Gradient Gallantry

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Prologue

Winter (Year 1)

The morning sun's warmth barely seeped through the clouds which were adding to the snow that blanketed the barren forest's floor. A den had been carved into a deep snowdrift, the entrance of which was maybe five feet tall. A black dragon's head peered out from it, before his abnormally large front paws gained purchase on the snow and he pulled the rest of his stout, wingless body through. His sapphire eyes glanced briefly back inside, softening as he whispered, "I'll be back soon, Vilodia." Then he tore his gaze away and left in search of prey.

The entrance to the den led down a slope into a twelve-foot-wide chamber housing a light green serpentine dragoness curled up in a nest. She stirred from the increasingly-familiar movement of the egg being incubated under her.

"You can't wait to hatch, now, can you, little one?" she murmured. Her sky blue eyes glinted with amusement. "We still have at least a month until you'll be ready, so just be patient, alright? Besides, I wouldn't want your father to miss your emergence if you hatch while he's out."

As if calmed by its mother's words, the egg settled. Vilodia stood on all fours and stretched her clawed, darker green wings as much as she could in the small space, before repositioning herself to incubate it once more. The shell was tough and could retain heat for perhaps a few days in warmer seasons, but in this weather it would only last perhaps less than five hours alone before its temperature dropped too much for survival, so she and her mate would take turns with their egg while the other fetched food.

Their nest was initially built on the forest floor in late summer, concealed by a thicket and the leafy treetops, which obscured them from the scorching summer sun and the sight of winged dragons passing overhead. But in this season, their branches were bare, leaving the family exposed both to potential predators, and to the harsh cold. The den itself was only a winter shelter.

Vilodia had previously lived amongst her fellow seer dragons in a more tropical climate, so despite her ability to foresee potential future events, she never predicted just how unforgiving the seasons could feel. Still, she adapted for the sake of her mate and their future hatchling, which was easy enough since their days had become routine and predictable without the need of her foresight. She trusted that her powerful mate would protect them regardless, and she was grateful for that, since her ability required energy that she'd much rather focus on her egg instead.

Unlike other seers, Vilodia preferred to live in the moment and discover the future as it came. The last time she had ever used her ability was to foresee how a relationship with the earth dragon would go, which was positive in nearly every future possibility–and to discover the chances of them having an egg, which was very slim given their different breeds, but still possible, and eventually their success became the true future. While she was tempted to foresee what their egg would hatch into–being a mix of an earth dragon and a seer–she ultimately decided the wait would be worth it.

Vilodia heard a heavy thud on the ground from outside. "Trent?" the green dragoness called softly, expecting her mate to have returned. When he didn't respond or greet her, she warily slinked toward the entrance and angled her head up parallel to the slope to see out. The air flowing in carried a familiar scent, but it wasn't that of the earth dragon she loved. Instead, it filled her with a sense of dread as memories from her homeland invaded her mind.

Vesper? No... How could he have found me...? Instinct kicked in, and the blue-eyed dragoness found herself using her foresights to confirm her suspicions. Still through her own perspective, the first and most possible upcoming event played out before her:

She stepped out from the den and confronted the large dark purple seer, whose weathered wings tipped with claws were red to match the striations down his neck and underbelly. His golden eyes narrowed at her, and he spoke, but visions had no sound. He then took a step toward her, but she held her ground.

After another exchange of muted dialogue, Vesper grew insistent on whatever he was saying, and this time approached her more confidently.

Vilodia attacked him, and at first he responded defensively, but as the fight went on, he fought back.

The vision ended in red, indicating her death.

The second likely event played next.

This time she remained in the safety of her den, praying he wouldn't discover her. Vesper soon went inside, however, and upon seeing the egg in her nest, he became visibly shaken. He shouted something at her, but before she could react, he roared, then attacked her.

The vision once again ended in red. She quickly moved on to the next one, which began similarly to the first:

He moved to take a step toward her, but she approached him instead. She spoke, and while there was no sound, Vilodia could presently feel her future self's emotions: she was scared, trying to bargain with her potential killer.

Vesper seemed shocked by her words, and lowered his head over her shoulder to embrace her. She grew more terrified by the second, but her desire to live overpowered her discomfort. The two continued speaking until Vesper pulled away; something had distracted him. Vilodia followed his line of sight to see her mate had returned with a deer in his mouth. His sapphire eyes assessed the situation before they closed. When they reopened, Trent dropped the prey and left.

The vision ended. None of those outcomes were desirable. But although the scenes had only taken up mere heartbeats of real time, every moment she spent inactive increased the chance of the second vision becoming the true future. One good thing learned from the visions was the timing in which her mate came back. *If I can stall Vesper until then, we can take him down together.*

The green dragoness was tired from using her ability after months of adjusting to life without it, and the physical pain from their fights and her multiple deaths within them lingered. She felt the effect of each vision as though she had physically lived--and died--through them all in the span of seconds. But she didn't have any more time; she could hear Vesper nearing, and so stepped out from the den to meet his eyes, which narrowed.

"Vilodia, my love... So this is where you fled to?" he spoke. "Why? Our kind isn't meant to endure such weather."

"...How did you find me?" she whispered.

"I foresaw this meeting as a rare possibility, and pursued that as the true future. It took me months to recognize this land from my visions, but I'm here now, so you're safe."

Safe? Vilodia restrained herself from berating the other seer, and from revealing that she had left their homeland to escape him. She would *never* feel safe until he was gone. "Why did you come here? Why go to such lengths to locate me?"

"Because you and I are the most powerful seers of our land. We are perfect mates. No matter how likely events are to end in tragedy, we have the ability to pursue our own true future–together. And... I believe that is a future worth pursuing." He began to approach her more confidently.

It was hard to read his intentions; was the motion a threat to force her into his desired future, or a plea for the closeness that he was deluded into believing they should share? Either way, she knew from her visions that both fighting and retreating to her den resulted in her death. Fleeing would fail for many reasons, namely since he was faster, but also because Trent would have a harder time rescuing her if she left the vicinity he expected her to be in.

It's alright... I only need to buy time. I can do this. "Vesper, wait," Vilodia begged. He hesitated, tilting his spiked head to eye her skeptically. "I may have once had powers on par with yours, but the months I've spent out here without practice have dulled them. If power is what you seek in a mate, then I am no longer worthy."

The purple dragon's brow ridge rose, almost as if with interest. "The powers you're capable of exceed most others. I can work with you to hone them again." He continued to shorten the gap between them.

She panicked internally, then decided on a different tactic. "Is my power the only reason you love me?" she demanded, trying to sound betrayed.

He froze, not expecting that reaction. "Of course not. You are gorgeous... Even now, seeing your scales dried by the cold air, and with your wings stiff from sheltering in such a small den... you are perfect. Once we get you home, you'll make a full recovery."

She didn't have time to rethink her strategy, so instead she blurted, "What if I don't *want* to go back?"

"...Hm. Then I suppose I will stay here with you. We can start a family, and we shall reign over this land together."

She almost cringed. *He really* has *foreseen every possibility for him to end up with me.* The hours of real time he must have spent going through every future until he came across the ones he wanted was concerning, considering each vision was ordered by how likely they were to happen... and the fact that she'd literally die twice before she'd consider giving him a second chance.

"What say you?" Vesper continued after a few beats of silence.

"I wish to be alone for now," she said carefully. "Give me time to consider your proposal." *Just a little more is all I need.*

"Time?" the larger dragon echoed. There was mockery in his tone. "You have had months to consider my proposal. Have you gone this long without me crossing your mind?!"

Yes! the dragoness wanted to scream out, but knew better. "Of course not," she lied to deescalate the situation. More honestly, she added, "You're impossible to forget." *Just not for the reasons you think...*

He chuffed. "That I am. Now then, you shall be coming with me."

Three... two... one...

The sudden sound of large paws getting louder distracted him. One of the issues seers faced when pursuing a specific future, like Vesper, was when they disregarded every other possibility before it. Trent's interference must not have been anticipated; when the black dragon dropped the deer to lunge at him, Vesper was caught off-guard... at first.

Using foresight during combat was risky since it took so long, but seers could also manipulate their own perception of time. They could 'freeze' the world to assess their surroundings or take aim, and 'slow it down' to predict their opponents' moves, all the while the flow of time remained normal to everyone else. Judging by how swiftly Vesper was able to dodge, he was slowing it down.

"Hanging around earth dragons now, Vilodia? I never thought you'd sink that low," the purple dragon taunted her.

Vilodia and Trent had sparred in the past, and she had attempted to train him in the art of misdirection for this very situation. It was their only hope of winning against a seer. She would join in the battle once she had recovered from her multiple deaths in her visions; for now, she believed in her mate and stood guarding their egg. She used her perception to study the other seer's trajectory and predict his attacks, alerting her mate to them with sounds only earth dragons made so as not to tip off Vesper as to whose side she was on.

Trent proved himself worthy of her faith by feigning a bite, only to tackle. He was strong, as all earth dragons were, and the force knocked Vesper onto his back, where he was pinned by a single huge paw on his red striated chest. Trent didn't have time to prepare another attack, though; the seer stabbed his neck with the long claw of his wing's 'thumb.'

The black dragon's scales were solid, but he was impaled by the precise strike directly into the fine line between them–where the claw got stuck. Trent was rendered paralyzed; any movement could worsen the injury. Despite this, his weight alone kept the serpentine dragon pinned, so they were at a stalemate. His sapphire eyes darted to the den, then to his mate, as if instructing her to take their egg and run.

By this point, Vilodia had recovered. In the back of her mind, the vision of Vesper killing her over the sight of her egg reminded her that she couldn't risk their attacker finding out it existed. Refusing to flee without her egg, she had no other choice but to fight, and rushed to her mate's defense by snapping her jaws shut on Vesper's throat. A seer's scales were softer, so her fangs sank in before she tore, letting go just to latch on to the same spot once more.

The pinned dragon let out a pained roar and writhed, managing to shove Trent off of him–out of the reach of his wing, so that the claw came free–as the dark purple seer rolled upright. Blood instantly flowed out of the stocky male's neck-wound, which was simultaneously beginning to freeze over in the extreme temperature.

Vilodia bit harder on Vesper's throat, adding slashes with the thumb-claw of her own wings, albeit blindly since his body was only visible in her peripherals. Unfortunately, most of them missed.

Vesper used both front paws to pry her jaws apart and force her head backward, away from him. “I didn't come here to kill you,” he strained. “Stop this foolishness and we can live together in peace."

The dragoness growled with frustration. Flashbacks of her deaths in the visions haunted her. When Vesper finally tossed her, she could see her mate slowly crawling toward the den in a last ditch effort to bring their egg to safety. A trail of red snow was left in his wake.

While she was distraught by the sight, the other seer pinned her with her pale green striated belly on the ground by way of a paw on each of her wings. Icy droplets of blood dripped down from his throat onto her back, the chill of each one stinging. All she could do was wait with dwindling hope of her family’s survival. Without them, what did she have to live for…?

“That's enough, my love,” he murmured. "Calm down and think this through. A life in the snow around lesser dragons is no place for a seer. Let's head back to the tropics."

“This… isn't love…” she managed to say. Once again her light blue eyes focused on her mate, who lied motionless at the entrance of the den.

For once, Vesper seemed to catch on to their relationship, and angrily pressed down harder on her. “You mean to tell me… that an earth dragon… is your *mate*…?!”

She winced but said nothing.

That made him angrier. “We are seers. We are above them!” His claws dug into her wings. “Breeding between different elementals is near impossible, anyway, so why would you ever choose *him?!*”

Silence.

“Unless…" His head whipped back to face the den. “Don't tell me… you actually managed to…?”

Instinct to protect her egg was renewed by his realization. She struggled violently to free herself, to stop him from harming it.

He took her actions as a confirmation. “That's sickening,” he hissed, lowering his head beside hers. “But I foresaw my future with you, so I know you're not beyond redemption… Your mate will surely bleed to death, anyway. So this is your last chance: leave that abomination of an egg to die with its father, and just come home with me."

She bit back a sob. Her light blue eyes perceived time as she focused on the slight undulation of her mate's sides as he breathed his last, then tears welled up until she finally broke down. Vilodia twisted her head back and snapped her teeth viciously at the other seer, who easily backed out of her reach.

"I left to get away from you and our horrible society that enables behavior like yours," she spat. "I'm not the one who should be asking for second chances here. But I will give you just one: if you leave me and my future hatchling in peace, then I won't kill *you* right now."

Vesper was appalled. "You would choose that pitiful *thing* over me? What if you brought it with us?"

She was seething. "How dare you... You know the others would kill a hybrid just for it existing...!"

He grinned. "That's the idea."

Vilodia snarled and managed to push herself up so abruptly that he lost his balance and fell off of her. "Even if I could bring it home, I'd never go back... And I'll *never* be your mate...!"

Vesper was visibly stung by her words, but she seized that opportunity to lunge at his injured neck to finish him.

With time perceived in slow motion, she glimpsed remorse in the killer's eyes, only to realize all too late that his regret didn't stem from murdering Trent, but rather herself as pain shot through her neck from the claw of his wing's thumb piercing her.

He ripped it free, the claw being followed out by a spray of her blood that soon dyed the snow around her fallen body as she succumbed to her wound the same way her mate had.

Vesper stood over her solemnly. Then his gaze traveled to Trent and the den he had been trying to protect, and grew colder with pure hatred. The purple seer ducked inside to see a light green egg secured in the warmth of a nest.

With the shell as tough as it was from its visible earth dragon heritage, destroying it would be more trouble than it was worth. Instead, Vesper backed outside and collapsed the den, but that wasn't enough. So he dug the egg out, then left it exposed to the cold so it would die in the powdery remains of its former shelter.

Then he spread his red wings and took flight back to his homeland.

A young water dragoness who had been forced to leave her lake territory in the plains due to it freezing over had migrated to the forest at the edge of it, searching for food and shelter, as was how she survived this time of year. The smell of blood and a deer had drawn her to the scene where she found two dragons stiff from both the cold and rigor. She was horrified by the sight. *Who could have done this...?*

Against her instincts for self-preservation, the light blue dragoness searched the area for clues, fanning out the wide, purple-and-teal fins on her back to cast the blinding white ground under their poor excuse of a shadow from the meek afternoon sunlight in order for her to see better. The lack of a trail for the third set of footprints indicated that the culprit had flown off. She wasn't sure if that knowledge should bring her comfort or not, since she couldn't fly, herself. And without a way to track them, they were likely still out there, somewhere. She committed what she could gather of their scent to her memory just to be safe.

Then she recoiled when she spotted the reflectiveness of a light green shell scarcely visible. The clouds were crying crystallized tears of snow that were slowly burying an egg. The facultative bipedal dragoness hesitantly reached for it with her webbed hands, then risked a look back at the corpses, fearing they would spring back to life and attack her for being near it. Seers like the green female were especially dangerous, not to mention a rarity in this land, and the strength of an earth dragon was nothing to sneeze at.

After a moment to confirm they were indeed dead, she felt grief and a deep sympathy for the deceased family, despite being a stranger. Losing an egg was especially sad, since the hatchling never had a chance at life. She stood on her hind legs and cradled the freezing egg in her arms, holding it against her body for a time that seemed to last forever.

Just as she was about to set the egg down and move on with her life, she felt movement from within, and the shock nearly caused her to drop it. "You're *alive?!*"

As if in answer, the movement started again, albeit slightly weaker.

She panicked, then realized her body heat must have helped revive it. Her red irises, which matched the color of the gemstone embedded in her forehead, stared at it with amazement, and even respect for the fact it hadn't perished yet. "I don't know what you are, or how you survived, but… you're one tough little guy. My name's Glacia. I guess it's up to me to keep you safe from here on out."

Spring (Year 2)

Within a month of Glacia taking in an orphaned dragon egg, the weather had warmed and life had returned to the land in the starting of spring, so the young facultative bipedal water dragoness had returned--egg in hand--to her thawed-out lake. She instinctively wanted to take the egg to her hoard in a small cave at the bottom of her home, however she had to remind herself that, unlike her own elemental's eggs, this one would most likely need air. The shell may contain it long enough to travel a short distance underwater, but not to stay there.

If the deceased dragons she had found by the egg in the neighboring forest were truly its parents, it was a cross between a seer dragon and an earth dragon, both of which had no connection to water outside of drinking it. Earth dragons in fact were known to stay clear of it lest they sink and drown from their heavyweight muscles. Glacia didn't know too much about seers, though, given their rarity in this land.

Aquatic dragons in general had more self-regulating body temperatures, which extended to their eggs as well, although Glacia in particular detested the cold. In her initial discovery of the egg, which had been freezing in the snow, she found out it needed constant warmth, which the depths of the lake wouldn't provide regardless of its need for air.

Should I have stayed with it in the forest instead? Am I being inconsiderate for bringing it to my home when it's not a suitable place? she wondered. *No... I'd dry out and die if I stayed out of water for too long. I don't want it to become an orphan all over again...* The only season water dragons were built to last through on land was winter, since they couldn't swim in the water of their homes while it was frozen solid. Their survival on land for that long was only possible because snow was a form of water, which kept their scales hydrated.

The light blue dragoness considered her options, and briefly wondered if adopting the egg herself had been a mistake, instead of just rescuing it. *Maybe I bit off more than I can chew,* she thought solemnly. *I'm not even prepared to hatch eggs of my own, let alone one born of entirely different elementals. I guess that's another reason why cross families are frowned upon...*

Her red irises looked at the tough pale green shell, which easily passed off as an earth dragon's egg. Earth dragons had an established territory at the base of the mountain range southeast of the forest, which was much closer than the one of the seers', the latter residing on a tropical island in the sea to the north. Traveling to the island would be possible for her, but not the egg. The trip to the mountains would be fine for the egg, but near impossible for her; in the water she was light and swift, but outside of it she was heavy and would grow sluggish after extended periods of exercise, and again she would dry out before reaching it.

But it won't hatch into a pure earth dragon, either... Hybrids were rare, but were viewed as 'knock-offs' of either of their parents' pure elementals: weak as adults, and as hatchlings, a burden to raise or teach the natural skills they may not have fully inherited. Since they resulted from cross pairings, society's disdain for hybrids extended to them. *In the off chance that I do manage to bring him there, as soon as they discover his seer heritage, he'll probably be exiled–or killed.*

She stood on her hind legs and held the egg as close as when she first encountered it, sharing her body heat that had initially revived it from the brink of demise. Glacia had gotten attached to it from the start. Even if she did find someone else who would take care of the egg–which the water dragoness didn't need to be a seer to know such a future was extremely unlikely–she wasn't sure how willing she would be to part with it. Her choice to save and raise a hybrid would be scrutinized by the masses, making both her and the future hatchling a potential target if they happened to be discovered. Regardless, Glacia was determined to make this work.

She placed the egg on her back, sandwiching it between her two large purple-and-teal fins above her yellow dorsal fin-sail so it wouldn't fall off, and entered the water. The light blue dragoness used her webbed hands and back paws to steer as she chose to rely on the teal fins at the end of her tail to swim smoothly toward one of her three sun-basking rocks near the center of the lake. When she reached the limestone pillar, she began climbing; the movement was so habitual that she had to catch herself before she'd follow through with reaching the flat top to lie on in her momentary forgetfulness, instead stopping just under the highest ledge at a crevice wherein she had stored a few fish bones she'd used as toothpicks. With one hand, she brushed the bones and loose rubble into the water, then carefully brought the egg forth from her back. To her relief, there was more than enough space inside for it.

The rock pillar itself was wide, and if she had been an earth dragoness, she would have been able to use large strong paws to chip away at the crevice and make more room for herself to properly incubate the egg inside. She shook the thought from her mind; her imagination often got away from her. *Will the egg be okay with the sun's warmth by itself? Maybe I could bury it in the sand and lie on top? No–if it'd suffocate underwater, it'd suffocate underground, too.*

Glacia was at a loss as to where she could safely store and incubate it. Then she spotted one of the fish bones she'd missed behind the egg. With excitement, she dove under the surface and used her back fins as wings to 'fly' into the depths, entering the cave at the lake bottom and sifting through her hoard. Perhaps she could find a makeshift chisel among the various pieces of junk that had flowed in through the underwater cavern that sourced the lake. After a few minutes of searching, she gave up, then resurfaced to check on the egg.

It was still warm.

Then she got another idea, but was less thrilled about it than the first. The aforementioned underwater cavern was how she ended up in the lake as a hatchling in the first place. But it was pure luck on her part, being pushed by the current in total darkness. The cavern branched out in many paths, mostly dead ends, but she had been washed up multiple times onto land with air pockets, and once into a small cenote. If it weren't for the flooding of an endless storm and her inability to fly, she would have stayed there as a hatchling, rather than continue to be washed away. She had a very bad sense of direction on top of it all.

The experience had been traumatic for her, so she had never attempted to explore it again. But until now, she never had a dire reason to. Glacia gently rubbed the egg before drawing a breath and once again submerging. She didn't want to leave it for long despite the warmer weather, so the dragoness promised herself that if there wasn't an air pocket close enough, she would turn around before she got lost.

The entrance to the cavern was smaller than she remembered; or rather, she had grown bigger over the nine years since she had last been in it. She could fit through comfortably, at least, and the current was still, unlike during the storm. The only issue now was how dark it was. Her vision was great in dim lighting, especially in the depths of her lake, but that was only because there was lighting in the first place. The cavern had none.

I'm doing this for the egg, Glacia reminded herself. *For* my *egg.*

Ignoring her second thoughts, she went in, keeping a hand against the rock wall on the right side as she swam so she could find her way back. She hadn't made it far before the wall ended; her past trauma took hold as she pictured herself a spec in a void with no way out.

Glacia reached out blindly in her panic before finding the wall again; it was a corner piece, and she realized it continued to the right. Her hands were shaking and she wanted nothing more than to retreat. After a moment to try to regain composure, she forced herself onward. The passage narrowed between two walls, and the wall she was following led to a dead end... or so she thought. It turned out to be another bend, just to the left this time.

That's when she saw it: a single light source.

In her haste and excitement, the water dragoness abandoned the wall to swim swiftly toward the light, and her paddling hands touched the sandy earth despite her having kept to the same depth level; the ground must be sloping up. Her fins breached the surface as well until she was standing on all fours. The slope leveled out into the same space she had remembered from nine years ago: a small patch of land in the water with a cenote allowing sunbeams to filter down into the deeper waters ahead, but far enough from her that flying dragons wouldn't see them if they looked down the hole. When she was last here, it had been dark and storming, but in the calm daylight she could admire the beauty of the lush spring plant life climbing down from the ceiling. Best of all, she knew now how to reach it.

Glacia followed the same route back to the lake. She had only been gone for a total of thirty minutes at the most; she immediately surfaced to check on the egg. Placing her hand on it to confirm it was still warm, she prepared to pick it up so she could take it to the cenote, but her motion was cut short by sudden movement from inside the green shell. It wasn't unusual, but this time it was aimed directly at her touch, and was much stronger than before. The dragoness pulled her hand away, unsure of what that meant. Then the egg rocked again, and a pip formed where her palm had been.

Glacia suppressed an excited squeal at the hatchling’s emergence, but also panicked, as she wasn't prepared for it so soon.

It wasn't long before a small green head poked through the shell: slightly spiky like the seer's, but with backward-facing horns formed in an S shape on either side of his head similar to the earth dragon's. A dark green stripe ran back from the top of his head and continued down his neck. It–or rather, *he*–had blue eyes with a lighter blue stripe horizontally through his pupils, which almost immediately focused on her. His adoptive mother watched in awe as he broke the rest of his body free piece by piece.

As usual for an earth dragon, he had big paws in proportion to his body, which was the slightest bit thinner than a pure blooded one's. What Glacia didn't expect were the wings he had.

She remembered the wings of his biological mother: the seer dragoness had a long wingspan and the tips were clawed. But the hatchling's wings were small, even in proportion to his body. They were short, and while the thumbs of them were tipped with a blunt horn, they lacked claws.

Glacia briefly wondered if the seer she had found near his egg was truly his biological mother, despite his green coloring matching hers. Earth dragons didn't have wings, so she knew he was a hybrid, but between which elementals she was now unsure.

The dark stripe down his neck extended to his back and shorter tail, wrapping around the front of each leg. The hatchling kicked the last piece of the shell off of his hind paw before looking up at her once more.

"Hey, little guy," the water dragoness greeted him with a wide grin. "Welcome to the world!"

He took an unsteady step toward her... then nearly fell right over the ledge she had hid his egg on. Glacia caught him in a single hand, since she was still balancing on the footholds of the stone pillar. She placed him on the base of her neck on one side of her yellow dorsal fin-sail and just above her shoulder blade, then paddled toward the shore. On her way there, more doubts regarding her decisions filled her mind. She had been anticipating this day since she found him, and she was truly happy to see his emergence. But...

Now what...?

Glacia had no idea what she was doing. Now that he had hatched, she couldn't risk him drowning on their way to the cenote. There wasn't much shelter in her home outside of the water, though, either. She slowed to a stop and glanced back at the hatchling. He was calm, and seemingly amused by the occasional droplets she had kicked up around him. *He likes water?*

Growing curious of her theory, she didn't think twice before taking the baby dragon in her hand, letting him sit in her teal-padded palm as she lowered the bottom half of his body into the water, keeping him at that level and studying him intently. His striped blue eyes sparkled like the waves in the sun as he joyously splashed around. She beamed, relief and hope welling up inside. Encouraged by his reaction, she slowly pulled her hand away, eventually letting go completely to see if perhaps his mixed heritage would allow him to float or swim despite half of him being an earth dragon.

He didn't.

He sank like a stone, and she freaked out, diving after the hatchling and cupping him in her hands to bring him high above the water. The whole ordeal lasted maybe three seconds, and after he coughed out a few droplets, he only seemed confused by what happened... happy, even.

But Glacia's heart was beating out of her chest, and she berated herself for even considering that an earth dragon hybrid could swim, and felt ashamed for putting him in danger all out of her selfish hope that he could live with her at the lake. That hope was now gone, and the realization crushed her. *This can't work after all, can it...? He only just hatched, and I already almost killed him...*

When she finally calmed enough to stop trembling, Glacia placed the hatchling on her back and continued to shore, her mind blank. Once there she rose out of the water on her hind legs, taking the green baby dragon in her arms, where she absently cradled him as she'd done for the past month. Her red irises stared into the distance at nothing in particular.

Then she felt the hatchling nuzzle into the yellow scutes on her chest, and she snapped out of it. Her eyes watered with emotion, and she embraced the moment, watching him drift into sleep before casting her gaze across the plains to the forest she had initially found him in with pure resolve.

I'll make it work.

Summer

The summer sun's light filtered through the treetops of the forest, landing as speckles in the shade that Glacia rested in. The light blue water dragoness watched over the green four-month-old hatchling she had rescued as an egg near winter's end, as he playfully chased a butterfly. The hybrid earth dragon sprung after the insect until it fluttered up out of his reach. His striped blue eyes tracked it for a moment, shining with hope before he spread his short wings and leapt, flapping them with all his might.

His big hind paws had launched him high, but his wings were much too small to carry him; he crash-landed, the tall grass cushioning his fall.

"Gadalik, are you okay?!" his adoptive mother fussed, rushing to his side.

The hatchling didn't seem injured–at least, not physically. He refused to meet her gaze.

"Gadalik?" she repeated his name, even more worried at that reaction.

"Why can't I do it?" he finally spoke, his voice quiet as if he didn't expect to be heard.

"Do what…?" she prompted gently, despite already knowing the answer.

"No matter how much I practice, I *still* can't fly…"

"You're still young," she reminded him. "Give your wings time to develop first."

Gadalik dragged himself to all fours and looked back at his wings. They had had this conversation before, when he was younger; it was clear to him now that his wings were already as developed as they would get. That didn't change his instincts to use them, however. His eyes finally met hers, and Glacia's heart sank to see that the spark of hope he'd had in them only moments ago was gone.

All she could do was embrace him, and she fought back tears when he didn't respond to her touch right away. After what seemed like an eternity, she felt him nuzzle into her chest, and a sense of relief washed over her. She relaxed her grip.

Gadalik stepped out of it. "Your scales feel dry," he murmured. "I think it's time for our trip to the lake again."

Glacia tensed, then nodded in agreement. While she could endure life on land, it took a physical toll on her body, and she had never spent the summer season away from her home before. The heat wasn't so bad, but the dry air was unbearable, so their trips to the water had become more frequent. While she was grateful the young dragon cared about her, she was concerned about his mental state, because that spark in his eyes hadn't returned. Still, she followed Gadalik as he led the way out of the forest; his sense of direction was much better than hers.

It took maybe twenty minutes to cross the plains and reach the lake, and as Glacia submerged herself in the shallows, she turned her head back to face him; he was patiently waiting on the shoreline for her to recover, as he always did, but instead of watching her or occupying himself with making sand structures, his eyes simply stared with a concerning calm at nothing.

"Gadalik, why don't you join me this time?" she suggested, remembering how joyously he had splashed in the water on his day of emergence. Ever since he'd nearly drowned right after that, Glacia had been adamant that he stay out of the water despite the fact that the experience hadn't fazed him. At this point she was willing to try anything to see him happy again.

Her adoptive son tilted his head slightly. "But I'm an earth dragon," he said as a matter of fact. "Won't I sink?"

"I'm not asking you to swim, silly," she chuckled reassuringly. "Just come stand in the shallows with me. I'm sure you'll love it."

After a moment of consideration, Gadalik dipped his front paw in the water, eyeing the ripples in its wake with fascination. As they dissipated, he put his other paw in to repeat the process.

Glacia was watching him with an amused smile as he made a small wave with a sweep of his paw, but the corners of her mouth fell when he backed out of the water after that, the young dragon staring indecisively at the slow waves lapping the shore. She felt her own hopes begin to diminish, unable to cope with the knowledge that she had failed him.

That's when he suddenly charged into the lake, laughing at his whole body's impact on the waves as they'd been pushed out much farther than they had been by his paws. He looked excitedly at his adoptive mother, not even waiting to catch his breath before calling out, "Did you see that?!"

Glacia was shocked, but pride quickly overcame her, and she smiled like an idiot. Gadalik grinned back at her, and before she had a chance to praise him, he jumped and splashed with both front paws, his attention completely captivated by the water. An idea popped into her mind, and without second thought, she flicked the tip of her tail up, her teal fins on the end of it flinging water at him while he was distracted.

Somehow, he saw it coming and dodged. Then he let out a mock battle cry and charged at her.

The two played in the shallows for hours until he tired himself out, and she carried the green dragon across the plains, back to their thicket in the forest as he drifted off in her arms.

In the two following weeks, Gadalik seemed back to his usual self, although Glacia noticed he hadn't attempted to fly anymore. She wasn't sure how to handle that. Water dragons–and earth dragons, for that matter–didn't have wings, so she had no experience with flight or how it was learned, nor what to expect of the seer and earth dragon hybrid–if his biological mother was in fact a seer. Fear of her adoptive son becoming depressed again drove Glacia to drop the subject, though.

On their routine trips to the lake, Gadalik had begun to follow her farther out into the water, but he never went deeper than he could stand in. He seemed to study her movements as she swam in the depths, and even while they played.

"Can you teach me…?" he finally worked up the courage to ask.

The question caught Glacia by surprise. "To swim?"

He nodded. When she hesitated, the memory of him almost drowning haunting her, he continued, "Never mind… I think I understand."

"Huh?" His mother came to, then panicked as the young earth dragon walked forward, letting himself be swallowed by the waves. "W-Wait! Stop!" She lunged for the spot he'd disappeared in, but she couldn't feel his body. Her heart raced and she dove, her red eyes darting until she spotted him kicking off the sand so that his head surfaced. His large paws paddled in the correct motions but they weren't in sync with each other, which wouldn't matter so much if his body didn't naturally sink.

Glacia pulled him back to shore, but he struggled against her hold. "I could have done it," Gadalik cried. "Why did you *stop* me?"

She took a deep breath to compose herself, but she was still shaken by the thought of losing him. "We've talked about this before... Earth dragons *can't* swim."

"But I'm only *half* earth dragon! Maybe it's different for me...! I won't know if you don't let me try..."

The two sat in silence for a little while as they both calmed down. Then Glacia finally stood up. "Alright," she decided. "I'll teach you."

Autumn

Warm-colored leaves drifted down on the light blue water dragoness and her eight-month-old adoptive son as the latter–a striped green hybrid between an earth dragon and possibly a seer–bounded excitedly ahead toward the outskirts of the forest, leading the way to the plains where her lake resided.

"Come on, Glacia!" he beckoned her with a playful glance over his shoulder. "Don't you want to live?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'," she laughed with mock annoyance. "You know I won't have the strength to keep up with you until *after* I recover in the water. If I didn't know better, Gadalik, I'd assume you're only in a rush for us to get there so you can swim!"

He smirked and rolled his striped blue eyes to dismiss such a ridiculous motive, but he slowed to a stop for her to catch up. Gadalik had grown considerably since the start of the previous season, but he was still clearly juvenile both in size and spirit. Despite his bigger body, though, his wings remained proportionately small–a fact he seemed to have accepted long ago, since he stopped attempting to fly.

Still, Gadalik made use of his wings to help him stay afloat in water–a task otherwise impossible for pure earth dragons, both since they had none, and because their natural muscles weighed them down. The young male had taken Glacia's swimming lessons seriously, and although it ended up requiring precise, nonstop, powerful movement for him to avoid sinking, he took pride in his success.

The water dragoness finally reached his side, and the two continued through the plains toward the lake at a leisurely pace together. Halfway there, a large, dark purple serpentine dragon with a red striated belly and matching, clawed wings flew over them from behind. Glacia became visibly upset by the sight, and her mouth moved as if she were speaking a warning, but Gadalik couldn't hear anything. For some reason, his lack of senses other than sight and touch didn't feel unnatural, so he didn't think to question it.

The large dragon circled around to land before them. Even on all fours, his long, snake-like body stood at least twice the height of Glacia–which was quadruple that of Gadalik's. His golden eyes flicked briefly to the dragoness, before focusing on her adoptive son.

Gadalik recognized him as a seer, based solely on the description Glacia had given him of the deceased green dragoness she had assumed was his biological mother. In his short life, the hybrid had only seen other dragons passing through the skies. He had never encountered one aside from Glacia. His striped blue gaze was drawn to the seer's long wings; for some reason, he felt a pang of envy.

Despite his mother's apparent warning, Gadalik stepped toward the other male, speaking the polite greeting he had rehearsed as a hatchling in the case of his first meeting with another dragon.

The seer seemed to laugh, but his eyes held contempt, remaining focused on him as though the younger dragon were prey he refused to lose sight of.

Glacia shouted something inaudible, and when the seer ignored her yet again, she shot a jet of water from her mouth, the pressurized stream aimed at his glabella. He turned his head away at the last second in an attempt to dodge, but that caused the water to hit one of his eyes instead. He recoiled, having shut his eye too late to block the attack; blood dripped out from between his eyelids.

The seer roared at her in a fit of rage, extending his powerful red wing to swat her away as though she were nothing more than a nuisance to him. Then he rounded on Gadalik, forcing his eye open to reveal the golden iris was now flecked with red, making him all the more intimidating as he stalked toward the hybrid, who was distracted by the assault on his adoptive mother. She had been knocked almost twenty feet away, and was lying motionless.

Fearing for her life, the young dragon rushed to her side to ensure she survived when he felt a sharp, immense pain in his neck from the seer's claws.

Everything went red.

Gadalik's sight cleared, and he was confused to see the seer recoiled, having shut his eye too late to block Glacia's attack; blood dripped out from between his eyelids. Somehow, this repeat of the event also didn't seem unnatural to him, and he quickly made use of this second chance during the time the bleeding dragon needed to recover by pulling his mother's back fin and fleeing toward the forest; she followed suit, although she was falling behind due to her prolonged stay on land.

The seer's shadow loomed over them, and Gadalik looked skyward with horror to see he was right above him and moving in for the kill.

In that moment, a bipedal black dragon with a thin white stripe down his sides and limbs, who was roughly the same height as the quadrupedal seer, knocked the amphithere off-course, hovering on white-and-burgundy wings tipped with indigo stingers and glancing down at Gadalik with light indigo-and-magenta eyes that held a hint of curiosity. He called out to the younger male, but it was silent. Then he focused on the seer, who was angrily retaliating. The black dragon kept a level head, dodging smoothly before whipping his long tail to impale the seer with the burgundy stinger on the end of it. The winged serpent drew back from the sting, purple venom oozing from the puncture, and the potential hero once again noticed that the terrified young hybrid hadn't moved. He gestured urgently with his hand for Gadalik to run.

In the brief time he was distracted, the seer caught him off-guard by slashing long, gaping tears in the webbing of his stinger-tipped wing. While the black dragon struggled to stay airborne as this injury disallowed him to catch wind, he was losing altitude fast, and the seer didn't wait for him to recover before delivering the precise final strike with the claw of his wing's thumb through his opponent's heart from behind, immediately tearing it out.

As the black dragon fell from the sky, a spray of blood raining down in his wake, his killer's golden eyes trained on Gadalik next. The young hybrid paralyzed by fear and grief was in too much shock to even reflexively wince from the warm red droplets that landed on and around him. He felt Glacia try to pull him out of the seer's path when the latter charged with the corners of his gaping mouth rising into a twisted grin, but she was all too late.

The world was engulfed in red once more.

The gentle breeze swirled colorful leaves around the water dragoness as she finally reached her adoptive son's side, but by that point, he suddenly seemed distraught, staring straight ahead at nothing. "Gadalik?" she prompted, getting worried when the green earth-seer hybrid didn't respond.

After twenty seconds of her desperate and unsuccessful attempts to get his attention, he snapped out of it, hyperventilating as his heart still pounded with adrenaline and his muscles ached from the chase. There was a searing pain in his neck where the seer had fatally wounded him, but after frantically looking around, Gadalik discovered that Glacia and himself were alone in the outskirts of the forest. *Wasn't I killed?* he thought. *How did we get back here?*

"Calm down...! Tell me what's wrong," Glacia had been pleading.

His lifted his forepaw to his pained neck as his answer, only to find out that he was uninjured. A moment passed for him to piece together exactly what took place: they hadn't suddenly reappeared in the forest; instead, they had not left it yet.

The young male turned back to cast his gaze over the trees, spotting the silhouette of a distant serpentine dragon flying toward them from the ocean far beyond the forest: the same seer as was in what the hybrid now realized were visions. If Gadalik wanted to survive, and prevent the death of the black dragon who had tried to save him, the green juvenile needed to hide... but where?

That's when a new vision graced him, as if the universe were guiding him to safety.

After another ten seconds of Glacia calling his name again, he came to and spoke, although his voice was quiet and serious as he explained, “I had a vision... We have to get to the lake as fast as we can."

“Vision?!" she exclaimed. "You mean–you really are a seer–”

“There's no time...! We have to leave *now,*” he interrupted, only slightly louder to emphasize the urgency.

Gadalik waited to make sure his adoptive mother ran first, before he followed close behind her. Glacia had been upfront with him about his heritage from the start, but given his lack of resemblance to the green seer dragoness found dead near himself a month before he hatched–as well as the fact that he had never had a vision until now–Gadalik and Glacia both had doubts as to whether or not the seer was his biological mother.

This confirmed she was, but he had no time to process that information. After what felt like forever, they reached the lake–Glacia had overexerted herself, teetering on the verge of collapse, but she jolted when the winged earth dragon confidently leapt into the depths, instantly sinking.

"Gadalik!" she cried, panic over his safety allowing her to power through her exhaustion to dive in and save him. Her red, veiled eyes spotted him instantly, and to her relief, he was fully awake, trying his best to swim underwater despite their lessons never having advanced that far. His strategic movements quickly became erratic until he was floundering and bubbles were escaping his mouth.

Her instinct was to pull him ashore, but she realized that he had been swimming toward the underwater cavern. Given how desperate he'd been for them to leave the area, Glacia trusted his judgment. She hugged him firmly in her arms, then used her webbed feet, back fins, and tail fin to propel them swiftly through the entrance, making one right turn, then one left, before the sandy ground eventually sloped up into a patch of land before a cenote.

Gadalik coughed out water as she placed him down on it, then she collapsed beside him. “Are you okay...?” the water dragoness asked the seer-hybrid.

“Yeah... I am now,” he panted.

"What did you see...?"

"...A lot." They caught their breath before he explained his first two visions in depth.

"An evil seer, and a bipedal savior?" she summarized.

"Yeah. Do you know who they might be?"

"No... Not a clue. You mentioned the black dragon had stingers, so he must be a poison elemental from the desert region. Seers live in the tropics on an island to the north, and aren't fit for this climate. So the two could either be travelers who stopped to rest here, or rogues looking for a territory to claim–if they were desperate enough to adapt here, that is–but that's really all I can think of."

"I don't know... They both acted so purposefully, like they had a reason for being here. I think the seer's reason was... me," he murmured. "He *killed* me in both visions... But the black dragon would have won against him if I hadn't been there. So when I came back to real time, the only thing I could think of to do was hide before either of them found me."

"And you decided to hide *underwater*?" Glacia suddenly chided him, as if trying to lighten the mood despite her honesty. "I understand your intention, but we both know that's a death sentence for you!"

"True," he chuckled, somewhat embarrassed. "But I had a third vision."

That got her attention. "What was it?"

"This," he answered simply. "I knew you'd bring me here." His soft gaze met her eyes, which widened slightly with a mix of surprise and honor at that revelation.

She lowered her back fin to blanket her son, and he leaned his body into the embrace. There was a moment of silence while they processed these events. The evening sun shone onto the calm waters in front of them. The family watched the dust particles and small insects dancing in the spotlight as it slowly faded with the day's end.

Chapter 1

Winter (Year 2)

Gadalik

Gadalik focused intently, although on what, he wasn't sure. The green seer-earth dragon hybrid had been struggling to figure out the use of his foresight ability ever since he had his first visions nearly three months ago.

He was standing on the small patch of land before a cenote, where dim light from the overcast sky filtered in, the beginnings of snowfall drifting down through it to melt in the calm waters below. When Gadalik wasn't attempting use of his seer ability, he spent most of his time practicing the swimming lessons his adoptive mother had given him, but he had never attempted to go back to her lake–nor did he want to.

A light blue water dragoness surfaced from the underwater cavern connecting to said lake, dropping the fish she had caught onto the ground between them. "Hey, big guy. You hungry yet?" she greeted him with a smile, but her tone was weighed with concern.

"Not really," he murmured honestly. His appetite had dwindled a lot recently. The longer he failed to use his foresight, the less he cared about eating.

"Come on," she prompted her adoptive son gently. "You can't expect to use foresight on an empty stomach, now, can you?"

He hesitated. "I guess not..." He crouched to take a small bite from the fish, but ended up zoning out instead of finishing it.

"Gadalik, are you alright?"

"...Huh?" he answered, coming to. "Sorry, Glacia... I'm just not feeling well."

"Are you sick?" she fussed, lifting his dark green front paw in her hand to feel its temperature.

The young dragon gently pulled it back. "No... It's just–" He caught himself.

Her red eyes watched him expectantly.

Gadalik breathed. "What if I never get full use of my foresight...?"

"Don't worry so much. We survived this long without it," she assured him.

"But if I hadn't had those visions of the purple seer dragon, we *wouldn't* have survived. What if he's still looking for us?"

"Gadalik, those visions happened months ago. I doubt he'll search in this same area for *that* long."

"But he's a seer. He doesn't have to wait here; he can use his foresight to predict when we'll come out–*then* he'll come back and kill us…!"

Glacia sighed. "Well, we can't stay in the cenote forever. The lake will freeze over soon, and if we're here when that happens, we'll be trapped with no access to food."

Gadalik averted his striped blue eyes. He was too young to have lived through winter yet. Pure seer dragons didn't survive well in the cold, though, so maybe they were safe from the evil dragon in his visions–if only for the season. "Alright," he finally agreed. "When should we leave?"

"Well, we can wait a little while if you're not feeling ready to swim through the cavern," she offered.

"N-No, I can do it," he stammered. "But can you stay near me just in case…?"

"Of course…!"

He smiled slightly. They finished eating, and the winged earth dragon dipped his dark green paw into the waters leading to the cavern. It was cold, but bearable. With a glance back at his adoptive mother to reassure himself that she would rescue him if he drowned, Gadalik took a deep breath and descended the sandy slope until he was submerged underwater.

He closed his eyes from the iciness, and because his sight was useless in the darkness. Then he kicked off of the land and paddled with all his might to keep himself from sinking too deep. He counted how long he swam in each direction: forward, east, then north again; until he opened his eyes to see the light through the lake on the other side. At this point, his need for air was making him more desperate, so the motion of his paws were losing their rhythm. Despite his efforts to swim up toward the lake's surface, he began to flounder and couldn't hold his breath anymore.

Instantly he felt the water dragoness embrace him in her arms and carry him effortlessly to shore with just her tail fin, webbed feet, and large back fins.

Gadalik coughed out water and leaned against Glacia, both to rest from how strenuous swimming was for someone as heavyweight as himself, as well as for comfort. This wasn't the first time he'd almost drowned, but he could never get used to it.

After he calmed down, the two headed for his old home in the forest across the plains. There was a light coating of snow over the grass, and Gadalik looked to the sky, having not properly viewed it due to his refusal to leave the cenote since fall. Everything seemed so different now.

The seer hybrid couldn't stop himself from looking toward the ocean north of the forest, half-expecting the dragon from his visions to suddenly appear there. They made it to their den without incident, though. The winged earth dragon used his big paws and natural strength to dig it out more to accommodate for how much he's grown over the months. While he was at it, he made sure there was extra room for Glacia as well. They both went inside when he was done; it was nostalgic in a sense, and he held onto hope that the purple seer would be deterred by the worsening weather.

The next morning, there was several inches of snow, almost blocking the entrance to their den. Glacia was still asleep, so Gadalik pawed through it and peered outside. The forest floor was blanketed in a stark white, and as he pulled the rest of himself out, his paws slowly began to burn if they remained in the snow for too long–a problem pure earth dragons never faced.

He gave each paw a chance to warm by lifting them in an awkward dance, then was distracted by how the motions kicked up the freezing powder around him. Gadalik grinned and scooped up the snow into a large mound, then jumped into it, laughing as it plumed around him.

He instantly regretted that when he found he had sunk into the base of it; the snow was now compact, making it hard to move. The young dragon panicked, especially when that burning cold sensation was building up. “Glacia…!”

After a brief moment, his adoptive mother shuffled through the entrance of their den and instantly caught on to the situation, lifting the juvenile out. “Be careful! Just like in water, earth dragons are heavy in deep snow, too."

“S-Sorry..." Gadalik had never felt snow before, and was the slightest bit disappointed that playing in it wasn't safe for him.

“It's alright. Why don't you stay in the den while I get us something to eat?”

Despite the risks of him being in this weather, the hybrid didn't want Glacia to be alone in the forest. She had a poor sense of direction, and most of the usual landmarks were concealed by the snow. The dragoness was too prideful to admit that, though. Then he got an idea. “Can I go with you to hunt?”

She blinked. “Normally, yes–but it could be risky for you this time of year,” she pointed out, gesturing to the snow-pile she had freed him from.

"I promise I'll be careful," he pleaded. "Besides, you'll save me if I get stuck again, won't you?"

"Of course!"

"So I can go with you?"

Glacia hummed indecisively, but when he looked up at her with sad blue eyes, she heaved a defeated sigh. "Oh, alright. If you really want to, you can come with me."

He instantly brightened; she laughed and pushed him lightly since that sudden change in his expression exposed his previous one as a bluff. The water dragoness led him into the trees and explained how differently prey acted in the winter than in the previous seasons. How some became more or less active, where they burrowed, and so on.

Despite his main motive being to keep Glacia from getting lost, Gadalik did listen to her, summarizing her words in ways his mind would better understand to prevent forgetting them. She had him watch her as they spotted a hare nearby, nibbling at some grass it had dug up. The seer hybrid used what he had discovered to be his *perceive* ability to 'slow down' time and study her movements as she crept up and pounced on it.

He managed to do the same after a while, and once they gathered enough food–and dealt with a few more instances of the hybrid sinking into deep snow–the two returned to their den.

This went on for a couple of months or so, and at present, a wicked snow storm had been brewing, making it impossible to safely leave their den.

"Blizzards shouldn't last too long," Glacia assured her son, who was huddled against her for warmth, listening to the trees creaking in the wind. "We have enough food to last us until it's over."

As soon as it ended later that night, it seemed, a new storm started again.

Their stock of food was running out, and after Glacia gave him her last morsel, she moved for the entrance.

"Where are you going? The blizzard hasn't passed yet," Gadalik called. "We can go without food a little while longer. It'll be over before we starve."

The water dragon frowned. "I hope so, but it doesn't seem like it's slowing down any time soon. We'll see, I guess."

A couple days later, Gadalik couldn't stop his stomach from growling. But he woke up to silence outside; the wind must have died down at last. He dug through the snow concealing their den and looked out. Aside from how deep the snow was now, it was finally calm. He cheered and rushed out, then yelped when he sank.

"Gadalik!" Glacia cried, having to literally dig him out from how deep he had fallen.

"S-Sorry, I forgot," he mumbled, embarrassed.

"You stay here this time, alright? I'll stock up on enough food so we won't run out if there's a storm like that again," she promised. "I might be gone for a while. But I'll definitely be back, okay? Just wait for me here."

The young hybrid had no choice but to obey her since the snow was too deep for him to follow her. So he watched his adoptive mother disappear into the trees without him.

Now what...? Gadalik wondered. He went back into the den and sat down... before standing up and pacing it in his boredom. He periodically poked his head out to see if she was on her way back, only to retreat when there was no trace of her. He sighed heavily and plopped onto his belly, where he laid and flicked the tip of his short tail impatiently.

Gadalik must have drifted off, for he awoke from a distant creaking sound. His heart sank when he saw the entrance to their den had been sealed by snow again, and he pushed through it in a panic to see another blizzard had begun. "Glacia!" he shouted, his voice drowned out by strong winds.

When there was no answer, the green hybrid plowed himself through the snow in the direction he had last seen her go in. The snow continued to rise around him; the unavoidable contact with it burned his half-seer scales to the point of numbing them, and the snow building up around his legs restricted his movement, but he pushed on, determined to save his adoptive mother.

Eventually he couldn't see anything ahead of him over the wall of snow that he was trying to use to climb out of the deep tracks his body made, all the while harsh winds were tossing the loose powder over him and scattering the snow under his paws so he'd slip back down. He growled with frustration, and the icy gales retaliated by collapsing the mound he'd been climbing when he next fell.

Helpless in the trench of his own making, Gadalik cried out, but his voice was instantly muffled as the toppling snow buried him.

Gadalik woke up to find himself inside a large tree hollow. It was wide, but only around five feet tall. Confused, he turned and nearly fell backward out of the tree when he recoiled upon noticing a dragoness with pale blue-and-pink fur and ears, and golden antennae, her extremities tipped with white, lying behind him. She had long, iridescent insect-like wings with yellow inner markings, stacked on either side of her spotted back and glowing faintly.

A fairy dragon? Gadalik recognized from Glacia's descriptions of other dragon types. Her yellow eyes watched him, but they gave nothing away of her thoughts or feelings.

"Did you save me from the snow…?" Gadalik dared himself to speak. She nodded. Then the memory of why he ventured out in the first place returned, and he panicked. "You have to save my mom, too! Please!"

"Worry not," she replied. "A water dragon will fare just fine in this weather."

"But what if she gets lost–"

"Then we'll find her once the storm passes."

He opened his mouth to argue, then the fairy dragoness's words registered. "Wait… How did you know my mom was a water dragon…?"

"I have lived here for a decade. While I stay sheltered during the cold, I remain in tune with all of the life in this forest. I can feel her presence; she is alive and well, waiting out the storm."

Gadalik sighed with relief, taking a moment to recover. "Life?" he echoed. "So, then… Would you know if someone died, too…?"

Her eyes narrowed solemnly. "Yes. And I'm aware you are no stranger to death, either."

He tilted his head, confused. "What do you mean…?"

"The reason you're being raised by a water dragon," she answered simply.

Gadalik gaped at her. "Did you know my parents…?"

"Not personally, but they had lived here for three seasons. It was last winter when I sensed their demise."

Gadalik quailed. "Who are you…?"

"My name is Guinevere. You are Gadalik, yes?"

"Y-Yeah," he stammered, a bit scared that this stranger knew so much, but he figured her knowledge could be useful. Glacia had told him that he had been orphaned as an egg, but she had never met his parents prior to finding them dead, so all she had to offer him were their descriptions. "What can you tell me about my parents…?"

"What do you wish to know?"

"E-Everything!"

"Hm. Then it may be better to show you instead."

Show me...? Before he could ask, she fanned her wings out just enough for him to see them. Their glow grew brighter, and the hues around the inner yellow markings began shifting colors. Gadalik was mesmerized by it, unable to look away.

The tall grass reflected the warm light of the summer sun, and a green seer dragoness almost camouflaged within the blades. The only movement from her thinned, bruised, serpentine body was the undulation of her sides as she caught her breath. Her wide, clawed wings were splayed out stiffly as though they had been gliding in that position for far too long, and her sky blue eyes stared calmly at nothing in particular.

"Are you okay?" sounded a male's voice, low but gentle.

She lifted her head weakly, meeting the concerned sapphire eyes of a wingless, muscular dragon. "An earth dragon... in the forest? Why?"

"I could ask the same of a seer dragon," he chuckled. "You know this forest is temperate. Come winter, you will freeze."

"I'd rather freeze than remain on the seer's island," she murmured with scorn directed at her homeland.

"You mean... you flew all the way from the middle of the sea?" He sounded genuinely impressed. "Why here?"

"You said it yourself... Seers will freeze here."

The earth dragon considered her words. "Perhaps I can make some shelter for you. The forest has a cliff with the beach below it. I can excavate a cave there for you."

"No... if you truly wish to help, then allow me to rest–alone."

He hesitated, then left. She lowered her head into the grass once more. After maybe a half-hour, she was startled by the thud *of a freshly-killed deer dropping in front of her.*

She glanced up to see the black dragon had returned. "What is this for?"

"I know it may not be what you're used to eating... but deer are abundant here, and they aren't half-bad," he answered.

"No; I mean, why are you helping me?" She finally rose to all fours, staring him down with distrust.

"Well... I only just got here from the mountains a few days ago, so I understand how hard adjusting to life in a new place can be. And... I also know how much it hurts to leave your old home behind, regardless of the reason."

Her light blue eyes softened and looked down at the deer he had gifted her.

"My name's Trent," the earth dragon introduced himself.

"...I'm Vilodia," the seer replied slowly, still not meeting his gaze. There was a beat of silence, and just as Trent moved to leave, she nudged the prey between them in an indication to share. Their eyes met, as if gauging each other's intentions, before he smiled genuinely. The two ate together.

Gadalik blinked, coming back to reality. *What was that?* he wondered. *A vision? No–visions don't have sound...* Then he recalled that fairy dragons had the ability to hypnotize others.

"Those were your parents," Guinevere explained. "I had studied them both on the days they first reached this forest, but seeing they were no threat, I left them alone."

My parents...?! The young dragon committed that scene to his memory, reflecting on it as if that would somehow fill the void in him that he never knew he had until now. "Please... Can you show me how they died...?" His adoptive mother had told him they'd been killed, and that there had been tracks in the snow that ended abruptly–implying a dragon capable of flight had been involved.

"It was late winter last year, so I didn't bear witness to their deaths, myself, since I had taken shelter for the season. However, it was that very day I detected the presence of a new dragon in the forest, and it departed shortly after your parents lost their lives. Because of this, I got worried, and left my hollow to see who it was."

"Did you spot them before they left?"

"Yes. He was a dark purple seer dragon with red wings."

Gadalik felt his heart skip a beat, then race, as his mind flashed back to the murderous dragon from his visions. Was he the seer Vilodia was hoping would freeze if he followed her? *Wait--he came here during winter?!* "No... That means--" He scrambled awkwardly in the small space to stand in preparation to leap out of the tree.

"It isn't wise for you to leave in this storm," Guinevere advised him.

"I have to! If that dragon finds Glacia, she'll be killed just like my parents were! I have to *protect* her!"

"What makes you think he will return?"

"Last season, I had a vision of him–the purple seer–and he attacked her, killed me twice, and murdered a dragon who had tried to save me," Gadalik explained. "I ran and hid with Glacia before he got here in reality, but after that, I couldn't figure out how to use my foresight... I have no way of knowing when he'll come back–or who he'll target–or–" he was hyperventilating, his quick breaths coming out in puffs of steam against the freezing air.

"Calm yourself, young one," the dragoness soothed him. "If ever I sense his return, I shall warn you."

As promised, when the snowstorm finally subsided, the pale blue-and-pink fairy dragoness wrapped her white-tipped paws just under Gadalik's forelimbs from behind him as they poised at the mouth of the tree hollow they had sheltered in, and the young green hybrid began to feel warmed from the contact with her soft fur. His striped blue eyes looked down from their perch at the once-familiar forest now disguised by a thick sheet of white and gulped, not having realized how far up they were. Guinevere spread her iridescent insect-like wings, the pink glow of which illuminated their yellow innermost markings, before she leapt out.

Gadalik felt his stomach lurch at the expectation of falling from such a height, only for the silent descent to be almost ethereal. He released a bated breath, then glanced over his shoulder, surprised to find that she appeared to be floating down steadily; there was a soft pink motion blur emanating from her back.

The half-seer dragon perceived time, slowing it enough for him to track each of her four wings which were beating rapidly in an ellipse. He admired them until the fairy dragoness placed him down in the snow, and the cold snapped him out of it. "Guinevere?" he called when she remained hovering above him.

The white tuft at the end of her long tail swayed absently while her golden antennae repositioned themselves. Then her light yellow eyes met his. "Follow me exactly," she instructed.

Before Gadalik had a chance to ask what his rescuer meant, she began moving through the air. Instinct kicked in; the hybrid launched himself up with big hind paws to fly after her, but his small, dark green earth dragon wings were still as useless in the air as they'd always been.

Guinevere's ears perked up at the sound of his heavy body plopping into the snow. She moved to free him as he struggled in the freezing, compact depths, but frustration lent him the strength to break loose and drag himself out of it. He glared at the white ground, although his anger was directed at himself–or rather, his inability to fly.

"Are you okay to continue?" she inquired, her tone neutral.

Gadalik tensed, feeling hot with embarrassment when her voice reminded him she'd witnessed his failure. "Y-Yeah," he stammered, then awkwardly tested his weight with a single paw on the snow in front of him to see if it was shallow enough to stand in without sinking.

"There's no need for that," the dragoness stated. "I will direct you safely. There's no telling when there will be another blizzard, so we should hurry."

"Oh... alright." He watched the subtle changes in direction of her antennae as she guided him. To his surprise, the path she took was in fact free from further snow-related hazards, so Gadalik began to trust her. After what felt like forever, he heard a familiar water dragon complaining to herself about the weather nearby. Relief overwhelmed him, and he charged ahead carelessly. "Glacia!"

"*Gadalik?!*" his adoptive mother answered when they were within each other's sights. She recoiled and dropped an arm-full of prey when he tackled her in an embrace that she instantly returned. "What are you doing out here on your own? I told you to wait for me in the den!"

"On my own?" he repeated, confused. The young green dragon scrambled off of her and turned back to introduce Guinevere, but the fairy dragoness had vanished without a trace.

"Is everything okay?" Glacia asked, concerned by his reaction.

Gadalik wasn't sure. He remembered how it had felt when Guinevere used hypnosis to show him the meeting between his biological parents. He wondered briefly if this whole journey had been another scene created through that ability. *No–she hadn't changed her wing colors at all since then,* he concluded.

"Hey," his mother tried again, this time tapping him with her webbed finger.

He jolted. "Oh! S-Sorry. Yeah, everything's fine... I think."

Her red eyes narrowed at him skeptically. "You 'think'?"

"W-Well, there was this other dragon..." he admitted, then shook his head, not wanting to sound crazy. The hybrid gathered the prey into a manageable pile, trying to redirect her focus off of him.

It didn't work. "Another dragon?! Who was it? Did they hurt you?!" she fussed, checking him over for injuries.

"N-N-No! Guinevere saved me–she helped me find you...!"

"Guinevere?" Glacia seemed taken back by that name.

"Do you know her...?"

"Well... I know *of* her. She's one of the fairy dragons in this forest. They're pretty elusive, though. You won't really see them unless they sense your life fading...especially this time of year." The water dragoness hesitated. "Wait. What exactly happened to you while I was out?!"

He shrank, ashamed of his near-death from being buried in the snow his mother had told him to stay out of. But he heaved a defeated sigh and explained everything, including the scene Guinevere had shown him through her hypnotism.

The light blue water dragoness processed the events while she picked up the pile of prey. "I had no idea who killed your parents... He sounds like the same dragon who attacked us in your visions last fall." She reached for the last hare, but stopped, staring at it–or, perhaps, past it–with a somber expression.

"Glacia...?" he pressed, going closer to check if she was okay.

"...I'm sorry," she murmured.

He tilted his head slightly. "For what...?"

"For not taking your visions seriously. If he really *is* still after us, then..."

"Guinevere said she'll warn us if she senses him," he assured her.

Glacia visibly relaxed at that news. "Alright, big guy," she changed the subject, "I'm sure you're freezing your tail off out here, so let's hurry back to the den and eat, okay?"

He smiled slightly. "Alright."

Thankfully their return was uneventful and the weather remained calm for the duration of it. The young hybrid settled inside but stared through the entrance, hoping he'd catch a glimpse of Guinevere despite knowing she had probably gone back to her tree hollow. He couldn't help wondering if he'd meet the fairy dragoness again, under more pleasant circumstances; he had grown fond of her in the short time they'd spent together.

Gadalik happily raced through the new green grass, whipping his head around to beckon Glacia, who was amused but falling behind. Her red eyes widened when they focused on something up ahead, and Gadalik followed her gaze to see Guinevere landing gracefully before him, the sunlight sparkling through her translucent pink-and-yellow wings. Her small, smiling mouth moved as if in a greeting, but there was no sound.

"...ik? Gadalik?" Glacia's worried voice faded in as the scene dissipated. Her adoptive son looked around in disbelief, then gave an excited bounce, breathing too quickly to get a coherent sentence out. She eyed him curiously. "What is it?"

"I had a vision again!" he exclaimed, and rambled on about the details. "What if my foresight isn't broken after all? What if I just need a connection to whoever I'm envisioning?"

"Maybe," she replied enthusiastically. "Want to try foreseeing my future, then?"

His eyes lit up. "Can I?"

"Of course!"

The juvenile bounced again, then concentrated his thoughts on his adoptive mother.

Gadalik found himself on the top of a hill, overlooking the plains, the warm-colored trees of the forest, and their lake home. He felt a deep sadness, but was comforted by a familiar webbed hand on his shoulder; Glacia was beside him, giving her son an encouraging smile. The two turned east, and his sights settled on the base of the mountains. The water dragoness spoke, and although there was no sound, he gained some determination from her words. The two stepped forward together.

Chapter 2
Spring (Year 3)

Gadalik awoke comfortably in the den for the first time since winter's start. He realized that was because it had finally warmed up from the sun's sudden appearance. The young green dragon stood to wake his adoptive mother Glacia so she could enjoy the beginnings of spring with him, but the only thing in the den besides himself was a small pile of prey from the previous day; the light blue water dragoness wasn't there.

Normally he'd panic at the thought of losing her, but her disappearance had become expected over the past week as she grew more impatient for her lake to thaw; the snow melted and receded more every day, so the weather was starting to dry her out again. Glacia didn't want him accompanying her across the plains to check on the lake so frequently due to the risk of him being targeted by the returning migratory wind dragons, but she also didn't want him awake without her, so she had opted to go in the mornings while he slept, and he trusted she'd return.

New grass and flowers had been growing all around, and just like in the seer-hybrid's vision a few weeks ago, Guinevere had agreed to meet with them, officially introducing herself to Glacia. The two hadn't seemed to understand each other, but they managed to get along since the fairy dragoness had rescued Gadalik after he'd nearly died in the snow–something his adoptive mother had also done last year, before he had hatched.

The juvenile stepped outside of the den, bringing his muzzle to the earth and determining from how fresh the scent trail was that Glacia had only just left, so he'd be alone for a while yet. He sat down and considered his options. When the shadow of a wind dragon passed overhead, he tensed and couldn't tear his gaze away from it, both out of fear, and admiration for the flight that he would never be capable of despite his wings. He shook his head and retreated to the den.

No sooner than he had gone in did he hear someone approach. *Glacia couldn't be back yet… Did the wind dragon see me…?*

"Gadalik," a stoic female's voice called him.

He instantly recognized it, poking his head out to greet her. "Guinevere! I wasn't expecting you!" Then he frowned, remembering Glacia's words about how elusive fairy dragons were unless they had sensed a life dying. "Is everything okay…?"

"Yes. Your mother asked me to check on you if I didn't sense her return at this hour," the furred pale blue dragoness informed him simply, one of her golden antennae angling toward the lake in the plains outside of the forest they were in to imply where Glacia was. Her ears suddenly perked up as another wind dragon crossed the sky overhead, and despite her body remaining as still as it was when calm, her four iridescent insect-like wings glowed an unusual purple color around their yellow inner markings.

Gadalik had spent enough time around Guinevere to pick up on what the reactive colors of her wings signified: purple was fear. *She must feel so vulnerable out in the open like this...* "Do you want to come inside?" he offered, backing out of the entrance so his bulky body wasn't blocking it. The purple glow of her wings slowly faded to their usual, neutral pink as she accepted his invitation. Curiosity got the better of him. "Can you still sense my mom even though she's not in the forest with you?"

"Yes," she replied, tucking her white-tipped paws under the pale pink fur of her belly and wrapping her long, tufted tail around herself. Guinevere stood taller than Gadalik, but shorter than Glacia, even when the latter was on all fours, despite being a couple years older than the water dragoness. Seeing her lay in that position with her wings flattening on either side of her spotted back made her seem even smaller. "Although, normally, I wouldn't extend my abilities that far, as it's taxing on me," she continued.

Gadalik acknowledged her with an impressed hum. "I understand. Thank you for watching over us."

Once again her body language barely changed, but the glow of her wings shifted briefly, this time to orange. Gadalik understood that to mean she felt bashful or embarrassed. He smiled slightly. "Do you have any plans to celebrate your emergence day?" Guinevere changed the subject, turning to look at him with her light yellow eyes.

He blinked. "Emergence? Like, the day I hatched?" Her wings dimmed to a mix of purple and pink as she nodded. "But... you only hatch once. Why celebrate it afterward?"

They turned fully purple for a moment, then transitioned to green as her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Finally, they returned to pink. "Forgive me. I was unaware Glacia hadn't told you about it. It's typical for families with young dragons to use their emergence day as a way to celebrate how much they've grown from year to year. I assumed your first year since hatching is nigh. Am I wrong?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I never asked when I hatched, and Glacia never brought it up."

"I see," she murmured, dropping the subject.

"How do we celebrate?" he inquired, hoping it wasn't too late to keep the topic going.

"The celebration focuses on three key aspects of growth: height, abilities, and goals. The way they're celebrated is highly personalized, though, and different dragon types have their own basis for each."

"That sounds fun. When is yours? Maybe... I could join you for it this year?"

She laughed–a soft, genuine sound that only lasted a heartbeat. "Not every dragon type celebrates. More solitary types like fairy- and wind-dragons have nobody to celebrate with, so they don't. Besides, celebrations usually cease after six years, when most types are considered adults. I will be twelve this year."

"Oh," he uttered, not sure how to feel about that. Part of him pitied those who lived alone, but only because he couldn't imagine himself being without Glacia. Then he hesitated. "Are water dragons a solitary type...?" He had never seen his adoptive mother with any of her own kind.

"No, they typically stay with their families, leaving only to start their own families in or near the same territory," Guinevere explained. "Earth dragons and seers are both similar to water dragons in that regard."

His heart sank. *Why was Glacia alone, then...? And my biological parents were far away from their own kind, too... I know Vilodia fled from her killer, but what about Trent?* He remembered the scene he'd been shown of his earth dragon father mentioning he'd left his home in the eastern mountains to live in this forest.

Guinevere's wings flashed a surprised yellow, then green, before lingering on a sorrowful blue. "I apologize," she murmured, looking away almost guiltily. "I had no intent to distress you."

"Huh?" he came to, then remembered that her antennae picked up on his emotional state just as easily as her wing's color showed him hers. "N-No, it's okay! I'm glad you told me."

"I'm back," Glacia announced, her uncharacteristically cheerful tone breaking through their melancholia. "Gadalik, we'll take a trip to the lake this evening. If you want to stay in the cenote again, you're welcome to, but–"

"--I think it's safer in the forest with Guinevere," Gadalik finished her sentence the same time she did. They both laughed, and Guinevere watched them, stoic as ever despite her wings turning orange for a moment.

"Okay. It'll be just like old times, then," his adoptive mother decided. "We'll stay in the forest, but I'll still need to recover in the water every so often. You'll still need to come with me there later today, though."

"Have you considered storing water in the forest?" the fairy dragon suggested calmly. "Perhaps Gadalik could dig a hole near the den, and you can fill it up with the water from your lake to recover without needing to travel."

Gadalik sat up straighter at the opportunity to dig, pawing at the ground with a dumb smile just thinking about it.

But Glacia frowned, eyeing the other dragoness as if trying to get a read on her intentions despite her wings fading to purple from the glower. "As if staying in the forest for as long as I physically can isn't a sacrifice enough, you're telling me I should give up my home, too? For a *puddle*?"

Guinevere visibly tensed. "No. All I'm saying is–"

"Look, I'm happy you're here for Gadalik, but you don't know *anything* about our life together here. So maybe you should leave the decisions about it to *us."*

The fairy dragon fell silent, narrowing her eyes at Glacia while her wings alternated between red and purple.

Red? That's new… Gadalik thought. He stepped between them. "Calm down… Guinevere didn't mean it that way."

Glacia retreated a step from her son as if he'd betrayed her. "Are you saying *you* want me to stay here in a puddle, too…?'

"W-What? N-N-No! It was just an option… Nobody's telling you to do anything."

"But is that what you *want…*?" she pressed him, her voice growing softer.

Gadalik quailed, seeing she was seriously willing to go to that extreme just to stay with him should he say 'yes.' He shook his head firmly. "No… Of course not. I would never ask you to give up your home. Besides, the lake is part of *my* home, too."

The water dragon let out a relieved sigh.

"…I'm sorry. I shall be more careful with my suggestions in the future," Guinevere spoke.

The light blue dragoness blinked and focused her red eyes on the fairy type, almost as if forgetting she was there. "What? Oh… Whatever. Do what you want," she said dismissively.

Gadalik felt offended on his friend's behalf, but before he could say anything, the latter simply stood and walked steadily out of the den, the glow of her translucent wings remaining a deep blue even when they became obscured within their motion blur as she flew off.

Glacia was confused by her reaction, taking a step after her and opening her mouth as if to call her back, but it was too late. She sat and glared at the ground, but Gadalik could tell her frustration stemmed from remorse.

"Um… Glacia?" he finally spoke, if only to change the subject.

"Yeah?" she answered, relieved by the distraction, but also interested in whatever he had to tell her.

"What day did I hatch?"

She froze, and her eyes darted as if looking for a way to escape this conversation. "Uh… You'll find out later," she dodged the question.

"I will? How?"

"You'll see," she repeated, then waved one of the wide purple-and-teal fins on her back to signal the end of that conversation. Then her eyes shone and the flat of her tail fin slapped the ground excitedly before she took a breath to calm herself. "Now then… come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To find a spot for that puddle."

"Huh? But I thought you didn't want to move here–"

"Who said I'm *moving* here? A puddle isn't ideal to live in, but… it's not a bad idea to have an emergency spot to recover in if I ever can't make it to the lake."

Gadalik hummed his agreement, deciding not to question it. The two looked for ground with enough spacing for her. A spot just west of their den seemed to fit, and coincidentally, Gadalik could see the tall trees Guinevere resided in from this location. Glacia seemed to notice that, too, but didn't mention it.

“Will this work?” he asked. She nodded, so he took into account the size of her body and began drawing a line at least three times bigger than it. Then he used his natural strength and large paws to easily start digging, tearing out the thick roots and undergrowth. It became tiresome after a while, but he was having too much fun to care.

His mother snuck a glance toward Guinevere's home. “I'm going to get us food from our den, okay? I'll be right back."

Gadalik may have gotten carried away; when she returned and called his name, it sounded distant. He looked toward her, his heart skipping a beat upon seeing she was over fifteen feet above him on solid ground.

“What happened?!” she shouted just to be heard. “Did it collapse under you?!”

He felt heated with embarrassment. “N-No... I just... kept digging,” he admitted with an awkward laugh.

“Can you get out?” she fretted.

“Uh...”

She shook her head, letting out an exasperated sigh. “Stay here. I'll get Guinevere to fly you out, alright?”

He nodded, watching her toss prey down to him before her footsteps faded. With nothing else to do, he finished smoothing out the dirt on the bottom, then looked back up, this time at the sky. It had been perhaps a half-hour, and the sighting of wind dragons became less frequent.

Gadalik grew impatient and propped his front paws on the side of the hole. To his surprise, his textured, dark red paw-pads easily gained purchase on the coarse dirt, nearly sticking to it. He tried one hind paw next, balancing on just one, then began to pull himself up, tentatively at first out of fear of falling, but then more confidently, and eventually instinct drove him; he hauled himself over the ledge without even realizing he'd made it to the top. The winged earth dragon glanced down into the depths he had both made and escaped, feeling proud of himself. Then he turned around and jolted upon discovering that both dragonesses had arrived just in time to witness his feat.

While Guinevere didn't emote much in general, she very clearly seemed impressed. Glacia rushed over to pick the green dragon up under his shoulders, swinging him around and gushing about how amazing he was while he laughed.

The winged dragoness helped gather materials which she used to fortify the inside, then the finned one began filling it with the water she had stored in her body. When she ran out, she left for the plains to get more from her lake home there.

“Are you two okay?” Gadalik asked now that it was just him and Guinevere again.

She nodded with a small smile as if to reassure him. “Are you? You have worked hard. Get some rest; Glacia and I can take over from here."

The young hybrid reluctantly agreed and settled under a tree so that he could watch them without being in the way.

He must have dozed off; the next thing he knew, Gadalik awoke to see it had been completely filled, save for a few feet from the top so the water level wouldn't overflow whenever Glacia went in. He carved a step into the ledge so she could easily get out, too. With that, it was done; the three of them admired their handiwork.

“Ah!” Glacia suddenly exclaimed. “It's evening already?!”

Gadalik was startled. “Y-Yeah. Why?”

“Come on, we need to get to the lake,” she replied vaguely.

He felt a bit hurt. “What about this one…? Don't you like it?”

She immediately stopped and covered her mouth. “Of course I like it! It's wonderful! But this isn't about *me*."

“...What?" He looked to Guinevere for an explanation, and her head was tilted, seeming just as confused as he was.

“You'll see when we get there,” Glacia assured him, and for some reason that phrase sounded familiar, but he couldn't think of where he'd heard her say it.

They crossed the plains under the reddened evening sky. He noticed right away as he approached that the lake looked different; there were a lot of flowers haphazardly planted in a trail around the shoreline, leading them to the southern side of the lake. Some were wilting from what he had guessed were days spent without proper nutrients; others had never been rooted in the sand to begin with. He glanced back to notice the hue of the fairy dragoness’s wings was changing rapidly between red, purple, and blue as she visibly restrained herself from trying to replant them, out of respect for Glacia’s efforts.

Gadalik felt bad for her but couldn't suppress a slight puff of laughter. The flower trail ended by going into the lake toward one of the limestone pillars Glacia sunbathed on.

The water itself was still icy, but he could tell she had tried to break apart the surface enough to swim in. His adoptive mother looked at him expectantly, and he dipped a paw into water, but instantly drew back from how cold it was. That's when she noticed that neither Guinevere–who had managed to successfully root one of the flowers in the grass of plains before the sand–or Gadalik seemed too impressed by what she’d done, and the finned dragoness sat down in defeat.

“What's this all for?” he prompted gently.

“The flowers were meant to lead us to that crevice in the pillar,” she said. “To get there, you would need to show off the swimming ability you worked so hard to master…”

“What's important about the crevice…?”

“It's to show you how tall you've gotten…”

He didn't understand what his height had to do with a little crevice. Then his conversation with the fairy dragon from earlier that day hit him at full force. "Wait... You mean this is the celebration of my emergence? It was *today*?" *So that's what she's been spending all these mornings setting up for...*

She nodded, still disappointed in herself. "You were so tiny, your egg had been in that crevice when you hatched." She sighed. "I kind of figured this wouldn't work..."

Gadalik felt overwhelmed with emotion; both from how much heart she had put into it, as well as how guilty he felt for not appreciating it.

"So I thought back to what Guinevere said about you digging, and that's *also* a skill you have. And getting out of the hole shows your height, too, doesn't it?" Her voice broke. "I'm sorry... I never celebrated an emergence day before... nor has mine ever been celebrated. I--I don't know what I'm doing..."

Guinevere's antennae moved slightly and she looked their way, clearly sensing how they felt. She abandoned the flowers to comfort the two. "You did wonderfully, Glacia."

"Really...?"

Her son wiped his watered eyes with his forepaw before smiling. "Of course," he answered, parroting the phrase she commonly used. "It's beautiful...! I really, really, love it."

She sniffled and hugged him. "Happy emergence day."

"Wasn't there a third theme?" he asked after finally pulling away.

"Yes: a goal. That part's on you, big guy. Is there something you'd want to do before this day, next year?"

He hadn't given it any thought. Then he remembered when Guinevere had flown down with him from her hollow after a blizzard, and how Glacia had to initially rely on her flight to free him from the hole earlier. Then his striped blue eyes looked toward the hills, where a handful of wind dragons now roosted. "I... I want to learn how to fly," he decided.

Glacia and Guinevere exchanged an uncertain glance upon hearing the one-year-old hybrid's emergence day goal.

"Flight comes more naturally to some dragon types than others," the pale blue fairy dragoness softly stated, sitting down beside him. "For example, wind dragons can use their ability to create gales that they can easily glide on. However, their bodies are lightweight. When it comes to heavier winged types, like fire dragons, their flight is limited, even though their wings are fully functional."

"Are you saying I'll *never* be able to fly because I'm heavyweight...?" Gadalik asked quietly, and the pink glow of her wings faded to purple, then blue, and she averted her light yellow eyes without answering.

"N-No! Earth dragons can't swim, but *you* can. You put in the work, and you succeeded. There's no telling what you're capable of!" Glacia spoke up encouragingly. "But I know how much energy and precision it takes for you to stay afloat–and water is denser than air. All we're saying is that if you *do* learn to fly, it might be even harder than it is for you to swim. Is that something you're prepared to put yourself through?"

He considered it. "There's no harm in trying, right? It's not like there's a chance I'll drown in the air."

"In that case, we'll be with you every step of the way. Right, Guinevere?"

She nodded, her blue wings slowly returning to their neutral pink.

He smiled slightly at the two. "Thanks for giving me a chance. I've tried on my own and failed, but this time I have someone who can teach me."

"Like I said, flight is different for every type, so I'm not sure how effective my teachings will be for an earth dragon hybrid," Guinevere admitted. "But, rest assured, I will show you everything I know."

The next few days, the winged dragoness had started their lessons with her hypnotism ability, allowing Gadalik to get a physical feel of flight's sensations. Each session added in new factors such as more of his weight, wind turbulence, and the difference his wings' movements made.

After that, Guinevere moved their training to the real world to put what he had learned into practice. She brought him to one of the smaller boulders near the northern edge of the forest, and instructed him through various exercises so that he wouldn't strain himself. "I want you to start by gliding."

Gadalik nodded, staring down with determination. He spread his small wings and leapt, trying to match the feeling to that of the scenes he had experienced through her hypnotism. His dark green paws launched him far from his natural strength alone, but his wings didn't catch air, and he landed a bit awkwardly.

Guinevere supervised his attempt. "Remember to align your wings and body with the wind, and don't be afraid to adjust their angles if the wind changes."

He tried again.

And again.

And again.

Each time, the young green dragon pushed harder and leapt farther, but that's all he was doing: leaping.

"Focus less on your paws, and more on your wings," she tried to correct him.

At this point he was growing too frustrated to listen. He was wearing himself out, and when he tried to climb back up the rock, he was too exhausted to make it to the top.

"That's enough for the day," she decided. "I shall take you back to your den."

Gadalik opened his mouth to protest, but sighed instead, and reluctantly followed her to his home where Glacia had been waiting for him with the food she had hunted while they were out. The water dragoness offered prey to Guinevere, who politely declined it before taking flight to her tree hollow.

The following days weren't much better, except Gadalik took her advice to focus less on jumping and more on keeping his wings at the right angles. Although his instincts told him to fly, it was like they were missing the part that made flying natural. He had to remain completely aware of the wind's direction, too, which was harder to catch and less predictable than the slow waves of the lake.

Guinevere stayed with him patiently each time, but she was running out of advice to give him.

It eventually reached the point where his form was perfect but he still landed much too soon instead of gliding. He looked back at the fairy dragoness, seeing her wings were that sorrowful blue again. *She knows this isn't going to work... doesn't she...?* he figured, and the hope he had been clinging to was starting to fade.

"It's getting late," the fairy type murmured, and when he finally agreed, she began leading the way back to his den. Once there, she made sure he went in safely before turning her back to leave.

"Wait," he stopped her. To his surprise, she did, giving him her full attention. "You've been working hard, too. If it's easier on you, you can stay in the den with us, so you don't have to keep going back and forth..."

Her wings flashed yellow, then orange. "Would Glacia allow me to...?"

"Would I allow you to do what?" the light blue water dragoness yawned as she stepped out to greet them, stretching the purple-and-teal fins on her back.

"Stay with us," Gadalik answered for her when her glow darkened to purple. "At least until our training is over."

"Oh? I mean... There isn't really room–"

“Then I'll make room," he shrugged, going in to do just that.

When he finally finished, his adoptive mother was still iffy about sharing her space, but ultimately said nothing about it after she went in with him. "Woah, you outdid yourself this time, big guy!"

Gadalik felt warmed by the praise. Guinevere hesitated, standing stoically in the flowering grass, but her wing color was alternating between green and purple.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” Glacia called to her.

The furred dragon’s wings flashed yellow, then orange as she entered the now-spacious den and instantly lied down.

As they ate, Gadalik noticed her watching them with her antennae slightly raised and her wings a subtle mixture of orange and purple. He could tell she was happy to be there, but also cautious, as if expecting Glacia to chase her out when least expected. When the finned dragoness plopped herself down and began snoring faintly, the purple of Guinevere’s wings slowly eased back into orange, and she visibly relaxed, resting her head on the ground and shutting her eyes.

The fairy dragoness had napped in her tree hollow while Gadalik had sheltered there from last season’s blizzards, and back then, she had appeared to be alert and disturbed by every little sound, in a sort of doze while they had waited out the storm.

This time, she allowed herself to rest fully. Gadalik could tell from her change in breathing and from how deadly-still her body was besides it that she had had too many sleepless nights, and it finally caught up to her.

The seer-earth dragon hybrid also settled down, but froze when he heard a voice in the distance. He looked at the adults with him in hopes that they'd know what to do, but Glacia was naturally a heavy sleeper, and Guinevere had completely passed out.

The voice sounded again–a female’s higher-pitched laughter. He could tell it was hushed, so he assumed whoever it was didn't intend to draw attention to herself. *That's a good thing... That means she isn't a threat.* Still, curiosity got the better of him, and he quietly slipped out of the den to inspect it.

It came from the northern edge of the forest where he had practiced his gliding just hours ago. He crouched in the grass, hoping his green body would camouflage when he spotted a white juvenile wind dragoness with light purple stripes running up the rock and over its ledge, giggling as she twirled and spun effortlessly in the air with her eyes closed. She landed lightly right in front of him, a pulse of air created from the collision of her paws with the ground. The tips of her wings then folded up from the backs of her forelimbs.

Her hot-pink eyes opened and caught sight of his immediately while he stared to gauge her intentions. "What?" she pouted. "You were on it for da-a-ays. It's only fair that *I* get a turn, too!"

"Huh?" Gadalik was completely confused and scrambled to his feet. He was barely taller than her if you didn't count the single horn between her eye ridges at the back of her head; they must be close in age. "How did you know that? Were you watching me?"

"Well, yeah," she casually admitted.

Guinevere didn't detect her? "Why? How?"

"Because I saw you keep jumping off the boulder," she answered impatiently. "It was so distracting! At first I was like... what is he *doing*? But then I was like... that *does* look kinda fun. So-o-o... I wanted to try it, too."

He blinked, then caught on to the impression she was under. "N-No, I wasn't *playing* on it... I was training."

"Training?" She slowly moved closer, her eyes shining with interest as the spade-shaped tip of her tail swayed behind her. "For what?"

"To... fly," he answered, too nervous by how near she was to think of a cover story.

"Pffft! Earth dragons can't *fly*, silly," she laughed genuinely, then back-flipped away from him, flapping her wings just once to bounce wind off the ground and up to keep her suspended in the air.

He gaped, both indignant from her words yet captivated by her actions; she was levitating, carried by the gale she'd stirred up from that single, simple motion. Gadalik shook his head. "I'm not a full earth dragon... I'm a seer hybrid. Maybe it's *different* for me."

She let herself float down when the air petered out, her pink eyes widened slightly at the realization that he was serious. "Want to find out?"

"Find out... what?" he dared himself to ask. The way she had suddenly gone from carefree to truly concerned really baffled him.

"If you can fly," she huffed, as if somewhat annoyed that she had to spell it out for him. Without awaiting his answer, she headed back for the rock. "Come on–I'll help."

What on earth is happening? Is this some senseless dream? Gadalik wondered, but he found himself following her anyway. She sat under the ledge and gestured with her arm for him to go on top of it, the motion bringing her purple-striped wing up since the folded tips of them extended from her wrist.

"Read-y-y-y?" she sang when he had gotten in position, and he tensed. "*Jump!*"

He did, his short wings spread the way he'd been taught. His new friend sent a strong gust up against him, forcing his wings to catch the wind. For the first time, he had achieved the same sensations from his hypnotism sessions. But instead of lifting him, his wings almost instantly buckled backward under the stress of his weight and he was falling.

She squeaked and rolled out of the way as his body audibly smacked the ground in spite of her wind. "Oh no–are you okay?!"

It hurt. He felt his eyes water from the pain, but also from the confirmation that she was right: flight was impossible for him.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," she panicked, looking around wildly. "Where are your friends? I'll get them to help–"

"I'm fine," Gadalik interrupted her quietly. He forced himself to sit up.

The young wyvern closed her mouth but was still breathing fast as her pink eyes studied him. Then she took a breath and sighed. "If you *say* so."

"Just who are you…?" he finally asked.

"Hm? Oh! I'm Gretel. I'm new here."

"Here… to the forest?"

"No-o, just… *here*. To this whole land."

He opened his mouth to ask more, but wasn't sure what to say.

She caught on that he was still confused. "I travel," she clarified.

"…*Alone*?" Gadalik was shocked.

"Duh."

"Why?"

"Why *not?*"

Oh, right… wind dragons are solitary types, he remembered. Then he realized she was staring at him expectantly. "Uh… can I help you…?"

The wyvern snorted, as if offended by how clueless he was. "You haven't told me *your* name."

"…Oh."

"Well?" Gretel prompted. "What is it?"

"I'm… Gadalik."

She grinned. "Nice to meet you! I'm gonna go to sleep, now, but I'll come back to play tomorrow! Okay?"

"Oh--uh… Okay…" the hybrid stammered. Then her words registered. "Wait–what? Play? Tomorrow? But I… You… We–"

"Bye-e-e!" she sang as she took to the sky without a second glance back.
He stared after her, dumbfounded, until she vanished into the night.

Chapter 3

"Gadalik?!" The light blue water dragoness's exclamation echoed off the walls of their spacious den. "Where did you get that *bruise?!*"

"Huh–what?" the young green seer-earth dragon hybrid managed to vocalize in his half-awakened state. He had been out for most of the night, staring at the stars for a sign that his surreal meeting with the wind dragon wasn't a dream. Mere hours had passed since his return to the den and morning.

"Bruise?" Guinevere lifted her head out of a sound sleep, concerned.

Glacia rounded on her. "You were supposed to *supervise* him," she snarled. "You *promised* me you wouldn't let him crash-land!"

The fairy dragoness's insect-like wings flashed yellow, then alternated between purple, green, and red, as she narrowed her eyes and bared her own small fangs in response to such sudden hostility.

Gadalik rushed between them, then winced from the ache of his muscles which he realized were indeed visibly bruised. "She had nothing to do with it," he cried. "I snuck out last night without her...!"

Glacia gaped at him in shock. "You *what?!*"

He flinched from her volume. "There was a wind dragon outside. Apparently she saw me training, and when I met her she tried to help me fly, but it didn't work–so I fell–and–"

"You let a *wind dragon* watch him train?!" the finned dragoness once again turned on the other adult.

"I sensed nobody in range of the forest," Guinevere stated as a matter of fact, her voice calm but her wings a mix between red and purple.

"So you're calling my son a *liar*?!" she snapped.

"Well, none of them are lying," sounded a new voice from outside the den, startling everyone. A white juvenile wyvern trotted inside on silent purple-striped paws.

"*Gretel!*" Gadalik was both surprised by her sudden reappearance, and relieved to know she hadn't been a figment of his imagination after all.

"Heya!" the young wind dragoness greeted him with a grin. "Wanna go play?"

"...Okay," Glacia grumbled, "*somebody* better tell me what's going on before I do something we'll *all* regret."

Gretel tilted her triangular-shaped head, not at all fazed by the bigger dragon's temper. "Gadalik already told you. What more do you want to know?"

By this point Guinevere finally calmed enough to think straight, her glow a green color. "Wind dragons can see someone from well over a mile away," she remembered.

"Two miles, to be exact," she beamed.

"*And?*" Glacia pressed, clearly too upset to catch on to the implication.

"*And* I was watching him a mile and a half from the forest. There's no *way* that fairy type would've sensed me."

Glacia looked between them all, her red eyes settling on Guinevere. She sighed heavily. "I'm sorry…"

Her wings gradually returned to their neutral pink color. The tension in the air faded.

"Well?" Gretel repeated herself, addressing her new friend. "Let's go!"

"Go… where, exactly?" Glacia butted in, eyeing the newcomer with suspicion.

She shrugged. "I don't care. Anywhere but the mountains, I guess."

"What's wrong with the mountains?" Gadalik asked, remembering that earth dragons lived at the base of them.

Gretel stared at him, the least bit offended. "You wanna see me *killed*?"

"*What?!* No! What does *death* have to do with the mountains?"

"You're part earth dragon; you should know the answer to that!"

Gadalik tried to piece together what she meant. *Do earth dragons kill wind types? How would that even be possible when the latter can just fly away?*

That caught Guinevere's attention.

"Geez. I thought you were nice," Gretel pouted. "If you decide you *don't* want me dead, I'll be waiting at our rock for you." She left.

Gadalik was once again rendered dumbstruck. *What did I do wrong?* He shook his head and moved to follow her, but his adoptive mother stopped him.

"You've got some explaining to do, mister," she chided. "What on earth drove you to sneak out like that? If Gretel were any older, you would have been killed, for sure!"

He shrank. "Why…?" *Do wind and earth dragons hate each other that much…?*

"There's a reason your parents and I decided to raise you here. This forest is the fairy dragons' territory, shared only in the winter with the occasional water type like me. Fairy dragons are the only type that *don't* hunt or fight others."

He blinked. "What about water dragons?"

"Don't trust them, either," she answered sternly.

"But I trust you…?"

"Yes, but I'm *different*."

"How?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it and looked away. "You'll understand when you're older…"

Gadalik frowned. He suddenly realized just how sheltered his life was. He knew nothing about other dragons' traditions like Emergence Day, or the conflicts that different types may have with each other. Gretel didn't seem to believe that someone could be as ignorant as him, perhaps convinced he was playing dumb just to hurt her. "No," he said out loud.

Glacia froze. "...What?"

"I know you want to protect me... But if you want me to be able to protect myself, you *have* to tell me what I need to look out for," he said, standing taller with his striped blue eyes looking into hers.

"I already told you: you need to look out for *everyone."*

"Why? Every dragon I've met here has been *nice* to me!"

"Oh, *really*?" she scoffed. "What about the seer from your visions?"

Gadalik tensed.

Glacia gasped and covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up," she murmured. "Look... All I'm saying is that there are dragons who think hybrids, like you, shouldn't exist. Juveniles like Gretel might be too young to care... But if you had encountered anyone *else* on your own last night, I *guarantee* you wouldn't be standing here to back-sass me right now."

"But... Gretel's harmless. Can I at least go and apologize to her...?"

"'Harmless'? Look at that bruise covering half of your body!"

"That wasn't her fault...! She tried to keep me from falling with her wind, but I was too heavy, and I..." His voice trailed off as he was suddenly reminded that flight had been confirmed impossible for him.

Glacia grew hesitant by that reaction. "Gadalik...?"

He didn't answer her.

"Come on, big guy... Maybe you should tell us what actually happened last night. Then we'll see about you and Gretel, alright...?"

"...It doesn't matter," he muttered, refusing to admit his disability out loud. She sat back, glancing helplessly toward Guinevere.

The fairy dragoness approached them. "I've never sensed such sadness from you before," she murmured.

He looked up at his former mentor, remembering how she had tried to let him down gently about his wings when he'd first set the goal to fly. Even Glacia had warned him it could never happen, despite her attempts to be encouraging.

Gadalik turned his back to them both. *Is this really how I'm meant to live: alone, and in hiding, just because I'm a hybrid...? Am I meant to sit by and watch the rest of the winged dragons live their lives from below...? Seeing Guinevere and Gretel both flying away without me...?*

"Hey," Glacia called to him softly, placing her webbed hand on his shoulder. "It's okay... If you want to see Gretel *that* much, well... I'll believe you about the bruise not being her fault. You can go play with her, alright...? Just... promise me you won't sneak out again."

Gadalik sniffled, then leaned his body back against hers, feeling her pull him into a hug. He briefly wondered what she had meant by being different. Perhaps she had her own struggles nobody else knew about. When she finally let go, he stepped back, feeling better. "Thank you…"

"I'm here if you ever want to talk, okay?" she assured him. He nodded. "Now go! Get *outta* here and have some fun with your new friend!"

The hybrid smiled and gave both of his parental figures an affectionate headbutt before he raced out to the northern edge of the forest, where a few large rocks jutted from the ground just before the cliff. As promised, Gretel was laying halfway off the ledge of the boulder they had first met at, her left winged arm dangling over the side so she could impatiently tap her paw on the rock to the rhythm of a song she was humming to herself.

He took a second to admire her voice: it was strong, and her pitch was perfect. When her song came to an end, he purposefully cleared his throat.

Gretel leapt to a stand immediately. "Oh, man! Took you long enough! I thought you'd *never* show up!"

"Hey... I'm sorry if I was rude earlier. I wasn't playing dumb to hurt you; I truly don't know what earth dragons and wind dragons have against each other."

"Uhh... what? There's nothing bad between them. What gave you *that* idea?"

"You said you'd die if you went to the mountains... and that since I'm an earth dragon, I should know why."

"Yeah. And?"

"If you're not saying earth dragons will kill you, then who *will?*"

"The same ones that targeted earth dragons forever ago. Do you really not know your own history?"

He shook his head, a bit embarrassed.

"I'm talking about light dragons, on the mountaintops."

Gadalik cast his gaze to the mountains southeast of the forest he resided in, this time focusing on their peaks. Everything seemed still, as usual, but Gretel's words revealed the chilling reason behind it.

"Why would light dragons target earth- and wind-types?" he finally asked. It was hard to imagine that the large beasts on the mountaintops–known for their healing powers and their guidance of the lost–were killers.

"Nobody knows," the young wyvern replied with a shrug, "and nobody can get close enough to ask them without being attacked."

"Oh..." *Maybe Guinevere might be able to tell me... I'll have to ask her later.*

"So, what do you want to play?" Gretel changed the subject, her tail swaying eagerly.

"Oh–uh, what games do you usually play?"

"I improvise," she admitted. Her hot pink eyes searched the area until she spotted something under the trees and perked up, flapping her winged arms just once to take flight before diving into the forest. Gadalik bounded after her, then recoiled halfway there when she popped back up with a pine cone between the teeth of her tapered muzzle. Gretel tossed it from her mouth to catch between her hind paws as she hovered. "Come on, grab some more!"

He had no idea what her plans were, but didn't pass up the opportunity to dig around. Once they had gathered a bunch, they went back to their rock on the northern outskirts of the forest. "Now what?"

"We have to keep the pinecones from touching the ground. If one touches the ground on your side, it's mine, and we'll use the next one. If it lands on *my* side, it's yours. Whoever has the most pinecones in the end is the winner," Gretel decided.

"Hm... I'm in."

They piled the cones on the sidelines and got into position: Gadalik stood before the trees, facing Gretel who had landed on their rock by the cliff. "A-a-and... *start!*" she exclaimed, tossing one pinecone into the air and then propelling it at him with a strong wind from her wings.

Instinct took over; the earth dragon hybrid batted it back at her with his large paw, his natural strength keeping it flying through the air at the swift pace she had set.

The young wind dragoness bared her fangs in a competitive smile and this time directed the pinecone far to his left instead of directly at him.

Gadalik had run to reach it, but managed to in time. *Two can play that way,* he thought, feeling his own lips draw back in a grin as he aimed it to her right and swatted.

Gretel squealed excitedly, chasing it down. She blocked it with her paw, but it ricocheted off of it; she fumbled until it dropped to the ground. "Wow, you're good!" she remarked, not hiding how impressed she was. "That's one for you. But it's not over yet, and I'm just getting started!"

"Bring it on!" he challenged her playfully.

The two kept the game going for what felt like forever. One for her; one for him–one for him, one for her.

They were both exhausted by the time they realized they had gathered an even amount of pinecones, so there was nothing to break their eventual tie with, and they laughed.

"That was great," Gadalik admitted, still smiling even though it was over. "I don't think I've ever played an actual game before."

"Really?" Gretel was stunned by that news. "Then what do you normally do for fun?"

"Well... I love digging, and water, and wrestling."

"Water?"

"Y-Yeah. My mom taught me to swim, but even before that, I liked splashing around in the shallows."

"Your mom? Who's she? Can I meet her?"

"You already have–this morning. Her name's Glacia; she's the water dragoness."

She stared at him, her hot pink eyes widening with surprise. Then she laughed. “Let me get this straight: you're a seer and an earth dragon... being raised by a *water* type?”

He shrank from how ridiculous that must have sounded to an outsider, but at the same time he felt the need to defend his upbringing. “I’m not a solitary type like you... I would be *dead* if it weren't for Glacia."

Her laughter stopped and she took a second to process that. Then she stepped back and hung her head. “Sor-ry... I forget how helpless most types are on their own."

Helpless...? Gadalik was somewhat offended to think of himself that way, but upon further introspection, he determined she wasn't exactly wrong.

“Us wind dragons can fly and make gusts with our wings from the day we emerge. If our parents stick around to teach us the harder stuff, great, but most of the time we can figure it out on our own."

“What do you mean by ‘stick around’?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do you mean’? I meant what I said."

“So your parents *didn't* stick around?”

“Duh." She rolled her eyes. “Do you *see* them anywhere?”

He felt a pang of sympathy for her. “How did you survive as an egg without them?”

“You mean, like, from predators? Usually wind dragons just hide their eggs somewhere warm and safe. Maybe if it's cold, the egg won't survive without its parents, but *nobody's* dumb enough to lay eggs in cold areas. If they happen to lay during winter, they’ll just migrate south and leave their eggs *there*."

Gadalik was intrigued by how differently her type lived. He couldn't help feeling the least bit jealous of her independence and ability to travel. *Seers can travel, too,* he realized. The hybrid glanced back at his wings, which his father’s type didn't have. *If my seer mom had such powerful wings, why aren't mine like hers?*

“It's been fun, but I'm pooped, and getting hungry. So I'll see you tomorrow, okay?” Gretel prompted.

“Oh–okay,” he stammered, a bit disappointed that she wouldn't stay longer. “See ya."

“Buh-bye!" The wyvern took flight, disappearing into the clouds.

Alone with his thoughts, Gadalik went over everything he learned as he made his way back to the den. *I accept that I'll never be able to fly... But I'd at* least *want to know* why *I ended up with wings that I can’t use.* Then there was the mystery around the light dragons’ aggression, but that didn't seem like one that could be solved easily, so he dismissed it for now. Upon entering, the young green dragon was relieved to see that both of his parental figures were still getting along, despite maintaining their usual distance from one another.

"Welcome back, big guy," Glacia greeted him with a wave of her purple-and-teal back fin. "How did things go with Gretel?"

"We had a lot of fun," her adoptive son replied honestly.

"But?" Guinevere spoke up, her golden antennae angling slightly at the hybrid, who was reminded she could detect his feelings.

"There's... something I need to tell you," he confessed. That got both of their attention. "That bruise from this morning actually came from my last attempt to fly. Even with Gretel's wind, I still couldn't stay airborne. So... flight really *is* impossible for me."

"Gadalik..." The water dragoness approached to embrace him, and the glow of Guinevere's wings shifted to blue.

"I'm not saying this for sympathy," he stopped them. "I just... want to know why. My biological mother had wide wings, and crossed the ocean on them to get here. But mine are nothing like hers... It doesn't make sense."

"While you are half-seer, you take mostly after your father; your wings are actually an earth dragon's type," Guinevere informed him.

"Huh? Earth dragons don't have wings," Glacia pointed out, confused.

"Not anymore, but they used to. The wings were of no benefit to them once they chose to stay on earth, so over time they evolved to lose them," the fairy dragoness continued. "The remnants are still in their genes, though, and because seers also have wings, the earth dragon's wings became a recessive trait for the latter's type-leaning hybrid."

Gadalik let her words sink in. "Could earth dragons fly when they *did* have wings...?"

"The answer depends on how long ago we're talking about. They never used to be earth dragons in the first place; they were mountain dragons, who had average-sized wings capable of basic flight. Change began when the light dragons established territory on the mountaintops."

"You mean light dragons weren't *always* on the mountaintops?"

"Correct. They had descended from the heavens, but that's a story for another time," she murmured. "Light dragons didn't take kindly to the mountain types flying around their territory, so the former began striking them down from the sky. The mountain dragons feared their wrath and stopped flying altogether, forced to survive on the mountainside and cliffs. They began to associate their own wings with death, so mountain dragons with prominent wings were cast out of society or killed. This led to their wings getting smaller over the generations, until eventually, they had none–becoming the wingless earth dragons known today."

"But why did the light dragons attack them? I thought they had powers to heal others, not *kill* them..."

"Light dragons do have healing powers," she confirmed. "And until they left the heavens, they were peaceful. As for *why* they left the heavens, I do not know... However, the only dragons who could reach them before then were types that could fly. Perhaps that contributed to the light dragons' downfall and subsequent aggression toward flighted dragons."

"Wait... so they are only targeting dragons that can fly?"

"As far as I'm aware, yes," Guinevere said, "because flying is the only way to reach them on the mountaintops."

"No, it's not," Gadalik disagreed, standing straighter with a new sense of purpose. "I can reach them by climbing...! And since I can't fly, they wouldn't have a reason to attack me." *I can do this...! I can bring peace between light dragons and the others. For once in my life, my heritage might be the reason I* succeed *at something!*

"Let's not forget that the base of the mountains are inhabited by earth dragons," Guinevere said.

He hesitated. "Why would earth dragons stop me? I'm one of them, aren't I?"

"Earth dragons had cast out or killed their own kind just for having wings. And... you are a hybrid of their own kind who has wings."

Gadalik heard himself growl.

The adults were taken aback by his uncharacteristic anger. They exchanged a concerned glance.

"You're telling me that earth dragons won't accept me just because I'm a *seer* hybrid," he recapped, seething with frustration. He rounded on his adoptive mother. "And you have said that the seer from my visions was targeting me because I'm an *earth dragon* hybrid. So, tell me: just where *am* I able to go? What types *won't* want me dead?!"

Glacia was completely caught off guard by his outburst. She moved her hand forward to comfort him, but he backed out of her reach, his watered striped blue eyes challenging her. She sighed. "You're *able* to stay with me... *I* don't want you dead," she answered quietly. "Why are you so desperate to leave...?"

The hurt in her voice snapped him out of his rage. He instantly felt remorse. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean it like that... I just... feel so... *limited.* Like I'm trapped in one place, while everyone around me is free to travel and make new friends..."

"Everyone is limited in *some* capacity," Guinevere empathized. "I, for one, cannot leave the shelter of my forest, since I lack the combative skills of other dragon types. My hypnotism is especially ineffective against light dragons, as their light can overpower my wings' glow. Fairy dragons are seen as pushovers, or easy prey, by other types, so we're forced to hide even when we're in our own territories if we detect the presence of unfamiliar dragons. And even then, wind dragons may still see us from out of our range, as was the case with your friend--but not all wind dragons are friendly."

Gadalik quailed. He had the impression that her abilities made her untouchable. The thought of her dying so easily tied his stomach in a knot.

"And water dragons will dry out and die if we don't have ready access to enough water or snow," Glacia added, "but you knew that already."

"Limitations are part of all life, young one, regardless of your heritage," the other dragoness concluded.

"That still doesn't make it fair…" he argued, despite hating how childish that made him sound.

His adoptive mother thought for a moment. She opened her mouth to speak, then reconsidered. Just as quickly, she drew in a breath and braced herself before announcing, "If you *really* want to see the earth dragons, then… I'm coming with you."

Gadalik stared at her, shocked. "But… you just said you'd dry out if we left–"

"That's something I considered long before you hatched. If we leave in late fall this year, the upcoming snow will let me survive the journey."

He sniffled, feeling ashamed that she'd give up the safety of her environment yet again, just to support his unrealistic goal. "Staying here isn't a big deal, compared to what you and Guinevere have to live with… Besides, wouldn't the earth dragons hate me since I have wings…?"

"Pure earth dragons don't fare well against my water attacks. So if they try to hurt you, *I'll* show 'em who's boss," Glacia assured him with a half-playful smirk.

He chuckled genuinely through his sadness. "There's no stopping you once you make your mind up, is there…?"

"You, neither," she laughed. "You must've got that from me."

Chapter 4
Summer

Gadalik bounded through the trees of the forest, their placements so familiar to him that he could navigate blindly as he glanced over his shoulder with a smug grin at the young white-and-purple wyvern tailing him. "I thought wind dragons were supposed to be fast?" he taunted playfully.

Gretel snorted with mock indignation. There was barely enough space between trees for her winged arms to fully spread, but she compensated by relying on her air direction ability to create a tailwind that propelled her, so all she needed to do with her wings was steer. But steering itself was hard enough to constantly maneuver around the trees ahead. Despite her struggle, though, she never lost sight of her friend.

The green earth dragon hybrid made it to the northern edge of the forest where the trees ended to be replaced by large rocks jutting from the ground. He lifted his large paw and tagged a specific boulder that had come to symbolize their meeting. "I win!"

Gretel emerged from the trees perhaps a second or two after him, squealing as she was suddenly a lot faster without the obstacles blocking her wind–she nearly shot past him like a bullet before she stopped her ability and managed to land gracefully right before the cliff.

"You ok?" Gadalik called to her, worried since the snarky dragoness had been silent and panting.

"Yeah," she huffed, catching her breath. "That was just a workout for me, haha. But congrats! I've never lost a race I didn't try to win before, so your victory was earned."

He felt himself grow warm with embarrassment from the praise. "Thanks...!"

"How do you *live* in that place? There's no room at *all,*" she complained. "Doesn't it make you feel *trapped*?"

He blinked. "No, not really... I mean, now that I think of it, the forest *is* meant to keep us sheltered from predator dragons..."

"Predator dragons?" she echoed, confused. "You mean, like... me?"

He tensed. "Guinevere mentioned that wind dragons may target fairy types like her, and that she had to hide whenever new dragons entered the forest."

"Well... she's *right*, but my kind prefer hunting birds, or maybe some land-dwelling prey animals that happen to live in–or wander into–the open. As you can see, no wind dragon would want to go through what I did in our race just now–*especially* not for a puny snack like a fairy type."

As much as it unnerved him to hear Guinevere implied to be a 'puny snack,' her words did reassure him that the forest was indeed safe, and his friend had no interest in targeting them regardless.

"But, yeah! You really dodged those trees like a pro–without even looking! What's your secret? Do earth dragons have a natural feel for their terrains?"

"No–at least, I don't *think* so. I've just lived in this forest all my life, and I have a good sense of direction, so I know every path here by heart."

"You mean you've never left the forest?!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"I-I mean, I *have* been to the lake in the plains, but nowhere besides that–"

"I know some *great* spots! Come on, I'll show you!"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure if I'm *allowed* to leave... Not on my own, anyway."

"If you're with me, you *wouldn't* be on your own," Gretel pointed out. "Besides, this first spot isn't far from the lake, so it should be fine!"

"Are you sure it's safe for me...?"

"Come o-on... I'm a wind dragon! I know my own kind's routines."

He took a breath. "Alright. But I'm still going to ask first. Ever since I snuck out on the night we met, Guinevere has been keeping tabs on my location and life force, so she'll *know* and tell my mom if I left the forest," Gadalik explained. "It's better to just be upfront with them."

"Oh, for real? But Glacia would *never* let you go," she whined.

"Maybe not at first, but she can be lenient if we're honest with her."

Gretel rose one corner of her mouth with doubtful consideration. "...Alright. We'll go ask."

"Absolutely *not!*" the light blue water dragoness prohibited her adoptive son. "It's hard for Guinevere to monitor you if you're too far from the forest. And what if a predator spots you?!"

Gadalik shrank. While he truly wanted to explore outside of his home, Glacia had valid points.

"You think I can't protect him?" Gretel interjected, somewhat offended.

"You're just a juvenile! You don't stand a *chance* against adults," Glacia rebutted.

"I can hold my own against *you* just fine," the striped white wyvern stated as a matter of fact.

The older female snarled at her. "This discussion is over. Get out of our den–*now*–before I prove you wrong."

Gretel gulped and retreated a step.

"That isn't what she meant, Glacia," Gadalik intervened, staying calm since he knew his mother would never actually harm someone weaker than herself. "We'll only be gone for a short time. I can even use my foresight to make sure nothing will happen if we go. Deal?"

The water dragoness exchanged a look with Guinevere, the latter having been listening in without emoting much outside of her insect-like wings glowing a thoughtful green color. “Alright,” Glacia decided. “I trust your abilities, Gadalik."

He relaxed some. Then the green seer-hybrid imagined himself leaving the forest with Gretel, inviting his foresight to provide visions of the possible futures after that.

Gadalik followed Gretel into the plains, instinctively heading for the lake just south of the forest. But his friend stopped him and gestured with a flick of her spade-shaped tail-tip toward the hills before gliding easily in that direction. He kept up at a steady trot, training his striped blue eyes on the sky for any sign of danger.

They made it to the tallest hill, the young wyvern landing at the top, while Gadalik climbed up to join her.

The vision ended. Gadalik came to. “It’s just to the hills. It seems pretty safe."

His mother acknowledged him with a hum, but still wasn't convinced.

“If it'll ease your worries, I *can* monitor him outside of the forest,” the pale blue-and-pink fairy dragoness finally spoke. “But for my senses to reach that far, I would have to trade that distance for an equal one in the forest, leaving a blind spot for me in our territory."

Glacia frowned. Then she got an idea. “Gadalik, can you use your foresight to see if anything would happen to *us* while you're gone?”

The young hybrid shook his head. “It doesn't work that way... I've tried. If I won't be in a specific place in the time frame of my visions, I won't be able to see any futures there. My visions are only from my own point of view."

“Well?” Gretel prompted when the water type remained uncertain.

"I'm sure we'll be safe,” Guinevere assured Glacia. "Since they're going southeast, the blind spot will be in the northwest part of the forest. While it does give us less time to prepare for an intruder should they enter from that area, I will still sense one if they head our way."

“Okay, okay, *fine*,” the latter caved. She turned to her son. “But if anything goes wrong, I'm coming to get you, and you'd *better* come back with me."

Gadalik smiled slightly. “Fair."

“Then what are we waiting for?” Gretel chirped. “Let's go!” She led the green seer-hybrid to the hills, landing atop the tallest one where she peered down and beckoned him excitedly to join her.

Gadalik managed to climb it with ease, grateful that his rough, crimson-colored paw-pads could grip onto just about any solid surface. He pulled himself up beside the purple-and-white wyvern. The unobstructed breeze helped cool him from the summer’s heat, and he instinctively spread his small wings and let the wind embrace him for a moment. Then his striped blue eyes focused on his friend expectantly. “What's the plan?”

“Plan?” Gretel scoffed. “You should know by now that I improvise. Bu-u-ut, I thought you'd like the view from up here." She gestured to the plains they had just traversed.

Gadalik took in the sight of his forest home on the northern outskirts of the land, and the lake just south of it. Then he was struck by a strong sense of deja vu.

"You okay?" the young wind dragoness asked worriedly.

"I've been here before," he remembered.

"*Really*? I thought you've never left the forest past the lake?" She seemed disappointed that her spot was nothing new to him.

"Well, I haven't... yet," he clarified. "Last winter, I foresaw a future of me and Glacia standing on this very hill. In that vision, the colors of the forest trees were warm, so it must take place in autumn–next season."

"What would you two be doing on a hill?"

"If we leave in late fall this year, the upcoming snow will let me survive the journey," the water dragoness had told him a few weeks ago. The pieces fit together. "We were going to the mountains–to see the earth dragons."

Gretel's tapered, purple-tipped muzzle gaped at him in shock. "You *do* know how earth dragons feel about having wings, right?"

The earth dragon hybrid nodded ever so slightly. "I know they had cast out and killed their own winged kind until they ended up wingless as a dragon type."

"And you *still* wanna go?" she pressed, flabbergasted. "Why?"

"There are a couple of reasons," he admitted. "The first is that... there's a chance they *will* let me in and I can find out more about my father and his side of my heritage."

Gretel's eyes narrowed skeptically at him. "Is having a connection to your parents *that* important? I mean, you'll be risking getting hurt or killed if the earth types *don't* welcome you."

He took a single step away from her. "You wouldn't understand; you're a solitary dragon. I'm *not*. Both of my blood-parents' types–*and* my adoptive mother's type–are meant to live in a society, not isolated in the woods..."

"So you're planning on *moving* there?"

"N-No! I just... want a taste of the life I'm designed to have. If they turn me away, that's fine... If they attack, Glacia will protect me. But there's still a *chance* that they'll let me in, even if it's just for a day, or a few hours..."

Gretel sat down, her mouth and eyes scrunched as if trying to wrap her mind around the worth of family and community. She shook her head dismissively. "You mentioned there was more than one reason. What's the other?"

"Oh! I wanted to find out why the light dragons are hostile."

"The earth dragons won't be able to help you with *that*... Out of all of the dragon types, they're the ones who've been trying the longest to figure that out--and it cost them their lives, *and* their ability to fly."

"That's just it: if light dragons only attack flighted dragons, I should be safe to meet with them and ask them directly."

She stared at him for a few moments as if to determine if this was a joke. Then the wyvern closed her eyes, took a breath, and leapt off the hill. At first Gadalik thought his friend was leaving, so when she turned around to hover directly in front of him, he was relieved. That relief was short-lived, however, as her hot pink eyes bore into his and she bellowed, "Are you *insane?!*"

Gadalik drew back slightly from his friend's volume, and the implication that his plans were illogical. "No?" he answered, more confused by her reaction than anything. "Based on what Guinevere told me, and the fact that earth dragons are safe on the mountain below light dragons after they lost their wings, it only makes sense that light types won't target a dragon that's flightless."

"Earth dragons are only safe at the mountain base because the light types' territories are on the *peaks*. It was never about who could *fly*–it was about who could *trespass*," Gretel corrected him sternly, still maintaining eye contact.

The hybrid swallowed uncomfortably. The young wind dragoness was usually energetic and constantly changing her focus to whatever fancied her in the moment. The fact that she was now still and intent on him hammered home how serious this was.

"Flight just happens to be the easiest way to come across their territory," she explained after a brief pause to consider where his facts had gotten mixed up. "But it doesn't matter *how* you get there... Because *if* you get there, you're *dead."*

Gadalik processed this. He thought back to his initial conversation about it with the fairy dragoness:

"Wait... so they are only targeting dragons that can fly?" he had asked her.

"As far as I'm aware, yes," Guinevere said, "because flying is the only way to reach them on the mountaintops."

When he then mentioned his ability to climb, he realized now that she had changed the subject–bringing up the fact that earth dragons likely wouldn't let him reach the mountain to climb it in the first place.

Was that her way of gently trying to deter me from going near light dragons? he wondered.

Suddenly the memory of how she had handled his emergence day goal came to the forefront of his mind.

"Flight comes more naturally to some dragon types than others," the pale blue fairy dragoness softly stated, sitting down beside him. "For example, wind dragons can use their ability to create gales that they can easily glide on. However, their bodies are lightweight. When it comes to heavier winged types, like fire dragons, their flight is limited, even though their wings are fully functional."

"Are you saying I'll never be able to fly because I'm heavyweight...?" Gadalik asked quietly, and the pink glow of her wings faded to purple, then blue, and she averted her light yellow eyes without answering.

Glacia had encouraged them to work together toward his goal to fly, and they had wasted weeks before Gadalik caught on that they knew from the start it was impossible for him.

At first he was grateful that she had tried to let him down easy, and justified it since they had probably wanted to spare his feelings. But now he felt that uncharacteristic anger take hold of him for the second time upon realizing that she had done it yet again in their discussion of light dragons: instead of dashing his hope of reasoning with them, the adults in his life tried to find another excuse for him not to discover he was wrong–just like they had fed into his delusions of flight. He heard another growl escape from his throat and he pushed past Gretel to descend the hill.

The wyvern quickly began gliding to match his pace. "Did I just hear a growl? From *you?!*"

"Yeah," he muttered, not even glancing her way; his eyes were trained on the forest where his adoptive parents resided. *It isn't fair. I'd rather them be upfront with me than lead me on like that... Do they think I can't handle failure? Can't they see it hurts so much more to fail* after *they let me believe I could succeed?*

"Well... I'm sorry if I struck a nerve. I just don't want you getting yourself killed," she said.

Gadalik hesitated, not sure why she was apologizing. Then it hit him. "N-No–I'm not mad at *you*," he assured her, meeting her gaze to prove his honesty. "At least *someone* in my life has the guts to correct me."

"What do you mean?" Gretel asked, obviously because she cared, but he detected a desire to meddle within her tone.

The young green dragon continued walking. "I'm sick of being treated like a hatchling," he vented. "I thought I've been doing ok on my own lately, but apparently everyone still thinks I'm too sensitive to be told when my goals aren't achievable. Just a few weeks ago, my family let me think that I'd be safe to meet the light dragons if the earth types let me through. And... I'll even bet that they know there *isn't* a chance the earth dragons would invite me into their territory, after all..." He slowed to a stop, his anger fading. *There really is no hope for me to have a life outside of the forest, is there...?*

Gretel landed beside him, placing her purple-tipped paw on top of his comparatively large one in an awkward attempt to get his attention. "Uh... You good...?"

The hybrid tried to shake the doubt from his mind; he didn't want Gretel to see him so distraught and start coddling him too. Not knowing how else to hide his emotions, he turned his back to her and rushed for his home.

"H-Hey! Don't ignore me!" she huffed, easily catching up by surfing the breeze. "If you want, *I* could go talk to them while you calm down."

"I don't think Glacia would listen to you," he rejected the idea. "She barely even listens to *me.*"

"Can't Guinevere help convince her to stop babying you?"

"Guinevere's part of the problem," he cried, frustrated.

The wyvern landed once more–this time to block her friend's path. "Okay. You want *my* advice?"

Gadalik couldn't think clearly enough to make a decision so soon, but ultimately, he nodded.

"I think you should stop waiting around for their permission to go where you want," she said. "It sounds like they aren't giving you a chance to prove you can make it on your own–so give *yourself* that chance."

He considered it. "That... isn't true. Sure, they made a fuss about letting me come with you to the hills... But they still go out of their way to help me try the things I want to do, even if it might not work out. Or... things that they *know* won't work out..." *Why am I appreciating that? Isn't that why I was mad at them in the first place?*

"Hey. You don't have to listen to *me,* either," Gretel added. "Do what you think is best."

The green juvenile shook his head. "All I want is for them to stop beating around the bush when it comes to the goals I set. I just... don't really know what to do about it."

"My offer to talk to them for you still stands."

"No–if I let you speak up for me, that would just be more proof to them that I'm not capable on my own."

She gave a soft hum of understanding.

"...But, I would like you to come with me and see how *my* talk with them goes," he invited her with a slight smile. "Maybe you can give me tips on what to say beforehand."

She grinned. "That's what I want to hear!"

Gadalik and Gretel had taken their time crossing the plains on their way back to his forest home, the two friends seizing the opportunity to plan out how he would approach his family's tendency to infantilize him, and perhaps pry out the truth regarding the chances of him reaching his goals.

They stopped outside of the den, and the hybrid held one of his wings out between it and Gretel to signal the wyvern to wait for him outside. Then he took a breath and went in.

"Hey! How was your trip?" Glacia welcomed his return. "You were gone longer than I thought you'd be. Did something happen?"

"Well... It was an experience," he tittered lightly. "But there's something I want to ask you and Guinevere about."

"I'm listening."

"Back on my emergence day, when I said I wanted to fly... did you two know I really couldn't...?"

His adoptive mother hesitated.

"I figured you wouldn't be able to," Guinevere confessed, stepping forward to look him in the eyes. Her wings remained glowing their neutral pink color, but there was a blue tint to them.

"Then why try to teach me?" he pressed her gently. "Why let me think I had a chance at all, if you knew I didn't?"

"I'm the one who told her to teach you," Glacia admitted.

He sat down and gazed at the water dragoness expectantly for her to elaborate. After a few beats of silence, he took a breath, then repeated: "Did *you* know I couldn't fly?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't. I mean, of course I didn't expect you to be able to fly around like a wind dragon, but I *did* think you'd be able to at least glide–and I know you'd be happy enough if gliding was all you were capable of."

Gadalik gave a slight nod. He felt a bit of comfort from knowing she did have faith in him after all, and even though Guinevere held him to more realistic standards, neither of his parental figures had intended to mislead him. "Wait... So, Guinevere, what about the light dragons? Did you think I had a chance to reason with them if I climbed up to their peaks?"

The fairy type's wings flashed yellow as she recoiled, almost as if he had struck her by suggesting that. "Forgive me, but I don't recall saying anything of the sort. The light dragons will kill you if you reach their territory, whether you climb or fly."

He thought back on his conversation with her. "Well, maybe you didn't say that outright... But you *did* imply that I could talk to the light dragons if the earth types let me reach the mountains."

Her wings shifted to green for a moment, before returning to their neutral pink. "Yes. Because you *could* talk to one of the light dragons if the earth types welcome you."

"I don't understand. How could I speak to a light dragon if I'm at the mountain base?"

"My friend mentioned they have a peacekeeper. I know little about the latter, though, for the two don't seem to be on good terms. And I also cannot guarantee that you'll receive your desired answers from him, either. Many have asked him, but he always avoids the subject."

"You have a friend?!" Gadalik exclaimed, genuinely shocked. It took an eruption of laughter at him from outside for him to realize what he'd just implied. Glacia's jaw dropped and he threw a large paw over his muzzle to hide his flushing face, chagrined. He quickly recanted, "N-Not that you can't *make* friends! I'm just surprised, since you're a solitary type...!"

"That I am, but so is Gretel," Guinevere reminded him, gracing them with a rare smile as she gestured with her glowing orange wings to the mouth of their den, where the wyvern was now audibly wheezing. "And you are *her* friend, yes?"

He blinked, having not considered his friendship with Gretel to be unusual until now. *Why* is *she friends with me?* he wondered curiously.

"Well, it sounds like they were being honest with you from the start," Gretel concluded as she trotted in. "You should maybe ask more questions next time. It'd save you a lot of trouble, I reckon."

"Oh," he uttered the sound, realizing she was right. He turned to face his family. "I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? For what?" Glacia said. "And what does she mean about us being honest with you? I've never told you a lie since the day you emerged!"

Her adoptive son reflected on that, then nodded his agreement. "Yeah... I see that now. That's why I'm sorry: for doubting you both. I thought you were hiding the facts so you wouldn't hurt my feelings. But I guess by assuming that, I hurt my *own* feelings," he laughed. *Wait...* "So, Guinevere... you're saying I *could* talk with the light dragons' peacekeeper?"

"*If* the earth dragons allow you into their territory," the fluffy dragoness reiterated.

He gave a thoughtful hum. "How am I supposed to know if they'll let me in?"

"Can't you use your foresight?" Gretel suggested.

"You think I haven't tried? I *really* don't want us to be going all the way there for nothing," he said. "I just don't know how I would look that far ahead when it comes to places or dragons I don't have a connection with..."

"Can't you foresee another distant future of Glacia being there, like you did back in winter when you foresaw her on the hills with you?"

"That was the *first* thing I tried," he explained. "Every vision I have had since then has been of things that are *about* to happen–like us going to the hills earlier."

"Perhaps there's a limit to how many distant futures you can see for each dragon or subject," Guinevere guessed. "I know more powerful seers can see distant futures easily, but for a non-dominant seer hybrid, there may be limits."

"...Huh. That would make sense. I've seen one distant future of you, Guinevere; after you saved me in winter, I foresaw us meeting again in spring. And with Glacia, I saw one distant future of her last winter: us standing on the hills this coming autumn. After that, anything else had been in the near-future for both of you."

"You have a connection to *me*, don't you?" Gretel bounced with excitement. "If there's a one-time use to see distant futures per subject, then you can still see *my* distant future!"

"What...? Y-Yes, in theory, I *could*... But I don't see how that helps in this case–"

"Just *try* it," she insisted, growing a bit impatient.

"Um... alright," he gave in, trusting that she had a reason.

Gretel was leading Gadalik and Glacia toward the mountains, the hybrid feeling the unfamiliar rocky terrain through the snow his heavy paws sank into. They were just shy of earth dragons' territory, and he could tell his companions were just as exhausted as him from their long journey.

The purple-striped wyvern landed before a couple of earth dragons who were standing guard. The water type stepped past her to greet them, beckoning her adoptive son forward.

The muscular wingless dragons, just taller than her, eyed him curiously at first, before focusing on his wings and exchanging an unsettled glance with each other. They spoke for a minute, and although visions didn't have sound, Gadalik felt a spark of hope from their words. Finally, one of them smiled somewhat awkwardly and gestured for the newcomers to follow, guiding them into their territory.

Chapter 5

"It looks like the earth dragons will welcome us," Gadalik reported, unable to stop his short green tail from thumping the floor of their den in his excitement. Gretel whooped, and the pale blue-and-pink fairy dragoness smiled yet again at that news.

Glacia gave her adoptive son a confident, toothy grin. "I knew they would!"

He chuckled, then calmed himself to address his friend. "Thank you, Gretel, for letting me see that," the hybrid continued. "But… in my vision, it was snowing, and I know wind dragons don't like the cold. Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Cold can kill a wind dragon egg, but once we're hatched, we can tolerate it," the wyvern replied with a dismissive shrug. "I won't like it much, but I won't *die."*

The corners of the water type's mouth fell, and her irises–which were as red as the gemstone embedded in her forehead–looked between Gadalik and Gretel. "Wait. She's coming with us?"

"Duh. It's only fair. If I hadn't decided to go, he wouldn't have been able to see my future with the earth dragons letting us in just now."

Glacia scowled. "No offense, but nobody invited you."

"Uhh, 'no offense,' but I don't *need* an invitation," the wind dragon retorted.

She bared her fangs. "You don't need that bratty attitude, either, yet here we are!"

"*My* attitude? Do you hear *yourself?*" Gretel laughed.

The larger dragoness growled, but Gadalik spoke first. "Please, Glacia," he begged her. "The more of us who go on this trip, the easier it will be."

His adoptive mother immediately softened at that, but she seemed almost betrayed that he would choose Gretel's 'side' over hers. "Why do you want her to join us there so much…?"

"Because Gretel's my best friend," he answered honestly. "Whether or not she had helped me use my foresight, I'd still want her with us…"

Glacia sucked in a breath through her teeth and looked away, her hurt palpable. Guinevere approached her sympathetically. "Your son isn't picking sides," the fairy dragoness murmured. "I can sense that he truly loves you *and* Gretel."

"…Yeah," the light blue water dragoness sighed, not offering any other reasons for her reaction. She just stared at the ground absently.

"So can Gretel come with us…?" Gadalik prompted gently after a few beats of silence.

That set her off. "Oh, *sure*. Let's invite Guinevere too–it doesn't matter if she'll die in the cold or get preyed on in the open," Glacia snapped sarcastically. "And don't forget Guinevere's *friend*! I'm sure whoever *that* is would love to come with us, too! The more the merrier, am I right?"

Gadalik flinched from her tone. He had seen her upset in the past, but never to this degree. “What's gotten into you? Why does it bother you so much? Gretel isn't defenseless; she's a predator, herself, who’s designed for open spaces. If anything, she could protect *us*."

“That isn't it!” Glacia exclaimed. She opened her mouth as if to elaborate, but instead she took a breath and then stormed past Gretel toward the mouth of the den.

“Glacia…?!” he called after her, scared she might not return this time.

“Keep an eye on Gadalik for me,” she told the other adult. Seeing her son's worry, she assured him, “I just need to clear my head… I'll be back."

“I will,” Guinevere promised. With that, the water dragoness was gone.

“What on earth was *that* about?” Gretel piped up, completely lost. The spade-shaped tip of her tail was flicking with agitation. “Did I do something wrong?”

"Well… arguing with her isn't doing you any favors,” Gadalik pointed out, “but even so, I don't think you did anything to make her *that* upset."

“Sorry for arguing, then. I’m just not used to being bossed around. It's a pet peeve of mine, I guess."

“It isn't *all* about her authority,” the fairy dragoness corrected them, one of her antennae angled slightly in the direction Glacia had left in. “I sensed jealousy from her."

“What?" The young hybrid was thrown by that revelation. “What is there to be *jealous* of?”

“That feeling from her was more prevalent each time the word ‘friend’ was said."

“I don't get it. Does she think her son likes me more than her, or something?” the wyvern speculated.

“No… it didn't come off that way. Forgive me; I am not used to explaining how my empathy works." Guinevere’s wings glowed green as she thought about how best to phrase it. “What I sensed from her was more akin to ‘longing,’ than jealousy. I sensed a feeling of ‘loss,’ and a longing for ‘gain’ each time the word ‘friend’ was mentioned."

“What's that supposed to mean?” Gretel huffed, even more worked up and puzzled after that explanation.

For some reason, memories from his emergence day flashed back:

“Not every dragon type celebrates,” Guinevere had said regarding emergence day. “More solitary types like fairy- and wind-dragons have nobody to celebrate with, so they don't…”

“Oh. Are water dragons a solitary type…?" He had never seen his adoptive mother with any of her own kind.

“No, they typically stay with their families, leaving only to start their own families in or near the same territory,” Guinevere explained. “Earth dragons and seers are both similar to water dragons in that regard."

His heart sank. Why was Glacia alone, then…? *he had wondered.*

He then remembered something his adoptive mother had mentioned later that same day:

Her voice broke. "I'm sorry… I never celebrated an emergence day before… nor has mine ever been celebrated. I--I don't know what I'm doing…”

"Guinevere… can you detect her presence? Can you tell me where she is?" he asked.

"She appears to be headed for the lake," the fairy type replied.

Without thinking, Gadalik made his way out of the den to meet her there.

The journey to the lake wasn't long, and Gadalik had taken this route with his adoptive mother countless times throughout the first year of his life. That's why everything felt off now that he was alone.

Gretel had offered to accompany him, but he knew even without future visions that the sight of his friend so soon after the fight that caused the water dragoness to leave in the first place would upset the latter all over again, so he advised the former to stay in the den with Guinevere.

As he approached, Gadalik made out the silhouette of Glacia lying on top of the stone pillar she had mentioned he had hatched on, her back to him. The young earth dragon hybrid spread his small wings as he descended into the water, kicking off the sand before his head could go under and paddling strenuously with his large paws in the deliberate motions she had taught him to. He crossed to the center of the lake and began climbing the rock she was on. There was room enough for the both of them as he hauled himself over the ledge beside her.

She had been staring into the depths, not even glancing his way as she murmured, "Why did you follow me…?"

Her adoptive son tensed from the uncharacteristic neutrality of her tone; he had expected more emotion from her. "To make sure you're okay…"

"Does it matter if I'm not?" she asked, still eerily calm. "I look like the villain no matter what I say…"

"That isn't true… Nobody sees you that way. I'm sure you have reasons for not wanting Gretel to travel with us. And… I'm here if you want to share them with me."

Glacia seemed hesitant, her eyes narrowed as though she were weighing the risks of telling him.

"Are you… jealous, at all," he pressed, "that everyone seems to have a friend except for you?"

That got an immediate reaction from her, but not one that he expected; the water dragoness seemed genuinely horrified by his implication. "*What?* No! I don't *want* friends." When he fell into a shocked silence, she let out a sigh to break the tension. "Look… I'm happy you have a friend to play with. But playing together doesn't carry the same stakes as traveling halfway across the land. We can't depend on Gretel–or anyone–to stick around when times get rough."

Gadalik studied her, seeing no trace of dishonesty. "What about Guinevere…? Do you trust her?"

She paused, as if to consider her answer carefully. "I respect Guinevere enough, because she has saved your life in the past... But fairy dragons aren't built for combat or travel. We can't depend on her for *everything*."

"I can tell you respect her," he acknowledged her words, "but do you *trust* her...?"

She bit her lip. It was clear she wanted to tell him, but was torn. Finally, she said, "I don't know how to answer that without it sounding bad..."

"It doesn't matter how it sounds," Gadalik encouraged her softly. "I'll understand. I promise."

"In that case, I'll just put it bluntly: I don't trust *anyone*... And neither should you."

He instinctively wanted to defend his friend and Guinevere, but instead, he stayed true to his word and decided to hear what his adoptive mother had to say. "Why not...?"

"You mentioned before that every outsider you've met so far has been nice to you. The problem is, it's not safe to go around believing that everyone is truly that way, no matter *how* they treat you at first. In the real world, others will *say* they love or care about you... Maybe they'll offer to protect you, too. They'll hang around, share their food, and convince you they're your friends. But then, when you'd actually *need* them the most... they won't *be* there," she said quietly, her gaze shifting to the cavern underwater. "You can't put your trust in others so easily."

Gadalik studied her eyes, feeling a pang of sympathy upon seeing she meant every word. *Her jealousy isn't about our friends... It's about our ability to trust others,* he realized. "Did something like that happen to you before...?"

"...Yeah," she admitted.

He waited for her to explain, but the following sounds were only from the slight current hitting the sides of the pillar from below. "Who were they...?"

"It doesn't matter *who* they were. That lesson is better taught to you through my past than by your future with Gretel."

"What do you mean...? Gretel isn't like that... She'd *never* ignore me if I needed help."

"Yeah? That's what I thought back then, too. *Nobody* believes their loved ones could abandon them... not until *after* they leave you for dead."

He winced, almost able to feel the sharpness in her voice. *Just who hurt her...?* The hybrid shook his head. "But if we can't trust *anyone*... then why should I trust *you*?" he pressed–not because he didn't, but to show her just how flawed her reasoning was. He remembered asking her a similar question the day she had met Gretel; his adoptive mother had replied vaguely with–

"I'm *different*."

"That's not an answer," Gadalik dismissed it. "What if I said Gretel was different from whoever hurt you?"

"You have no way to know that..."

"Well, neither do *you.*"

"But you want to put your life in her hands and risk finding that out the hard way?"

"That's what I've been doing with you," he pointed out. "So again: *how* are you different from her?"

"Because unlike *her*, I know what it's like to be someone's last priority," Glacia growled, but her anger wasn't directed toward him or his friend. "I know what it's like to call on someone you trust for help–someone who *should* love you unconditionally–only to find out the hard way that they only cared about getting what they wanted, no matter who they left behind in the process. And I wouldn't wish that betrayal on *anyone*–especially not on *you.* You're my *son*, Gadalik. As your mother, it falls on *me* to keep you safe."

The hybrid listened intently, piecing everything together. "You mean… the ones who abandoned you were your *parents*…?"

The water dragoness froze, as if she hadn't meant to reveal that, but ultimately she nodded and looked away.

"What did they want that was more important to them than their own daughter…?"

"The same thing Gretel might be after in the mountains," she said, sitting up and reaching a hand to her forehead. There was a faint glow as the red gemstone unfused from her body to land on the teal padding of her palm. She lowered it for him to see.

His striped blue eyes shifted from the gem, to his mother, then back again as he tried to wrap his mind around this. "That wasn't a natural part of you?!"

"No. Only revealer dragons have gemstones naturally in their bodies."

"Then where did this one come from?"

"From the cavern in my lake," she said. "Gemstones are hard to find, but they can enhance your powers, so a lot of dragons–like my parents–dedicate their lives to finding them… even if it means prioritizing the search over their own kin."

"Wait… so you found the gem they were searching for?"

"Completely by chance, yes. But that's not the point. If the reason Gretel wants to tag along with us is to use your earth dragon heritage to gain access to the gem mines in the mountains, I doubt she'll stick around once she gets what she wants."

Gemstones… mines… mountains… This was all too much for him to take in at once. "But… Gretel is my friend… She wouldn't… She…"

Glacia shook her head. "You understand now, right…? I'm not going to sit idly by and let you get hurt by Gretel the way my parents hurt me."

Chapter 5 Interlude

Glacia

Six-month-old Glacia trailed behind her parents as they trekked the winding paths of the cavern. While they weren't moving particularly fast, it was hard for her to keep up with them given how much smaller she was, so when her dark turquoise father abruptly stopped to inspect the ground, Glacia was relieved by the chance to rest; she sat on her aching haunches and caught her breath.

"Careful... We might not be alone," he rumbled. "These are definitely shadow dragon tracks."

"You don't think they found the apex before us, do you?" his mate replied, her white figure moving to see them for herself.

"No; these toe impressions are recent, and there's only one set of them. Theoretically, there's a single shadow dragon who's new to this area," he reported. "Come on. If we hurry, we may beat it to finding the gem."

Without even a glance back at their daughter, the adults resumed walking, much more quickly than before. As Glacia stood to follow, her legs felt weak and strained; her brief rest had allowed exhaustion to catch up to her. "I'm tired," she whimpered.

Her voice sounded louder than she'd meant for it to be, echoing faintly in the hollow depths. The white water dragoness stopped and looked back at the hatchling, but her orange eyes glared in warning. "Quiet down...!"

Glacia flinched. She took an unsteady step forward... then her trembling legs gave out and she collapsed.

"We don't have time to rest right now," her father sighed heavily in response to his daughter after he turned to find out what the holdup was. He picked up the light blue dragoness and put her on his back before they continued.

Glacia appreciated the chance to recover, and peered down from her new perch in hopes of seeing the tracks her parents had been talking about. Unfortunately they had long moved past them in their rush. *Maybe I'll see them on our way back to the ocean,* she convinced herself to avoid dwelling on her disappointment.

The rocky ground began to steadily decline. The farther they descended, the darker it became, and the cooling air eventually dampened with humidity. Glacia's scales, which had been drying out from the days they had spent exploring, felt rejuvenated by the moisture, and she carefully balanced upright on her father's back to spread her purple-and-teal back fins to let her whole body rehydrate.

"Be still," he commanded sternly, "or you'll fall off."

The hatchling tensed, feeling the slightest bit indignant that he hadn't even checked to see why she was readjusting her position in the first place; if he had, he would've known she intended to hold still in her new pose, and his words had cut her movements short of reaching it. But she obediently settled more securely into the groove of his back and lowered her fins despite how much doing so physically bothered her.

Glacia listened as usual to her parents quietly remarking on the changes in the environment, and while she didn't understand half of the terms they were using, the hatchling had picked up on the very basics of gems and what sorts of things indicated their presence over the past few months her parents had spent obsessed with finding them.

Eventually they reached the source of the humidity: an underground river of sorts was flowing from a sloping hole in the cavern's upper wall, which likely connected to the earth's surface. "Can I go in the water?" she asked her parents excitedly.

"Huh? Oh. Sure," the turquoise dragon permitted her, setting his daughter down from his back. "From what I can gather, the gem should be in this general area, so you can stay in the water while we search, if you want."

Glacia happily raced into the shallows, where she lied down and seized the moment to fully relax and recover. After a few minutes, though, she did get bored, and let her eyes wander around the room. Her parents poked and prodded the ground, stopping only to discuss how long to keep looking in a single spot before moving on to the next one.

After recovering, the hatchling decided to join in the search, weaving between her parents' legs to see what they were looking at.

"Glacia, *please,"* the white dragoness groaned with exasperation after nearly tripping over her, "go wait in the water. We won't be too much longer, okay?"

Her young daughter shrank, feeling crushed by her exclusion. She opened her mouth to convince her mother that she would behave if they included her, but ultimately she closed it and obeyed.

After what felt like forever to a bored and lonesome hatchling, Glacia picked up on a change in the water level. She shifted her focus to the source; the tunnel connecting the water to the surface seemed to be smaller than before. *No–the flow of water is getting stronger, filling it out more*, she realized. Just then the echo of thunder startled her. "Mom? Dad?" she called to them worriedly.

"It's just thunder," her father answered, his eyes not leaving the ground in his search for the gem. "It can't hurt you."

That isn't what I'm worried about, she wanted to say, but she was scared of getting on their nerves.

The current became ever stronger as stormwater added to the river she was in. "It's raining," Glacia tried to tell them again.

"That's nice," her mother dismissed her.

When the river started to overflow, the light blue hatchling feared losing her footing, so she stepped out of the water and made her way back toward her parents, not knowing where else to go.

"*Glacia*," her mother snapped, finally facing her. "We told you to stay in the river until we're done here."

"But it's getting too deep…" the young dragoness protested.

"Then just stand *by* it instead."

"What if I fall in?"

"You know how to swim," her father interjected impatiently. "Honestly, you're just getting in our way right now. So *please,* listen to your mother and wait for us over *there*."

"But–"

"*Now*," he snarled.

Glacia retreated a step, staring up at him even after he had turned away from her to resume his gem hunt. She sniffled, then walked back to the shore of the river, not daring to get too close to it. The water had flooded a lot within the short time she'd spoken with her parents; the current picked up speed as well. With nothing else to do, she escaped to the comforts of her mind, imagining she was back home in the ocean.

Just when she had gained some sense of peace, Glacia was startled back into reality by another clap of thunder. She jumped out of reflex, and the motion caused her to slip in the water that had elevated under her paws without her realizing during the time she'd been daydreaming. With a cry that echoed around the walls of the cavern, she lost her footing and fell in.

Immediately the current swallowed her, preventing her from calling out for help. Glacia tried to use her back fins to regain her bearings and swim, but by now she had been swept into total darkness. She was a tiny speck in void with no way out, too weak to fight the surging stormwater as the current pushed and pulled her at its own discretion.

She must have blacked out; the hatchling awoke washed up on a sandy piece of land within an air pocket, but her relief was short lived when she realized it was a dead end. Getting out of the cavern would mean facing the current again, and she wasn't prepared to go through that so soon. *Who knows how far it carried me from my parents... How long have I been gone…? Are they even looking for me…?*

Glacia backed away from the water, then winced and lifted her foot when it had stepped on something sharp: a red gemstone. At first she could only stare at it in shock. Then anger took a hold of her.

"*This* puny thing is what they cared so much about?!" she vented aloud. Months of building frustrations and insecurities regarding her own worth being put beneath that of the gemstone finally came to a head. The facultative bipedal hatchling stood on her hind legs to pick it up in her hands, preparing to throw it back into the depths.

That's when she felt the power from it emanating into her teal-padded palm. She paused, its aura distracting Glacia from her rage. She remembered what her parents had said about the types of gems and their effects on dragons.

Extenders increase your limits... Enhancers increase your strength... Apexes give you a one-time use of a power beyond your wildest dreams. But you can't tell which gem is what type just by how it looks. The only ways to find out for sure were by physical touch–if a dragon knew how to distinguish between each gem type's auras–or by embedding it into one's body.

I can remove it anytime, Glacia reminded herself when curiosity drove her to place it on her forehead. There was a slight glow as it embedded itself there by her will.

Immediately she felt that aura course through her body. It only lasted for a heartbeat, but in that time, she instantly knew it was an apex.

She should have been ecstatic, given that it was the rarest and most powerful type. But instead she felt even worse, since she'd waste its single use if she wanted its power to help her escape the cavern. *I should only use this in a life-or-death situation...* Glacia decided.

The hatchling gazed at the water solemnly, realizing she was completely alone. Even in the off-chance that her parents were searching for her, the cavern was too vast for them to find her before she starved or suffocated in the air pocket on her own.

Then her red eyes narrowed. *It isn't much different than before, though, is it...? They aren't here to take care of me... but they never took care of me when they were here.*

She glared at the waves. *I don't need them--I don't need* anyone. *Like my dad said: I can swim, and at this point, I don't care where the current takes me; I'll make it work.*

Chapter 5 (continued)

Gadalik

Gadalik sat up on the pillar he and his adoptive mother were on in her lake as he registered everything she had just revealed to him. *Guinevere never brought up Glacia's gemstone before... I never thought anything of it. To know that such a thing is valued more than family and friends is... sad. But I guess some dragons don't value friends or family that much in the first place, like solitary types... like Gretel.*

He shook the thought away. "The day you met Gretel, she explicitly stated she'd want to go play anywhere *except* the mountains," he reminded Glacia. "And she mentioned there's no bad blood between earth- and wind-type dragons, so what's stopping her from going to the gem mines herself, if that's what her end goal is?"

"Going to the mountains, and being let into earth dragons' territory, are two very different things," Glacia said. "Unlike fairy types, most dragons guard their territories, so she wouldn't get very far on her own. The only reason they'd potentially welcome us is because *you're* one of them–if only half."

He frowned, still trying to reason himself out of doubting his friend. "It just wouldn't make sense for her to plan this journey–in the bitter cold of winter that wind types usually migrate to avoid–based on the small chance that they'd let a hybrid in."

"That's exactly what I'm saying, but for the *opposite* reason...! Why would she be willing to go through all of that if she weren't motivated by something like a gem?"

The young green dragon's instinct was to argue, to defend the wyvern he'd spent so much time bonding with... But he was drawing a blank, and his emotional state wasn't helping him think clearly.

"I can't tell you what to believe, Gadalik. All I can tell you is what to look out for. If you *truly* want Gretel to come with us, then... I'll let her," the water dragoness murmured. "All I ask is that you prepare yourself for whatever might happen with her after we get there."

He felt his eyes water. *Glacia has sacrificed so much for me already... Her home at this lake, and her comfort on land... And now she's even going against her own beliefs just because I wanted Gretel with us. And... what if Glacia's right? I've been so sheltered in the forest that I know nothing about other dragons and how much influence a gemstone could have on them... And... it is a little weird that a solitary type would get so close to someone, the way Gretel has with me. Sure, they can have friendships, but to hang out daily like we do doesn't seem fitting. I mean, I've never even* seen *Guinevere's friend–and I've been around* her *for almost five months...!*

"Whatever you decide, I'll support you," his mother promised. "We still have until late fall to make any decisions about the trip. You can talk to me anytime, alright? About anything."

He sniffled, then nodded, giving her a slight smile. "Yeah. I know."

She blanketed him with her back fin as she had done so often in the past, and he leaned into the embrace, his larger size making him suddenly aware of just how long it had been since they were last alone together. As much as he valued the company of Guinevere and Gretel, the hybrid found himself reminiscing about his life with Glacia before the others had come into the picture. The two stayed that way for maybe an hour as they both calmed down and enjoyed the peace.

The mother-and-son duo eventually made it back to their den, only to find the pale blue fairy type alone.

"Guinevere? Where did Gretel go?" Gadalik asked, fighting back his newfound fear that she had suddenly decided to abandon him after all.

"She left maybe thirty minutes ago, saying she was famished," the winged dragoness answered, and for once her light yellow eyes narrowed slightly at him with confusion; he noticed her antennae angling up subtly, and realized she could easily detect his uncharacteristic panic.

He took a breath. "Oh, okay. Thanks. Sorry for overreacting; I'm fine."

Guinevere still seemed skeptical, but to his relief, she didn't press him for details.

"Are you hungry, too?" Glacia asked the other adult. "I could go hunt."

Her adoptive son felt his head tilt slightly at her openly caring offer. Of course he knew the water dragoness would hunt for all three of them as usual, but her vocal reasoning had always been more about feeding herself and her son; getting extra food for Guinevere was implied to be an afterthought while she was out. Gadalik couldn't help smiling slightly. *Maybe what I said at the lake about trusting others impacted her as much as her words about* not *trusting did me.*

"Oh, so you decided to come back after all?" Gretel's voice suddenly sounded from outside. "You were gone *forever!*"

Glacia tensed, but said nothing as the wyvern tossed a few large birds into the den before entering it herself. Gretel didn't seem to pay her any mind, instead dividing the prey between them all and instantly digging in.

He hadn't realized how hungry he was until the scent reached his muzzle. Even still, Guinevere's reaction to the light blue water dragoness distracted him. The former seemed somewhat concerned, even pausing mid-bite to get a read on the latter, whose red eyes were staring at Gretel. Gadalik couldn't help imagining the start of another fight, so he prepared to intervene, only for his mother's words to completely blindside him:

"I'm sorry," Glacia broke the silence. When her family turned to face her with disbelief, she glanced between them, as if scared that she'd said something wrong. "What? I shouldn't have snapped at you guys like that... Not even Gretel."

The juvenile wind dragon lifted her head, swiping her tongue over her lips to lick off the food. "You were talking to *me*?"

"Y-Yeah! You're the one I was fighting with, after all."

She seemed truly surprised. “Don’t worry; I'm used to it,” Gretel assured her as a matter of fact.

Glacia huffed somewhat indignantly. “I don't fight with you *that* often! Until now I've been good about leaving you and Gadalik alone as long as it was near enough for Guinevere to keep tabs on his safety."

“What? Oh–I wasn't talking about *you*. In fact, you're nicer than most dragons who see me in their territories... Not that I purposely trespass."

“This is technically Guinevere's territory,” Gadalik said. “Glacia and I do live here, but it's not really up to us to decide who's trespassing."

“I only mind trespassers if I sense they are a threat to me or the forest and its inhabitants,” the fairy dragoness explained. “Innocents aren't worth confronting. As far as I can tell, the three of you aren't a threat, so you are welcome to come and go as you please."

“What would you do if one of us *were* a threat?” he asked out of sheer curiosity.

“I would monitor you to see how long you intend to stay. If you leave, I would have no need to confront you. If it's clear you intend to stay and disrupt the life here, I would be forced to take action."

“Action…?”

“Hypnotism is no joke,” Gretel warned, stressing the seriousness of the ability. “It really makes you delusional. Like, you'll question all of the events of your whole life if a fairy type wants you to. The way they can fake memories or make you think what they're showing you is happening in real time..." She shuddered.

“Sounds like you're speaking from experience…”

“Yeah. Just recently I visited the flower fields by the mountains, and boy, was I *not* welcome by a fairy type who saw me there. He wasn't lying in wait like Guinevere, either. He was out in broad daylight, like he had no fear of predators. And after his display of power on *me*, I can see why."

Him? The hybrid turned to Guinevere. “Is that the friend you mentioned?”

Her insect-like wings flashed yellow before lingering on red. “No. I do not associate with hostile dragons. I know nobody from the fields, either."

“Oh…”

“My friend lives in the desert, but he's… a traveler, in a sense. I only see him when he visits the forest to check on me, usually a few times a year when it's warm enough out."

Gadalik once again felt a sense of deja vu, but couldn't recall when he'd heard of someone like that, nor the context. “Do you think I could meet him sometime?”

“For your own safety, I would advise against showing yourself around him."

“But… I thought your friends weren't hostile?”

“He isn't, but he has enemies who are. If they ever catch word of where you–as a hybrid–live, your safety will be jeopardized here."

Enemies? Just who is this friend of hers?

"That's something I planned on telling him before our trip to the mountains," Glacia joined in. "Normally I would be against lying, but there are some things strangers don't need to know about us. As far as the earth dragons know, we're just travelers, too, okay?"

Gadalik hated being deceitful, but nodded his understanding.

"I wouldn't have to lie about that," Gretel said. "I really *am* a traveler. But I do like this land a lot; it's bigger than most of the islands around it. More to explore, y'know?"

Glacia opened her mouth as if to say there was still a chance Gretel wouldn't be joining them there, but she held her peace, staying true to it being Gadalik's decision whether his friend goes in the end.

The young green dragon averted his striped blue eyes. He trusted Gretel, but he also felt frightened by the thought of her betraying that trust later on, given his mother's views on her. *I still have time to decide,* he reminded himself, dropping the subject to begin eating.

The rest of the day was mostly peaceful. Gadalik was listening to Gretel ramble on about the different places she had visited and which types she had primarily encountered there. Glacia had decided to stay out of the conversation, and Guinevere had left them to routinely check on her tree hollow and tend to the garden she had growing near it. Ever since she had stopped training him to fly last spring, she had spent more time with them in their den regardless, but she still was in tune to the rest of her territory and took care to maintain it.

"Have you ever felt the heat of a fire dragon's flames?" the young wind dragoness had been saying on the topic of her visit to a volcanic island. "I've seen trees catch fire from an electric type's strike, but let me tell you: fire breath is like three times hotter than natural fire. And that wasn't even when the big guy was angry! He had just sneezed in his sleep when I had gotten too close!"

He had been in a stunned silence for the duration of her tales. "How are you even alive right now?" he finally found his voice, both impressed and mortified by her many close encounters with death, as well as her nonchalant take on them. "Do you fear nothing?"

"I fear light dragons," she replied simply. "They're the only type I haven't managed to go near. I wasn't even close to the mountain peaks before a heat ray from there nearly burnt a hole through my wing! I mentioned I'm used to other dragons snapping at me when I trespass, but I thought light dragons were supposed to be healers until that point; I really wasn't expecting to be attacked by them. That was, like, the first time I felt so scared."

"Really? So the only reason you didn't fear the fire and electric types was because you were expecting them to target you?"

"Pretty much, yeah." She laughed genuinely when he gaped at her.

He shook his head with disbelief. "What drives you to approach strangers like that in the first place?"

"Huh. I actually don't know," Gretel admitted. "I don't plan to. It's just… an impulse." The corners of her mouth fell to a more neutral frown.

"What about me?" Gadalik asked curiously. "You admitted to watching me for days before I found you."

His friend didn't seem to hear him, seemingly getting lost in thought.

"Gretel?"

"Huh?" She snapped out of it. "Oh. You stood out because you were acting weird, jumping off the boulder over and over for your flight training. I wanted to see what was so fun or important about what you were doing."

The hybrid could tell she was being honest, but he was concerned when the lightheartedness had faded from her voice; as soon she had answered, she became distraught again. "Is something wrong…?"

Her hot pink eyes looked out of the den, then back at him. She seemed confused and slightly upset.

"Hey," he tried again. "Is something out there? What is it?"

"Sorry. I… I gotta go. I'll see you later, okay?" Gretel said. She didn't give Gadalik a chance to reply before the striped wyvern exited the den and took flight.

He followed her out but she was gone.

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He followed her out but she was gone.

By evening, the fairy dragoness had returned and the three of them settled down for the night. There was so much Gadalik wanted to learn, but he didn't really know who to ask or where to start–especially when it came to Gretel and her potential hidden motives for befriending him. His striped blue eyes watched his adoptive mother as her change in breathing indicated she was asleep, then focused on the red gemstone embedded in her forehead.

"Guinevere?" he called quietly before she could close her light yellow eyes.

She respectfully met his gaze. "Yes?"

"Do you know anything about gemstones…?"

The familiar soft glow of her insect-like wings cast the walls of their den in a faint green light. "I do. What do you wish me to tell you?"

He chose to phrase it carefully. "Why would they matter so much to dragons?"

"Gemstones will greatly boost a dragon's natural abilities, so they would matter to dragons who want to be stronger. In the times before the heavens were abandoned, light dragons used to have an abundance of gems in their hoards, but otherwise gemstones are very rare and hard to find even if you can sense their auras like light types can. Their rarity is one more reason why they may matter to a dragon," she began.

Light types can sense them? "More? Are there other reasons?"

"Gems were awarded to dragons who managed to reach the heavens, or to any type of dragon who had otherwise earned them by proving their dedication to their goals, or their loyalty. Gems would matter in that case because they prove a dragon is worthy of having the power of their gem."

"But the heavens have long been abandoned, right? What about nowadays?"

"In modern times, usually only the leaders and elites of each dragon type have access to gems. In the case of leaders, their gems are inherited from their ancestors who were awarded them from the heavens generations ago. In the case of elites, social dragons will have earned them by proving themselves worthy to their leader. Solitary types may have sought the gems out from the land itself–in which case successfully finding one proves they are elite regardless of being in a society."

He nodded. "So… only dragons who earned them will have them? What if someone found one completely by accident?"

"Nobody would know how that dragon obtained their gem unless told. Most wouldn't question a dragon with a gem, however."

"I see…"

"In short, gems matter to dragons because having gems gives them more power than dragons without any, and generally speaking, only worthy dragons can have them. So having a gem also means a dragon will gain the respect of their peers."

"How did you feel when you met Glacia, then? Did her gem play a part in your decision to let her live in your territory?"

"If she were a threat, I would want her gone regardless of her gem."

"Wouldn't the power of a gem make a threatening dragon harder to fend off?"

"Yes. However, I sensed an air of dignity from Glacia. I am under the impression that she is confident in her natural abilities without drawing from her gem. That, coupled with how I have witnessed her care for you and respect the life of the forest, I know she is not a threat."

Chapter 6

As promised, Gretel had returned the next day, acting as her usual carefree self. While Gadalik was still worried about what could have upset her the previous evening, he wasn't sure it was worth bringing up if doing so would dampen her mood.

"C'mon," the white-and-purple wyvern beckoned him on their way from his den in the forest to their rock on the northern outskirts. "Y'know, for someone who beat me in a race, you sure move slo-o-ow!"

Gadalik laughed between pants as he galloped at an increasing distance behind her. "No–you've just gotten faster."

Unlike during their first race, the young wind dragoness was currently dodging the trees on foot; her wings folded up against the backs of the forelimbs they stemmed from–as they did when she landed so as not to be in the way–but for sharper movements, they momentarily spread to catch the winds she summoned. If it weren't for the earth-seer hybrid's perception ability, Gadalik never would have noticed those quick and subtle actions, which impressed him all the more.

Of course Gretel preferred flying; as soon as she escaped the maze of forest, she took to the air and dropped on top of the boulder they had met at last season. "I win!" she announced triumphantly.

"You really deserved to," he congratulated her after the seconds it took for him to catch up. "It's crazy how you can adapt to the land *and* the skies. Is it natural for you to run like that?"

She seemed confused by the question. "Uhh... What? Running is natural for *anyone* with legs."

The green dragon shook his head as he climbed up beside her. "Not 'running;' running like *that*: with your wings." His specification didn't seem to help. *She really did all of that without even thinking?!*

"Running with my wings, huh... Do you mean flying? Of *course* flight is natural to me. If a wind-type couldn't fly, they'd die!"

"That isn't what I–" he stopped himself as her last sentence registered. "Wait. How would being on land kill them?"

"Being on land won't, but land-dwelling dragons will. Wind types are able to fly away from other dragons that either don't have wings, or whose wings can't carry them as far. That's how *I* survived this long, after all."

He remembered her recounting the times others had attacked her for trespassing on her travels and realized she was right; they had all ended with her escaping by flight. Then his earlier conversation with Guinevere regarding why she wouldn't let him meet her friend suddenly came to mind, and so too did a possible explanation of why Gretel had gotten upset before. "Gretel… Do you have any enemies?"

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I don't think so? All of the ones who went after me also attacked *everyone* who neared them, so it's not personal."

"But what if one of them followed you here?" He recalled how she had glanced toward the sky out of his den before she had left.

"How could they? Again, none of them could fly like me. And there's no way they'd know I would end up on *this* land, either, even if they *did* fly to follow–they couldn't keep up, and even *I* didn't know where I was going," she laughed reassuringly.

"I see…" Gadalik debated with himself on asking her bluntly about it, since the pieces he had to work with didn't fit together in the puzzle that solving would explain her behavior.

"You worry too much," Gretel concluded after a beat of silence. "I'm fine. *We're* fine. Nothing's gonna happen."

"Then why did you look so worried when you left yesterday?" The words came out on their own, seizing the opportunity to before the topic changed.

"Huh? I don't remember being worried…" The striped wyvern seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Maybe 'worried' is the wrong word. You looked… upset."

"I get what you *meant*… But my answer is still the same: I don't remember getting upset or anything. Last I recall, I was telling you about the time I was almost toasted by the sneeze of a sleeping fire dragon." She couldn't help laughing to herself at the memory.

There was no trace of deceit, but he felt himself frown from the realization that she had only gotten upset to begin with *after* she couldn't explain why she kept endangering herself by going near strangers. *She doesn't know why she goes near them… And now she doesn't even remember getting upset about not* knowing *why?*

Gretel's hot pink eyes studied his for a moment before she glanced over her shoulder to make sure his expression wasn't aimed at something else. "W-What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Are you okay?" Gadalik asked, truly concerned about her.

"Uhh, yeah? Again, I'm fine. But you're starting to make me think *you're* not. If you have something to vent about, I'll listen," she offered.

That's what I should be telling you! he wanted to say, but instead sighed defeatedly. "I'm okay."

"In that case"--Gretel sat on her hind legs and stretched both of her winged arms out at once–"what are we sitting around for? Let's do something fun!"

Should I drop it? Just like that? Gadalik wondered. *I don't know if I'll get another chance like this to find out more about her…*

"Hmm... What should we play?" she went on, not paying any mind to his hesitancy. "Oh, wait–why don't *you* suggest something this time?"

"Me?" The winged earth dragon was caught off guard. "Um... Like I said, I've never really played many games until I met you. I don't know enough about them to make one up, either..."

"That's okay! They don't have to be complicated. I'm actually a bit tired from our race... If you are too, then we can play something simple." She let her gaze sweep the forest they had come from. "How about... I-spy? I'm unbeatable with *that*, too, but you've proven to be great at *seeing*, so you might stand a chance," she giggled.

Was that a pun on my seer heritage? The hybrid couldn't help smiling. "Sounds fun. I actually know that one, so I can go first."

When she nodded excitedly, Gadalik looked around. He wanted to begin with something nearby, yet not too obvious, so he could get an idea of how good his friend was at it. There were a few colorful flowers swaying in the summer breeze between the surrounding rocks jutting out of the ground, and closer to the tree line were some sticks and fallen branches. His striped blue eyes were drawn to the flowers again, when he got distracted by a monarch butterfly landing on one.

Start small, he reminded himself. "I spy with my little eye... something brown."

"Oh! A tree trunk?" she guessed.

"No, but you're close!"

"Hm. Is it a tree branch?"

"Getting closer!"

"A stick?"

"Yep!"

"Yay! My turn," Gretel chimed. Without missing a beat, she said, "I spy with my little eye... something *red!*"

Red? There aren't too many red things, so that should make it easier to guess. "Is it a flower?"

"Nope."

"Um... A butterfly?"

"Uh-uh," she tittered. "You'll never guess!"

"Can I get a hint?"

"Sure. It's something that's always with you."

"The... sun...?" He cringed at himself, knowing it was yellow. *It could be red since it's fiery,* he tried to justify his guess.

"No, silly!" the wyvern laughed. "Do you want me to tell you?"

"Y-Yeah."

She lifted her purple paw and pointed at his lower neck. "You have a red marking there, in the shape of a diamond."

Gadalik blinked, dumbfounded. He had only ever seen himself in the lake-water's reflection growing up, so even though he couldn't look down to view it directly, he knew what she was talking about. "You're right: I *never* would have gotten that one."

The wyvern grinned. "Told you I was good! Your turn."

He wanted to pick something just as unique as she had, then spotted a bluebird pecking at the earth nearby. He hoped it would stay long enough for her to see. "I spy with my little eye… something blue."

"The sky?"

He shook his head.

"A flower?"

"Try again."

"Can I get a hint?"

"It's sentient."

"Guinevere?"

"No– Wait. What?"

Gretel flicked her spade-tipped tail toward the forest. "She's in her garden right now."

"You can see her garden from here?!"

"Well, yeah. But it's a bit hard because the trees are in the way." She refocused on their immediate area. "Oh–is it the bird?!"

"Y-Yes," he stammered, still in shock over how far she could see. He did remember her mentioning that wind dragons could pinpoint something up to two miles away, and that was how she had found him before they met, but it was mind-blowing for him to witness that sight in such a casual situation. "Can you really see her?"

"Of course! I'm not a liar," she huffed. "It looks like she's picking plants and bringing them to her tree hollow."

The earth-seer hybrid followed her gaze despite the tree line blocking his view. He thought about visiting the fairy type to confirm what his friend saw, and just to say 'hi' while he was there.

Gadalik passed through the forest until the trees grew taller and thicker. One of which had a familiar hole wherein Guinevere had taken him for shelter last winter. A few moments later, the pale blue-and-pink-furred dragoness came out of it, spreading her four pink wings to slow her descent until her white-tipped paws met the garden below.

Just when he was about to come out and greet her, Guinevere's wings flashed yellow to match the antennae on her head that suddenly raised along with her ears as she looked up.

He followed her line of vision and saw a nine-foot-tall black dragon land on two paws right in front of her. He had a white stripe along his sides and limbs, and a segmented indigo fin-sail down his back. Stingers of the same color tipped his burgundy-and-white wings, and a matching reddish one was at the end of his tail. Gadalik recognized him, but couldn't think of how.

The glow of Guinevere's wings reverted to their neutral, content pink color and she smiled up at the poison type who stood five feet over her, granted she was a quadruped. Her mouth moved as if speaking, but there was no sound. That's when it hit him: Gadalik was having a vision. Still, curiosity got the better of him and he studied their body language in place of eavesdropping.

The bipedal dragon seemed a bit out of breath, so when Guinevere gestured with her tufted tail-tip toward her tree, he obliged, taking a seat with his back resting against the trunk. His light indigo-and-magenta eyes watched her curiously as she picked a few berries before joining him. He modestly tried to decline the food at first, but Guinevere actually scowled and insistently held them out to him–although her wings' pink color made it obvious she wasn't angry. He laughed and popped one into his mouth, revealing his long snake-like fangs.

As much as Gadalik wanted to meet him, he heeded the fairy type's warning that his enemies would target the hybrid if he showed himself. The two were all smiles and laughter until the larger dragon reluctantly mentioned something and the glow of Guinevere's wings shifted to blue. Neither of them said anything after that.

She eventually stood and went back inside her tree hollow, returning a minute later with a leaf-wrapped package between her front paws, handing it to him. This time he readily accepted it with a grateful nod. They said a few more words with solemn expressions, then he smiled sadly and waved goodbye, flying off.

Gadalik blinked, finding himself back on the boulder beside Gretel. His sense of sound, scent, and even taste noticeably returned.

"Hello-o-o? Anybody there? Earth to the earth dragon!" his friend was saying, waving her paw in front of his face.

"Woah... Sorry. I had a vision," he explained.

"Oh, for real? What was it?"

"I think I saw Guinevere's friend."

"Really?! I wanna meet him!" She hopped to her paws and prepared to leap off the rock.

"Wait! I think we should leave them alone..."

"Why?"

"Because she said to... And we shouldn't interrupt them."

Gretel frowned indignantly, but didn't pursue the matter. "Fine. Guess it's my turn for I-spy..."

He could tell she'd now much rather be active than sitting here playing a casual game, and he didn't blame her. "Want to play something different?"

She was surprised yet impressed by the suggestion. "How did you know? Did you foresee that too?"

"N-No, but I'll take that as a 'yes,'" he chuckled.

Gadalik wasn't sure how far into the future his vision was, but going by the timeframe of past experiences, he guessed Guinevere's friend would arrive to visit her in roughly twenty minutes. Something about the poison type seemed so familiar, but he couldn't place it, which bothered him even throughout the new game Gretel had started.

The young wind dragoness seemed to notice his mind was elsewhere. "Are you bored? We could do something different, you know."

"Huh?" He had scarcely heard her. "N-No, it's not the game; I was just thinking about Guinevere's friend."

"Hm? Why? Who is he?"

"He's a poison type... And I haven't exactly met him, so I don't know who he is."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I *know* I've seen him somewhere before. It's at the edge of my mind, but when I try to focus on it, I can't."

Gretel froze.

He blinked. "What is it...?"

"I don't know," she answered, her voice wavering between quickening breaths. "It just feels wrong." Her hot pink eyes darted around as if searching for an escape from something. "Sorry. I... I think I should go."

"Wait!" the hybrid called before she could flee. "This is what I meant about yesterday. What's upsetting you? You can tell me..."

"I don't know," the wyvern repeated more urgently than before, but when he remained still and attentive, she took a breath, matching his energy. "But I think I know what you're saying... about not being able to figure out where you met someone. I guess... I felt that way about *you*."

"Me? But I've never met you until a few months ago."

"I know! I haven't even *been* to this land before then. Nothing makes *sense*." She glared at the grassy ground. "Maybe our gut feelings are wrong? Maybe you haven't met her friend before, just like I haven't met you before."

"But I have seen him...! Well, *foreseen* him, I should say... It was a long time ago," Gadalik insisted. "I just can't remember what–"

The memory hit him out of nowhere: his vision of the purple seer dragon–the one Guinevere had described as his parents' killer after the fact–targeting him, only for the poison type to intervene on the hybrid's behalf. Gadalik remembered being paralyzed by fear, unable to run, while the clawed red wings of the serpentine attacker tore through his rescuer's back in a lethal strike that caused blood to rain down on the hatchling before the latter was himself killed.

"Gadalik?" Now it was Gretel's turn to be worried.

He shook his head. The experience had been traumatic for him, despite it being a future he avoided. Until then he had lived happily with Glacia, unaware of outside threats. That was his first encounter with another dragon, too, if visions counted for that. *I must have blocked it out after all this time…*

Gretel seemed back to her usual self now that her focus was entirely on making sure her friend was alright. "Did you remember?"

"… Yeah," he confirmed, doing his best to calm down. "It was from a vision I had last fall. In it, I was attacked, but he saved me… At least, he *tried* to."

"He sounds like a good guy, then," she decided, as if trying to look on the bright side.

"Yeah. I kind of want to thank him now, but I can't… Guinevere said not to go around him since his enemies might discover me–" Gadalik paused. "The purple seer… Was he an enemy? Guinevere didn't mention seeing him after he killed my parents–"

"Slow down! What seer? Your parents were *killed?*"

"Y-Yeah. Why do you think Glacia adopted me?"

"Hm. I dunno; I figured you were abandoned."

"What? Why?"

She shrugged. "Happens more often than you think. *Especially* with solitary types."

He remembered Gretel mentioning that her parents didn't stick around, and for a moment, he was overcome with sympathy for her.

"So who is this seer and what does he have against you and your parents? Isn't one of your parents *also* a seer?"

"Yes, my mother was–and you answered your own question. Apparently my mother was worried about being followed when she moved to this land from an island in the tropics. I'm guessing the purple seer has a connection to her, and that's why he sought us out."

"Man… I had no idea. Sorry all that has happened to you," Gretel murmured.

"But that's besides the point," he said, not wanting her pity. "I told Glacia about the poison type dragon after we got to safety and prevented that vision from happening. But I haven't mentioned him to Guinevere… Do you think I should?"

"Well the vision was avoided, right? To everyone else, including her friend, none of that ever happened."

"True… I just…" The winged earth dragon sat down, defeated. "I don't know what to do with this knowledge."

"If you want to tell her, it's your choice. It might even help you get answers about the seer if her friend *is* his enemy."

"But then she'd know I spied on her…"

"You mean your vision just now was *intentional?* It sounded like you were surprised by it!"

"I didn't *intend* to foresee anything, but that doesn't change the fact that it happened," he pointed out.

"Well what did you see that would make her mad?"

"It's hard to tell; visions don't have sound or smells or taste. They talked, and then he left."

"So-o-o, let me get this straight: you foresaw them by *accident*, didn't hear *anything* they talked about, and you think someone as nice as *Guinevere* would get mad at you for it?"

Gadalik couldn't think of what to say. *When she puts it that way, maybe I* am *overthinking it…*

The wyvern laughed genuinely. "You're worrying for nothing. Go on–go tell her. I'll even come too, if you want."

He considered it. "Alright. But maybe I should go alone. I'll wait until her friend leaves, too; he should just be getting here."

"What should we do in the meantime?"

"Well, we could…" The sentence trailed off. His striped blue eyes studied the white-and-purple striped wind type.

Gretel tilted her head. "What?"

She's not upset anymore, the green hybrid realized. He reflected on everything she had said before the topic had shifted toward visions. "Maybe you should come with me after all."

"Oka-a-ay…? And?"

"I'm not really in the mood to keep playing… But if you could wait with me at the den for Guinevere to come back, I'd appreciate it. Glacia has been on good terms with you since yesterday, too, so don't worry about her."

"Oh. Um, sure," she agreed, the least bit disappointed that their playtime had been cut short. "Wait–I could help you think of what to say, like last time! We can talk on the way."

He smiled. "Thanks…! I want to make it clear I wasn't spying…"

"That's easy: just tell her the truth. She knows you don't have full control over your foresight, so it happens on its own sometimes. I'll back you up!"

The two continued their conversation as they walked side-by-side into the forest.

"Hey, big guy," Glacia greeted her adoptive son as the young green dragon entered their den. "You're back from your playtime with Gretel sooner than you usually are. Did something happen?"

Gadalik exchanged a glance with the aforementioned wind type who poked her head in after him. His friend gave him an encouraging nod. "A game of I-spy turned into spying," he confessed.

"Accidentally!" the wyvern added in his defense.

"Spying? On who?" Glacia asked, more curious than anything. The small purple aquatic fins on the sides of her head lifted slightly as if with intrigue.

“Guinevere… and that friend she mentioned," he said. "Do you remember the vision I had last fall? When we hid in the cenote to prevent it from coming true?"

The light blue water dragoness narrowed her red eyes, suddenly becoming more serious. “Don't tell me the evil seer you spent all that season hiding from is her *friend?!*”

“N-No! It's the opposite of that! Her friend is the poison type the seer also killed…”

“The savior?" She rose to all fours and took a single step toward the mouth of the den, almost as if she planned on checking to see if he were outside. The adult seemed almost childlike with how fascinated she was by that revelation.

“Y-Yeah,” he stammered, not sure why she was reacting this way. “Have you met him?”

“No–and I had no clue he and Guinevere had a connection. But anyone who is willing to risk his own life to save you is okay with me. I'd like to thank him personally, even if that future never happened."

For someone who gave Guinevere a hard time despite her saving me from the snow, Glacia sure seems interested in befriending this stranger, he remarked silently, then shook his head dismissively. “I'd like to thank him too, but Guinevere mentioned any of his enemies may be following him, and if they see I'm a hybrid living here, I might become a target. So I'm wondering if the evil seer is one of his enemies. And… I’m going to ask her about it."

“Yeah–I remember her saying that. And she's right: it's dangerous for you out there. No matter how sweet you are, all it takes is seeing your wings to know you're not a pure earth dragon–and not being a purebred is all the reason these social types need to hunt you down,” she growled lowly, though her anger was not directed at her company.

“Aren't water dragons social types?” Gretel reminded her.

“Yeah. And they're just as bad as the rest of them…”

Gadalik recalled his mother once saying not to trust them either, despite being one herself. The glimpse into her early life she had shared of her neglectful parents might be why she felt that way. But there was one thing he wasn’t clear on. “What exactly does it mean to be social? Or solitary, for that matter?”

“Solitary just means we can survive on our own from the moment we hatch,” the striped white juvenile replied. “We don't need to be taught how to use our abilities, or where we need to go if we have to migrate. It's all instinct, so we don't need anyone to help us."

“Right,” Glacia agreed. “And social types are the opposite. For example, water types need to be taught how to swim and shoot water, and our parents or other members of our society are meant to teach us that when we're hatchlings. Both of your parents–seer and earth dragon–are social types, so you are too, Gadalik."

That explains why I felt so isolated here, he figured. “What do social types have against hybrids, then? And why haven't you ever tried to rejoin your society?”

"As I said before, I don't trust others–definitely not enough to live around them again." Her gaze lingered on Gretel for just a moment; luckily not long enough for the latter to take offense. "And social types hate hybrids because they're"--she hesitated–"different."

"Different…?"

"Misfits," Gretel clarified. "Like… I'll bet you're sensitive to the cold, right, Gadalik? I know pure seers are."

"Yeah… I am," the earth-seer hybrid admitted. "I can endure if I have to, but it hurts."

"Pure earth types *aren't*. They aren't hurt by any extreme weather–hot or cold. So if you lived in an earth type's society, you'd be the only one who couldn't do their fair share of hunting or guarding during the winter–and so they'd hate you for that. Societies only value members who can contribute to them."

Gadalik winced. *Hate is such a strong word… And to hate someone for something they physically can't do? That's just… unfair…*

"How do you know so much about societies, Gretel?" Glacia wondered.

The solitary type froze. "Um… Well, I… Uhh…" The purple spade-shaped tip of her tail twitched anxiously as she struggled to answer.

The older dragoness rolled her crimson eyes, not bothering to pursue the topic.

"Solitary and social are just natures," sounded another's voice.

"Guinevere!" the green dragon exclaimed, happy she was back.

The fairy type smiled slightly at his welcome, her upper body rim lit orange by the glow of her wings.

"What do you mean by natures?" he asked when his mind processed what she'd said.

"Nature and nurture can both shape how an individual dragon chooses to live. Glacia as a water dragon is social by nature, yet she chose to live a solitary life here. Gretel as a wind dragon is solitary by nature, yet she appears to behave more socially. No doubt their pasts–whatever they may be–have played a role on the nurture side for them to live outside of their natures."

Gadalik let her words sink in. He understood his adoptive mother's reasons, but Gretel's was still a mystery to him… and maybe even to herself, given her inability to remember. He sighed. "Oh–Guinevere… I have something I need to ask you about… regarding your friend and the seer who killed my parents."

The rim light changed to green. "Go on," she invited.

"You and I didn't meet until late winter last year. That was when you promised to warn me if my parents' killer ever returned," he began. "But during the fall before that… did you happen to see him…?"

"Hm. I'll admit it's hard for me to identify flighted dragons in my territory unless they linger or land. Dragons move faster when flying, and most just pass over my territory instead of stopping in it."

“Then what's the point of your antennae?” Gretel impulsively asked, though her question was genuine. Even so, Gadalik shot his friend a warning look to act more respectful.

“Fairy types are not fighters or hunters; our antennae allow us to detect dying prey that we can scavenge from the earth, or feel the life of the plants we grow as food so we know what they need to survive. I just happened to hone mine to identify individual dragons’ life forces if they're nearby long enough, or if they land."

“Did your friend happen to visit you last fall?” he pressed.

“Yes, but I don't see how that's relevant." She paused for a moment. “Unless…”

Gadalik, Gretel, and even Glacia all leaned in closer to hear her answer.

“Someone who flew past *did* get his attention. But that was all they did: pass by."

“That's only because they didn't find us after we hid in the cenote,” Gadalik murmured to his mother, who frowned.

“I don't understand,” Guinevere said. “Was the one who flew by the seer who killed your parents?”

“Yeah. And back then, I had a vision where he killed me and your friend, too."

Chapter 7

The four of them fell silent; the glow of Guinevere's wings momentarily alternated between yellow, blue, and purple before settling on green as she met the young dragon's gaze. Hesitantly, she asked, "How exactly do you know it was my friend who was killed in that vision…?"

"I foresaw his visit with you like an hour and a half ago," the earth-seer hybrid answered a bit nervously. He remembered what Gretel had discussed with him on their return to the den. *Guinevere won't be cross with me if I tell her the whole truth.* "I didn't hear anything you two said, and I didn't mean to use foresight–it was an accident. I don't know how to stop it once it starts, either. But he was the same black poison type who died trying to save me in my vision last fall: burgundy wings with white tips, indigo fin-sail and stingers…"

"Gale…" Her light transitioned to a mix of blue and purple. She sat, her ears pinned back and her tufted tail wrapping a bit firmly around her paws in a self-soothing embrace.

Gadalik felt guilty for causing her such distress over a future that was avoided, but he had already decided that she should know what they were up against if the murderer ever returned. He glanced at the others, hoping they understood his motive wasn't to upset her. The wyvern seemed a bit awkward from the tension, but she noticed his uncertainty and nodded at him with reassurance.

To his surprise, Glacia stepped past him, the facultative bipedal water dragoness sitting on her hind legs in front of Guinevere… before she pulled the latter into a hug. "I saw what that evil seer was capable of; I stumbled upon the aftermath with Gadalik's parents when he was an egg," the red-eyed adult empathized. "From what he told me of that vision with Gale, I wasn't able to do much to save anyone, either."

The pale blue fairy type leaned slightly into the hold as if to comfort Glacia despite being the one hugged. "It's not your fault…"

"And not yours, either," she pointed out, letting go to look Guinevere in the eye as proof that she meant it. "But things have changed a lot in the seasons since then. You're here on our side, now, after all."

"So is Gretel," Gadalik added.

His friend perked up at that. "Yeah! Seers are dangerous in close-combat, but that isn't how wind dragons fight. I could chase him off easily! There's no *way* I'd let him hurt you guys."

Guinevere looked between her companions, the yellow-green of her wings portraying surprise and thoughtfulness. "That's… true." The tension in her furred body visibly ebbed. "Thank you… All of you." She turned to Gadalik in particular, adding, "I'm glad you told me. I sensed your apprehension when you mentioned foreseeing me and Gale… Please know I do not hold that against you."

He released a relieved breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding; that was what had worried him the most about telling her in the first place.

"See? I *told* you she wouldn't be mad," Gretel teased him.

He chuckled. "Yeah. But I still wish I had better control of my foresight... I can use it on command, but sometimes it happens on its own."

"That's a good thing," his adoptive mother said. "If it hadn't happened on its own last fall, we would have been killed instead of hiding safely in the cenote."

Gadalik blinked. *Huh... I never thought of it like that.*

"We all contribute in our own ways," she continued, begrudgingly admitting, "even Gretel." She rolled her eyes when the wyvern grinned at that. "I guess we have our own little society here together, y'know?"

"Yeah!" Gretel agreed happily. Then her smile dropped and her pink eyes looked at the moss-lined ground of the den. "But actual societies… just can't see the worth in different contributions like that."

This was a circle back to their previous conversation regarding social types' hatred of hybrids. Gadalik paused. "Wait... They hate purebreds too?"

"If they're misfits, then yeah," she said. "And by 'misfit' I mean a different dragon type than the ones in the society. A purebred wind type wouldn't be easily accepted into a revealer society, for example."

"Revealer?" *That's oddly specific,* he thought. *Nobody mentioned revealer dragons...* Just as he was about to question it, her stomach audibly growled.

Glacia gave a slightly amused laugh, appearing grateful for the distraction.

Gretel did not. "I'm gonna go eat... See ya tomorrow," she said before leaving the den.

Just like before, Gadalik pursued her out of concern, only for his friend to have flown off again. He cursed inwardly for not being able to fly, but quickly reminded himself that wind types were too fast for even flighted dragons to keep up with, so it didn't matter that he couldn't.

He sighed, defeated, then reflected on everything. *Glacia once told me that revealers live in the Highlands south of us here. But Gretel said she's never been here before we met... She also recounted electric types living on other islands, while Glacia said they lived in the wetlands here. I guess the same dragon type can live on more than one land.*

Gadalik remained sitting outside of the den, his striped blue eyes fixated on the sky where the wyvern had vanished, unable to extinguish his hopes that Gretel would return and explain her uncharacteristic melancholy despite knowing she was gone for the day. *Even if she did suddenly come back, she truly doesn't seem to know why she's upset, either. I just wish I could help her…*

The pale blue fairy dragoness stepped out beside him. "Are you alright?"

The green earth-seer hybrid let out a sigh. "I'm fine... It's Gretel I'm worried about."

"Hm. I did sense that she felt dejected during your talks of societies."

"Yeah... She isn't trying to hide it. But when I asked her about it earlier, she said she doesn't remember feeling like that, or any reason why."

"Perhaps the reasons upset her so much that she repressed them."

That makes sense... Kind of like how I repressed my vision of Gale's death. "Is there anything we can do to help her?"

"Actually, yes."

Gadalik eagerly leapt to his paws, facing Guinevere to give her his full attention. "What is it? I'll do whatever it takes!"

"You wouldn't have to do much; it is my hypnotism that may be able to bring forth any repressed memories to the surface."

He stared at her in amazement. "You can do that?"

"Yes. But it would be far easier if Gretel cooperates with me. That's where you come in," she explained. "Since you spend so much time with her, I'll rely on you to offer her my assistance. Simply let her know that I can give her help if she wants it."

"Thank you so much...!" The young earth dragon affectionately headbutted her, then immediately stepped back when he realized what he did. "S-Sorry! Did I hurt you?"

Guinevere chuckled with amusement, her wings glowing orange. "Not at all. But don't thank me yet; we still don't know if Gretel will accept my aid."

"I'll convince her to, when we hang out tomorrow. Count on it!"

"Alright. In the meantime, we should also eat."

"Oh." He didn't realize how hungry he was. "Glacia and I can go hunt, then."

"No need. I sense a stag being overcome with illness. I can bring it here for all of us."

"You mean it's dying?"

"In a matter of time, yes; its illness will cause it to die," she murmured sympathetically. "At this moment, though, it's alive–just in hiding, for it knows that it is too weak to defend itself from predators should one find it."

Gadalik hummed softly to acknowledge her. "Is that how you found me last Winter...?"

Guinevere hesitated, the glow of her insect-like wings darkening to blue. "Yes; but rest assured I do not see other dragons as prey." There was a beat before blue lightened to green, and she looked at the juvenile hybrid. "It's actually thanks to Gale that I rescued you from the snow. Had you needed help before I met him, I probably would not have saved you... especially since I seldom leave my tree hollow when it's cold."

"Really?" *So that vision isn't the only time Gale has played a role in saving me...* "Why not?"

"Fairy dragons are fragile, so getting involved with other dragon types is risky, for one reason. For another, we have an instinctive connection to nature; when we sense a fading life, it's not up to us to interfere with nature taking that life."

"I see... But what does Gale have to do with that?"

“Yeah–what *does* Gale have to do with that?” Glacia spoke up from the mouth of the den, revealing herself to have been eavesdropping the entire time.

Guinevere glanced between the two. “It's a long story."

“I'm listening,” the water type encouraged her.

"Me too," Gadalik agreed with his adoptive mother. "That is--if you're willing to tell it."

“Hm. Well, in that case, I'd be happy to talk more about Gale. But allow me to tell the story inside, where it's safe." The furred dragoness led them back in the den and lied down on the soft moss, tucking her white paws comfortably under herself. “Are you ready?”

Glacia and Gadalik both settled attentively in front of her, then nodded.

Chapter 7 Interlude

Guinevere

Six-year-old Guinevere awoke in her cooled tree hollow, instinctively raising her antennae to allow her empathic sense to scour the forest. All of the prey was in their usual places, and everything seemed harmonious. The pale blue-and-pink-furred fairy dragoness rose to her white-tipped paws, then made her way to the mouth of the hollow, peering out and smiling from the warmth of Summer's sun. Her yellow eyes focused on the garden beneath her tree; she had grown various berries and herbs for peaceful days like this when there was no dying prey to scavenge.

She spread her four insectoid wings, which then flitted in a glowing pink blur behind her as she descended. Guinevere landed lightly on the ground in front of her favorite red berries and plucked them from the bush with her small fangs. She was acutely aware of the bugs hidden on the leaves, scattering away from her point of contact with it–but she could tell that the plant was benefiting from them, so she did her best not to disturb them any farther after eating her fill.

The fairy type glanced over the rest of her garden. She had been selective about which plants were in it, knowing that their access to water was dependent on rain. Despite their survival requiring minimum hydration, the dry heat during later parts of recent days was taking its toll on them–and everyone.

Guinevere counted herself lucky that the trees of her forest territory provided not only shelter from the sight of flighted predators, but also from the sun's wrath during seasons it was especially hot. This was truly the ideal place for her, and it had been since she was a yearling.

The fairy type immediately stopped her wing's glowing and flattened them on her back, ducking into the long grass when a shadow passed overhead. Despite her instincts to raise them, she purposely kept her ears lowered, listening to shrill, breathy cries of a wind dragon.

She heard another one answer with a more husky sound as a second, larger shadow joined the first. Guinevere waited with baited breath until they both flew off, and remained still for moments afterward, tracking their locations as best she could with her antennae just to be sure they were gone.

There had been a few close encounters in the past with wind types who often rested on the treetops and neighboring hills, but most of them were simply passing through; they had favorite spots to return to, but they never settled in one place for long, so Guinevere didn't let herself worry too much about them lingering in her territory. The small adult dragoness's only fears stemmed from being seen as potential prey by the large wyverns.

After making certain that they weren't coming back any time soon, Guinevere decided to busy herself the rest of the day by venturing deeper into the forest in search of edible plants that were more tolerant of the weather. She had never needed to in the past, but the temperatures have annually become more extreme than the last, if only in small degrees. The fairy type sensed the life force of each one in the vicinity, taking note of which were thriving in hotter locations of the forest.

Upon finding one suiting her tastes, Guinevere carefully unearthed it with experienced paws, then carried it between her tiny teeth on her flight back to her garden, where she skillfully replanted it.

The next few days played out similarly, but she monitored its life force, happy to know she hadn't harmed it. She moved to nibble on its leaf when her stomach cramped from hunger despite how much she had filled it with vegetation. *I may not be able to last much longer without meat,* the dragoness realized. Her antennae lifted to once again detect any dying prey she could scavenge, but the forest was as full of life as ever; the only lives lost were ones immediately eaten by their hunters or nearer scavengers. She sighed. *Maybe tomorrow.*

Guinevere awakened the next day, going through her morning routine, albeit a bit more desperately as that pang of hunger had grown harder to ignore. It wasn't starvation itself; it was a lack of specific amino acids her body needed to survive. She let her senses search the forest, and was relieved to discover a half-eaten carcass nearby. The fairy type hastily rushed to it, determined to reach the kill before another scavenger could. And she made it, eating as fast as she could without upsetting her stomach, leaving nothing but its bones.

Her hunger finally satisfied, Guinevere relaxed for a moment, then retook her usual cautious stance by sensing for potential danger on her journey back to the tree hollow. She hesitated when she noticed many more leftover kills surrounding her, and frowned when she realized they littered the entirety of the forest. The population of life had decreased exponentially.

The fairy type inspected the other kills to find they were all half-eaten as well, with identical bite marks, and felt appalled; through her peripherals, she saw the light of her own wings change to a reddish purple hue to reflect her rare anger and confusion. *Who could waste prey like this? Nobody new had hunted here yesterday; it must have been while I was sleeping last night.*

Guinevere gathered as many of the leftovers as she could carry in her front paws and brought them inside her tree. Fairy types could eat kills at any stage of decay; their deaths would no longer be wasteful as she stored them under a large leaf she kept along the hollow's inner wall for later.

She kept her guard up the rest of the day, fearing the return of whatever foul beast had needlessly hunted and wasted so many different prey animals. The dragoness had even forced herself to stay awake throughout the night in case they did in fact strike during those hours.

As dawn arrived, so too did the presence of an unfamiliar dragon. Guinevere's first assumption was that he was the culprit, but she could sense that his life force was currently on the lower end; honing her antennae his way revealed to her that he was exhausted, and soon he had stopped moving. The fairy type focused more intently on him, relieved to feel the steady rhythm of his heart and discover he wasn't injured or ill, only asleep.

Still, she couldn't take the chance that he was the one behind the overkills, and left the safety of her tree to confront him directly.

Guinevere reached the stranger, approaching with caution. To her surprise, the sleeping dragon was tall and bipedal, with stingers tipping his wings and tail. *A poison type? What reason would one have to leave the desert?*

He was completely unconscious; she could see his snake-like fangs folded inward through his partially-opened mouth, and they confirmed he was innocent; the bites from the wasted prey were not a match to him. Still, her yellow eyes studied him curiously, trying to piece together his story through the healed scars between his black scales. *If he did in fact travel from the desert, it's no wonder why he would choose the forest to rest in. But why travel? Was he chased from his home by whomever scarred him?* She inspected the scars more closely. *No... these scars were each caused by differently-sized dragons, and some seem more recent than others.* Given his size, she'd guess he was only a couple of years older than her.

Guinevere didn't have time to ponder more as the sudden loss of another life interrupted her thoughts, causing her to flinch. She redirected her antennae and detected a new dragon nearby from the same location. Since they were so close, yet silent, they must be either a shadow dragon–which was unlikely at this early hour–or a wind type capable of stifling noise.

Then the shrill communicative cry of a different wyvern passing by overhead startled both Guinevere and the poison dragon. The latter immediately stirred, and despite his movements being sluggish from his lack of proper sleep, his light indigo-and-magenta eyes were alert and searching the skies for the source of the sound.

Then he noticed Guinevere and recoiled from her unexpected proximity. A few quickened heartbeats during which time the dragoness did not target him allowed the poison type to relax enough to ask, "Is this your territory?"

She nodded, but her mind was elsewhere; the second intruder was on the move, and she could tell from its sheer speed that it was in fact a wind dragon.

"Sorry for trespassing... I don't intend to hunt here. I just need sleep, and the trees here were good shelter," he continued. When her discomfort seemed to be obvious, he quickly added, "I'll leave if you want."

Guinevere blinked, confused by the contrition in his voice, then remembered that other types were blissfully unaware of things out of their sight and hearing range. "I have no issue with you resting here," she assured him, then winced as she felt another life taken; the previous one–a doe–had not been fully consumed, just like all the others.

"Thanks...! But then, what's the matter? I haven't met many fairy types, but I've seen enough of them to know that 'red wings' are 'angry wings,'" he chuckled, as if trying to ease the tension.

"Yes, I am angry... but not because of you. Someone else is here, and they are killing everything," she explained.

"What?!" His white-tipped burgundy wings spread in preparation to pursue the wasteful beast, and his brow ridges furrowed with determination. "Where are they?"

"They're heading to the western sector of the forest. Excuse me, but I must put a stop to this." Guinevere pinpointed the culprit and flew off.

To her shock, he was right behind her; his flight was uneven at first, and she was once again attuned to how tired he was. But he powered through it, keeping up steadily, and even showing restraint not to pass the slower dragon guiding him. Meanwhile his focus was straight ahead, his eyes searching for any sign of their target.

She wasn't ungrateful for his help; rather, just confused by it. "Who exactly are you?"

"Huh?" Her voice had broken his concentration and he met her gaze curiously. "Oh! My name's Gale. What's yours?"

"I'm Guinevere..."

"Nice to meet you. I appreciate you letting me rest here, but I don't think I can sleep knowing someone's terrorizing this place."

"I see..."

Gale seemed the slightest bit frustrated by her pace. "Can you tell me exactly where they are?"

"About half a mile ahead; but they're fast," Guinevere warned him.

"All the more reason to hurry. I'll see if I can catch up." With that, his tall frame passed her, maneuvering the trees by way of strategically-timed wingbeats.

She could tell from that alone that he was no stranger to navigating forested terrains. *Perhaps he travels for fun.*

Guinevere could hear two voices as she caught up to Gale, one belonging to the latter, the other presumably the foe who'd been senselessly killing the prey in her forest.

"This isn't your territory," the poison type dragon was saying, his voice low but stern. "You have no right to hunt down all of the food here."

"You call that tasteless garbage *food?*" the other–a scarlet wind dragoness–scoffed. "I've tried one of nearly everything in this place–foxes, rabbits, deer, you name it–and they were all so bland I couldn't even finish them."

Guinevere stopped the glow of her iridescent wings and hid just out of sight. If Gale could convince her to leave, the fairy type wouldn't need to risk confrontation. If things escalated, though, hypnotism was a backup plan.

"If you don't like any of them, why bother to keep hunting here?" Gale pressed, obviously trying not to express how annoyed he was, although Guinevere's antennae picked up on it.

"Because I'm hungry!" the wyvern answered shamelessly.

If you were that hungry, you would finish your kills, Guinevere thought, consciously preventing her wings from glowing red.

"Don't wind types eat birds?" Gale continued. "What's stopping you from hunting in the skies like the others?"

"What's stopping you from living in the desert?" the wind dragon retorted.

"Free will," the poison type chuckled. "That said, since you're so dissatisfied with what the forest has to offer, you have the free will to move on from here."

"*Or* I can stay for that little fairy dragoness instead."

The black dragon's smile fell. "What?"

"I thought she'd show herself if I messed her home up enough," she admitted her true motivations. "Didn't think I'd come across a poison dragon, though."

Gale eyed her warily. "What do you want with her?"

"I already told you: I'm hungry," she laughed, and the bipedal dragon visibly tensed. "I had a taste of a fairy type up in the flower field by the Highlands, and nothing else compares to it."

Guinevere sensed that her newfound ally felt disgusted by the scarlet wyvern's revelation. The fairy type didn't want to hear anything further from her. She moved into the open, spread her wings, and allowed them to glow.

Immediately her light attracted the foe, who rounded on the smaller female, but before anyone could make a move, Guinevere shifted the color of her wings in a deliberate pattern. The scarlet dragon's crimson eyes were drawn to them, her striped wings that were folded up from the backs of her forelimbs now spreading slightly as her guard lowered, allowing Guinevere's empathic antennae access to her mind.

"All of the prey you've eaten these past two days has been delicious and filling," she persuaded the intruder. "But birds tasted far better, and their distant scent is luring you back to the skies. You came to this forest to try new prey animals, and you've reached that goal. Everything went as you planned, so now it's time to leave."

Gale glanced between them, fascinated. When the glow faded, the wyvern looked around with confusion, her deep red gaze finally settling on the sky as her nostrils flared. Unfortunately, Guinevere's nearer scent must have renewed the predator's desires.

"No... The only thing I smell is a tasty little runt with blue fur," the larger dragoness laughed, completely disillusioned now. She instantly lunged at Guinevere with gaping jaws.

Gale intercepted, whipping his long tail to sting the attacker's shoulder in one smooth motion; with the stinger hooked through her scales, he pulled back to swing her into a tree, then tore himself free. Purple venom oozed from the puncture. "Leave. *Now,*" he demanded.

"Or what?" she challenged him, catching her breath but recovering quickly.

"Or else you'll be too immobilized by venom to leave. You'd be paralyzed here in the open for the wildlife you *haven't* killed to finish you off."

"I've fought poison types like you in the desert… Your venom takes ages to kick in, and that measly dosage isn't lethal. I'll kill you *both* before I even feel anything from it," she snarled, rearing up to flap her wings just once, which created a forceful gust of wind against him.

Although he stood his ground, he was skidding backward. His eyes darted for a way out, then gained a glint as he turned his back to the air current and spread his wings, riding the wind instead of fighting it so that he was back in control. During the short time it took him to circle around and rejoin the fight, though, the scarlet dragoness had once again charged to bite the fairy type.

Guinevere had instinctively taken flight to dodge, when a sudden change of direction in the existing air caught her insect-like wings, propelling her toward the wind type before the former even realized what was happening. She closed her yellow eyes and braced herself as fangs pierced through her soft blue pelt.

They just as quickly released--dropping her--as the attacker opened her mouth to cry out from Gale's second sting, this time to her throat. The wyvern retreated in pain, then snapped at the poison type, catching his tail in her teeth before he could withdraw.

Guinevere fell weakly to the ground. Her fur clumped as it became coated in red, and she lay there helplessly watching the two battle. *Is this how I'm fated to die…?* she wondered, the purple glow of her wings fading along with her consciousness. The last thing she saw was the scarlet dragoness suddenly staggering as the added venom took effect, and Gale seizing that moment to rush toward his ally. Everything went black.

Guinevere opened her eyes to find herself hidden in a thicket. *I'm alive…?* Her aching torso had been wrapped by large leaves held in place with vines. The injured fairy dragoness smiled, amused. *Not the most effective way to stop bleeding, but it'll do.* Her antennae lifted as usual as she tried to place herself. She wasn't too far from the scene of the fight, but what astonished her was the fact that the poison type was nearby. At this point it was evening, nearing night. *What is he still doing here?*

She carefully got to her paws and stepped out of the shelter, spotting him keeping watch. "Gale?"

He jumped, immediately facing her. “You're awake! Are you alright?”

“I will be... The bite wasn't fatal, thanks to you. You have my gratitude."

“Heh. It's the least I can do after you let me nap in your territory,” he modestly brushed it off.

Guinevere paused. *It wasn't much of a nap.* There were dark bags under his eyes, and once again she felt just how exhausted he was. Chances are he hadn't slept since they had first met that morning–and even then it had been for a half hour; who knew how long he had gone without sleep until that point. Her gaze then traveled down the fresh wounds from the fight earlier, although none of them were serious. She was impressed that he had cleaned them nicely, too. “Why did you save me?”

He blinked. “What?”

“You were in no condition to fight… let alone on behalf of a stranger."

Gale opened his mouth as if to oppose that notion, then closed it and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “Yeah. I really need a break, if I'm honest,” he chuckled half-heartedly.

“I don't understand your motives."

He shrugged. “I just hate dragons who think they own any territory they travel to."

She sat, taking this in. “And what does that have to do with rescuing me?”

One of his brow ridges rose. “Did you *not* want me to rescue you?”

“I appreciate that you did. However, if that were truly the way I was fated to die, why step in?”

“Fate?" His eyes darkened, and the corners of his mouth dropped into a more serious frown. “I don't believe in that. If it *does* exist, it's cruel beyond reason."

I can feel a deep sense of loss emanating from him... Guinevere shook her head. “I don't know what you've been through… but fairy dragons and other smaller types are preyed on more often than you'd think. As much as I wish it weren't so, it is nature… and it's nobody's place to disrupt natural order."

“Being natural doesn't necessarily make something right,” he stated as a matter of fact.

Guinevere gaped at him, that one simple sentence leading her to question everything she lived by.

Then he couldn't suppress a yawn, and lowered himself to the ground. “Sorry... I'm not sure I can stay awake much longer. Will you be alright if I sleep…?”

After a beat to get her thoughts in order, she nodded. “Stay and rest as long as you need to."

Chapter 7 (Continued)

Gadalik

"That was six years ago," Guinevere finished her tale. "For the longest time I've viewed saving others the same way I had viewed that scarlet dragon's actions: as interfering with natural order. And I viewed natural order as fate: something righteous and inevitable." Her yellow eyes gazed at Gadalik. "But Gale saved me, a stranger. He could have let me get eaten, just like I could have left you buried in the snow… yet he didn't. He showed me that fate can be changed; that natural order *should* be interfered with if it's for the better of those in need. And that is why I rescued you, Gadalik."

"Is that also why you'd want to use your hypnotism to help Gretel?" Glacia prompted curiously.

"Perhaps. Don't get me wrong; I truly do care about you all. I'm simply saying that until I met Gale, I didn't know that acting on my care for others was a valid option."

The green hybrid was touched by her experience. *If the actions of one could change her instinctual outlook on the world, maybe there's hope that I can play a role in changing the views of social types and societies the same way.*

Chapter 8

"Come on, slowpoke!" Gretel ragged the green dragon trailing behind her. The white-and-purple wyvern practically danced between the forest's trees, cartwheeling and somersaulting around each one with the help of intermittent tailwinds. Just like during their previous race, she summoned them each time her movements allowed her folded wings to open, since she remained on land. "If you can't keep up, racing you won't be fun anymore!"

Gadalik was running after his friend, somewhat envious of her natural agility. He was simultaneously too impressed by it to be bothered about losing, though–not that he wasn't *trying* to win. Debris crunched under the earth dragon-hybrid's crimson paw pads; the rough texture of which gained purchase on the ground regardless of what he stepped on. Rather than hindering him, sticks and pinecones were trampled under his weight, his heaviness also preventing him from slipping on the fallen leaves that had begun to lose their vibrancy as autumn neared. His powerful muscles allowed his large paws to launch himself far with each bound, but making turns to avoid trees threw off his momentum.

Even if I could run in a straight line, my top speed is nowhere near hers, he admitted to himself. *I can still try for a personal best in terms of how fast I reach our boulder, though.*

He soon lost sight of Gretel when she'd gone too far ahead. The young green dragon wasn't worried about that since he knew where they were going. What *did* concern him was the prolonged silence; her playful taunts had ceased. There was no trace of her anywhere.

Gadalik paused at the last point he had seen his companion and brought his muzzle to the ground in hopes of tracking her by scent, frowning when he discovered it ended abruptly. *That means she must have flown.* He glanced at the sky through the canopies, but she wasn't there either. That's when he realized the silence was deafening, whereas the leaves should be rustling in the breeze. *That's suspicious...*

Then he let out a startled cry as the other juvenile dropped down from a branch above him to land on his back, and the sounds returned. "Gotcha!" she exclaimed.

The wind type's light body had barely impacted him despite the two being similar in size. Gadalik gave his friend a wry grin over his shoulder, then bucked her off in retaliation.

Gretel squealed with mock indignation as she was flung high into the air, but easily spread her forelimbs to allow her striped wings to unfold; she hovered above him out of his reach and blew a raspberry.

"No fair! You know I can't fly," the seer-hybrid complained melodramatically with a few emphatic flaps of his small earth dragon wings. When she laughed in response, he took that moment of distraction to bat a pinecone up at her.

Gretel's keen sight let her notice it immediately, so she pivoted out of the way. “Ha! Missed me!”

“You sure about that?”

“Huh? What do you mean–” She chirped as it bounced off of her single horn on its way down. Then her hot pink eyes glinted mischievously and tracked its fall; right when it was passing Gadalik, the existing air suddenly changed direction to blow the pinecone at his face.

He blinked from it ricocheting off of his tough-scaled snout, once again more impressed than anything while her familiar laughter rang out. That sound had grown to be comforting, and he found himself smiling again, but not playfully this time--instead, it stemmed from genuine appreciation of her company.

Gretel landed in front of him. "What kept you? I was waiting in ambush for so long, I thought you went home!"

He chuckled and rolled his striped blue eyes dismissively. "I wasn't *that* far behind, was I?"

"Pfft! Are you kidding? You were slower than a pinecone--and I don't mean the one you threw at me!"

"But pinecones are stationary..."

"Exactly! You're such a slow-poke that you might as well be stationary, too!"

"He-ey, don't forget this 'slowpoke' beat you the first time we raced!"

The duo continued their light banter as they walked side-by-side to their finish line.

They arrived on the northern outskirts; Gretel flapped her wings just once to create a controlled gust, soaring on it and landing neatly atop their boulder. Gadalik climbed up beside his friend.

“You've really gotten good at avoiding trees,” he praised her in all seriousness.

She grinned. “Practice makes perfect! You're not so slow either; I was just kidding."

“I know,” he replied, feeling warmed from the indirect compliment.

“You're actually very fast as far as earth dragons go,” she said as a matter of fact. “But nothing really compares to the speed of a wind dragon like me,” she added with a playful smile.

“What about electric types?”

“Oh–they’re fast, too! On foot, they'd beat me in a race, no doubt about that. But they don't have wings, so in open spaces, wind types have the advantage." She considered it. “Earth types also have an advantage in open spaces–just not as much as us."

Makes sense, he agreed, remembering how the turns had slowed him down in their race. “What else do you know about earth dragons?”

“Oh–not too much. Just the basics from what I've observed on my travels,” Gretel explained. When he tilted his head curiously, she elaborated, “There were earth dragons on the mountains of that volcano island I mentioned. They didn't let me close, though."

“Ah. Why not?" *Will the earth dragons on this land let her in with me?*

"Eh, something about not trusting outsiders. At least *they* were civil about chasing me away from their territory, instead of resorting to violence like everyone else," she laughed.

"So earth dragons are nice?"

"Well, I can't speak for an entire subspecies of dragons, silly. Everyone's different."

"Huh... That's true." *Gretel's certainly a lot friendlier than the wind dragon that tried to prey on Guinevere.* "Guess I'll find out for myself when we visit the earth dragon society, then," Gadalik replied with a determined smile. He had made his mind up about including her; there was no way he could see himself going without his friend.

She tensed.

"You alright?" he asked, confused.

"What do you plan to do after that?" Gretel finally spoke, her hot pink eyes looking into his with trepidation. She was oddly calm, though, almost as though she were prepared to accept whatever scared her.

"What do you mean?" Gadalik prompted gently.

"When we were on the hill, you told me you didn't plan on moving there permanently, right?"

"Yeah, and I still stand by that. I'm not sure if they'd *let* me–as a winged hybrid–stay permanently, even if I wanted to."

She shrugged. "Hybrid or not, you're still dominantly an earth type. There's a chance they'd let you stay if you *did* want to." Her tail-tip was twitching, betraying the anxiety under her indifference.

"Well, I *don't* want to. Regardless, I would never ask you all to give up your homes to stay with me there, if that's what you're worried about. But again, I don't *want* to stay there."

"That's what you *say.*" That anxiety suddenly boiled over as she rounded on him, her striped tail lashing. "But once you get a taste of the high life, you'll change your mind about leaving it. I just know it...!"

"What? High life?" *Why is she upset with me all of the sudden?*

"You say you don't want us to give up our homes for you–but I'll bet you'd have no problem giving *us* up for your new home," she cried between quick, shallow breaths. Then the young dragoness caught herself and regretfully covered her mouth; she turned away from him to hide her forming tears, pawing fiercely at her eyes to dry them as she breathed to calm herself. "Sorry... Really, I'm sorry...! I should go–"

"Gretel, wait..." Her friend was more concerned than offended by her unfounded accusation. *I've never seen her act like this before...* "What's the matter...? What makes you think I'd do something like that?"

"I'm sorry," she repeated genuinely. "You wouldn't, and I know that..." The juvenile wyvern shook her head, taking a deep breath and releasing it in a sigh. "I-I should just go until I feel better... See you tomorrow–"

"No, wait! Please!" he begged, and she hesitated. "Talk to me… You let me vent to you when I was upset on our way back from the hill. It's only fair that you can vent to me about whatever's bothering you, too."

"I'd tell you, but I don't know!" Gretel exclaimed with frustration that was directed at herself rather than her companion. Her tail lashed again, and she sat on her haunches with her forelimbs slightly off the ground; he could tell she wanted nothing more than to take flight the same way she had escaped the violent dragons on her travels all her life.

"You know, I talked to Guinevere after you left yesterday," Gadalik murmured. "She told me she might be able to help you figure this out."

"What…? How?"

"Hypnotism… I don't know if it'll work, but it won't hurt to *try*, right?"

She lowered herself to sit properly, all paws securely on the rock they had met on. By now she had steadied her breathing and narrowed her eyes skeptically.

"Guinevere told me you can come to her anytime you want, and you can always change your mind if it turns out you don't want to go through with it," he assured her. When she still seemed indecisive, he sighed. "We just want to help… But if you don't want to do it, it's your choice–"

"Alright," the wind type cut him off. Before he could ask, she clarified, "I'll do it."

"Wait. Really?" The green dragon was relieved to hear that.

"Yeah… Normally, I wouldn't want to," she admitted, "but I also don't want to lash out at you like that again. You didn't do anything wrong."

He softened. "It's alright. I know you didn't mean it. And I'll be with you for everything with Guinevere, if you want me to be."

Gretel smiled even though she was still clearly not feeling her best. "Yeah–I want you with me."

"Guinevere should be in her garden right now," Gadalik said. "Would you want to try hypnotism now or later on?"

"Hmm… Let's just get it over with," Gretel replied. "Come on."

The green earth dragon hybrid followed the striped white wind type back into the forest. They eventually arrived at the tree hollow, below which the dragoness with pale blue fur was using her white-tipped paws to carefully dig and replant additions to her garden. Her golden antennae lifted as if to alert her to their approach. To Gadalik's surprise, his adoptive mother was with her.

"Glacia?" he called out to the water type. "What are you and Guinevere up to?"

"Oh! Hey!" she greeted him cheerfully in response. "We still have leftovers from the stag she brought us yesterday, so because I don't need to hunt today, I thought I'd make myself useful here while you were out on your playdate with Gretel."

"Useful?"

Glacia gave a toothy smile. "Ever since you made my puddle, I can use my storage ability anytime. Watch this!" She faced one of the new plants Guinevere had added to the garden, exchanged a permissive glance with the latter, then opened her mouth and showered it with a light spray of water.

Her son immediately remembered the part of last fall's vision where she had shot the killer seer in his eye with a bullet of water, causing the large dragon to bleed. He had never seen her use it so gently before, not even against himself during their play-fights.

"Now that she can water my garden, I can introduce plants to it that require more water. I also noticed that Glacia's presence deters predators from me," Guinevere added with an appreciative smile.

"Really?" he asked.

His mother chuckled. "I never thought about it, but I guess water types *are* considered predators too."

"Why wouldn't you think about it? You should take advantage of being a predator! You can go in the open without worrying about anyone preying on you," Gretel encouraged her with a prideful grin. "A-a-and you can scare off any trespassers!"

Gadalik once again remembered the scarlet wyvern that had tried to consume the fairy type in the latter's recounting of her past. *It must be hard having to worry about being hunted in your own territory...*

Glacia shrugged. "Water types don't really go in the open–at least, not until winter if it snows and our home freezes over. We stick to our oceans, lakes, springs, or wherever we live."

"True. I wasn't talking about water dragons as a whole, silly–I was talking about you specifically," Gretel clarified with a huff of laughter.

Gadalik paused. *With how much Glacia's stayed on land to take care of me, I completely forgot that being out of water isn't natural for her...* He suppressed a pang of guilt.

"I've never really had to do any of that before. Usually other predators like revealers, seers, and wind dragons don't come out when it's cold, so when we do go out during winter, it's safe for us," Glacia explained.

Right... we avoided that vision with the killer seer. Glacia really hasn't *encountered one in reality.*

Gretel, who had seemed back to usual self during their walk here and up until this point, had winced almost a second into the water dragoness's response. She was currently looking down, distraught. Glacia was confused by her reaction, but didn't question her; she awkwardly went back to watering the plants as if not wanting to cause drama between them again.

The wyvern's feelings did draw Guinevere's attention, though. "I detect some apprehension. Is everything alright?"

"I told Gretel about your offer to help her remember things," Gadalik said quietly. "Is this a bad time?"

"Not at all." She looked at the purple-striped juvenile. "I take it you accepted my offer?"

The latter hesitated, becoming indecisive once more.

What upset her? Gadalik wondered. *She was fine again until Glacia mentioned how winter deters predators...* "Gretel?"

The hybrid's voice snapped his friend out of it. "Huh?" she asked. "Oh... I mean... I..." The sentence faltered.

"If you're not ready yet, that's alright. I'll be here whenever you decide you are," Guinevere assured her.

"What if I never am...?"

"Memories may resurface on their own, but it may be a longer and more confusing process to go through alone."

"I think they *have* been resurfacing on their own lately," she admitted. "Broken, and senseless... but they still make me feel bad." Gretel averted her eyes, glaring at the ground. "I don't want to feel bad... I hate it."

"If you accept my offer to hypnotize you, we can try to get all of the bad things out at once, so we can work through them."

She took a breath, then looked at Gadalik, her initial resolve renewing. "Alright," she told Guinevere. "Can Gadalik join us?"

"Of course. Come, let us go in my hollow." Guinevere turned to the other adult. "Glacia, take a break until I return."

"Oh, okay," the light blue dragoness replied. "In that case, I'll go to the puddle and store more water in the meantime. I'll be back later!" Glacia waved one of her large back fins in farewell to the three of them before leaving.

The fairy type then beckoned the juveniles toward her tree. She flitted on her four glowing wings into the mouth of its hollow. Gretel created a wind that she glided upon to join Guinevere inside. Gadalik instinctively spread his small earth dragon wings, then hesitated and looked over his shoulder at them solemnly. *I'm not a pure seer... Or a pure mountain dragon, even if my wings are remnants of theirs. I'm an earth dragon–mostly--and earth types can't fly...*

"Can you make it?" the wyvern called out to her friend.

"I did carry him up here before, but he was still a hatchling back then. I fear he's grown too heavy for me to lift anymore," Guinevere said, and Gadalik saw her neutral pink glow shift to a sorrowful blue.

Gretel's winds couldn't carry me when we first met, either, despite trying to help me fly, he recalled. Then he shook his head. *If a pure earth dragon can manage without flight, so can I.* The young green dragon remembered how he'd climbed out of the 'puddle' he'd dug for Glacia on his own. Then he moved to the tree and extended his claws into its bark. His rough paw pads helped him maintain his grip as he climbed up carefully at first, then faster as he gained more confidence. Before he knew it, he pulled himself into the hollow with a proud grin.

Gretel whooped and Guinevere's wings flashed orange. “Great job,” the latter praised him. “Now everyone, get comfortable."

Gadalik glanced around; it was sheltered from the sun’s heat and light, but the glow of Guinevere's wings illuminated the dim interior enough for them to see. There were large leaves along one side of the space, and herbs from her garden stacked neatly on the other side, next to sticks that were wrapped in spiderwebs, and a few small bones from prey.

The moss-covered floor was soft, and the pale blue fairy dragoness lied down on it, tucking her white paws under the pink fur of her belly. Gretel settled in front of the adult, and Gadalik stayed out of the way perpendicular to them.

“Let me know when you're ready,” Guinevere told the young wind type.

“What exactly will you do? I mean, I've been hypnotized before by a different fairy type, and it… wasn't a friendly encounter. They made me see some pretty scary stuff to make me leave,” Gretel said.

“Rest assured I do not intend to mislead you with false imagery; I will only show you what you tell me. My influence over your senses can help you remember things more clearly. You can then tell me if I get any sensory inputs wrong, and I will adjust them until they feel right. Once everything is accurate, the process will repeat based on any memories you regain after it,” she explained. “If at any point you wish to stop, simply let me know, and I will end our session."

The juveniles exchanged a look. “She has hypnotized me before, when we first met,” Gadalik said. “She showed me a scene of my parents. I trust her."

Gretel sighed. “That’s fine, but I don't really know where to start."

“I sensed your dejection during yesterday's talks of societies. Is that related to what you may have repressed?”

“I… I think so. I don't remember being in a society, but I *do* remember what societies are like. Well, actually, no… not societies. Just *one* society."

“Do you know which dragon type that society was made of?”

“No…"

“Alright. Then that's where we can start. Tell me more about the society itself. Anything at all that you can remember will help."

Gretel tensed, her tail-tip twitching anxiously.

“Relax. Focus on my wings and let your mind open up. Are you ready?”

“Yeah. I'm ready."

The fairy dragoness spread her insect-like wings and shifted the colors of their glow in a deliberate pattern. Gadalik watched as it reflected in his friend’s hot pink eyes and she visibly calmed down, entranced.

“I remember that it was… open. I was able to fly around as much as I wanted. I remember a tree, and… Wait, no, there were multiple trees. There was a storm, and… No–that isn't right. I think I'm mixed up…”

"Take your time, there is no need to rush this," she murmured. "If the society itself was in an open space, the trees may be a separate area near it. Does that look right?"

"Hm... It *was* grassy, but the open space also had big rocks in it. Kind of like where Gadalik and I hang out."

"I see. How is this?"

"Yeah! And then there were flowers here and there. All that's missing are the dragons."

"Do you remember anything about the dragons? Their sounds, for example?"

"I remember... singing. Err, no–they hated singing. I was the one singing, not them."

"Oh? Dragons that dislike singing may have sensitive hearing. Perhaps they were one of the few dragon types that have ears?"

"I can't remember," Gretel muttered, frustrated. Then she gave it some thought and smiled slightly. "But they didn't *all* hate my singing... There was someone who liked it."

"I see. What can you remember about that specific someone?"

"Um..." She fidgeted with discomfort "I can't remember anything about him..."

"Him? So it was a male. Do not stress over him right now–let's focus on the scenery again. Do you recall any area you may have spent time together in?"

"Uh... I was... in a tree, and I was singing in it as it creaked."

"Creaked?"

"Yeah–like that. But the creaking was kind of drowned out by another sound."

"Wind, perhaps?"

"Well, yes, but not just wind... There was... like, a beat. I was singing to it."

"A beat... like raindrops?" Guinevere asked.

"Yes–I remember now! It was storming–rain, wind, the tree being blown with me on its branch," Gretel recalled. "I was singing along to the sounds of the storm because I was happy."

"That's great. Is this right?"

"Yep–perfect!"

"Do you remember why you were happy?"

"No, not really. But I'm usually happy, so it's hard to pinpoint a reason for this specific instance."

"That's alright. So what happened next?"

"Gadalik came up to the tree and said he liked my singing."

"Me?" The hybrid blinked. "I *do* like your singing, but don't remember any of that."

Gretel frowned. "Huh...?"

Gadalik thought back to the last time they hung out. "You told me yesterday that you remembered me from a long time ago, even though we've only just met in spring."

"That's true," his friend said, scrunching her face up. "I don't know why I remember you being there. I was young–a hatchling. You and I didn't meet until I'd just become a yearling."

"Perhaps Gadalik and this male dragon have similar traits?" Guinevere guessed.

"I really can't remember any physical traits... I just know that what he said reminds me of Gadalik. They're both nice."

"Ah. What kinds of things would he say?"

"Well, he said he liked my singing... and he asked me to teach him."

"Interesting. Usually only wind type dragons sing. But wind dragons do not live in societies."

"No–I don't think he was a wind type. Wind types don't need to be taught how to sing, anyway."

"Taught?" Gadalik echoed. He recalled the explanation they had given him about the difference between the two natures–solitary, and social–that dragon types innately had. "You told me solitary dragons don't need to be taught anything. Social dragons do need to be taught things–and only social dragons have societies, right?"

"Yeah. But... he was different. He was alone–and so was I. For a long time it was just the two of us," Gretel reminisced with a genuine smile.

"Perhaps nurture played a part, then? He could be a social dragon who chose to live a solitary life–like Glacia."

"No... Well, yes–but it wasn't his choice. He was stuck."

"Stuck?" Guinevere repeated. "How so?"

"That tree... no–the trees. The forest location is wrong," she told the fairy type. "The forest was below the open space–not beside it."

"Alright. Is this better?"

"That looks right, but it was farther down. The open space was like a tall plateau." There was a pause. "Taller... Perfect!"

Guinevere smiled slightly. "Can you tell me more about how he was stuck?"

"He couldn't fly up the plateau. He was stuck in the forest alone until I rested on the tree. The storm had made it too hard to travel, so I was happy when I saw the island, and chose to wait it out in that tree."

Things are starting to add up, Gadalik thought with a glimmer of hope. "So he couldn't fly, either? Is that another trait he shared with me?"

"Oh–you're right! Yeah, he was just like you."

"Was he a hybrid?" the other dragoness asked.

"I don't think so? Gadalik was the first hybrid I've ever seen."

"Did he have wings?"

"I can't remember..." Once again the corners of the wyvern's mouth dropped. "Ugh, why am I struggling with him in particular?"

"It's alright. Calm yourself. Let's go over what we know: he's a social dragon that cannot fly, and–"

"Wait! He *could* fly," Gretel corrected her, but she didn't seem happy about that.

"Oh...?"

"He couldn't fly at first, but then..." Her eyes watered and she shook her head. "He... I..." Her breathing became shaky with distress.

"Do you wish to stop?" Guinevere murmured.

"I don't know... I just... I... I was wrong. I *was* in a society... When he was old enough to fly, he invited me to live in his society with him. But..."

"Old enough to fly? That narrows it down to revealer dragons. They don't develop flight until around two years old."

Gretel drew in a sharp breath and leapt to her paws, tail lashing. "I want to stop...! I don't *want* to remember him–I *hate* him!"

Guinevere's wings returned to their neutral pink, ending their session.

"Gretel?" Gadalik stood calmly. "It's okay–he's not here, it's just us."

For the first time since the hypnotism started, Gretel looked at her friend, only to retreat a step from him almost if he scared her.

That's when Gadalik made the connection. "You've been confusing me with him... And earlier today you accused me of wanting to leave you behind to stay in a society... Is that what he did to you?"

"No!" she cried, but he couldn't tell if that was an answer or an exclamation. "I don't want to talk about him! I... I got out of there. He was nice at first, and they let me in, but he turned out to be just like everyone *else*!"

"Everyone else...?"

Gretel shook her head fiercely, then took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. She faced her friend again, this time with worry instead of fear. "Gadalik... don't go to the earth dragons..."

"What...? Why?"

"I..." She broke down, tears falling down her face. "I'm sorry... I'm gonna go..."

"Wait," he pleaded. "We can talk about this–about us, not him. I'm not him, okay? Whatever he did has nothing to do with me... I care more about you than the earth dragon society, I promise."

She bit back a sob. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I trust you... But you're so much like him, I... I just..."

"If you don't want me to go, I won't," Gadalik said, fighting back how much he truly did want to go. *The journey isn't worth it, anyway,* he lied to himself. *It's far and the weather will be cold for me and worse for Gretel. I barely even feel like I'm an earth dragon, too–I won't fit in there. Or anywhere...* He felt his own emotions choke him; he was trying his hardest not to have another crisis about never being able to leave the forest.

Guinevere looked between them, sensing both of their inner conflicts as her wings dimmed to blue. "I think we all should wait until we're calm before making any rash decisions..."

"No, Gadalik–don't let me stop you," Gretel sniffled. "I know how much you want to go. Guinevere's right–I just need space to calm down and think on it, okay…? I'm sorry… I'm sorry–I'm gonna leave now… I'll… see you tomorrow." Without waiting for a reply, the striped wyvern turned on trembling legs and fled.

Gadalik watched his friend vanish into the clouds from the mouth of the tree hollow, disheartened and guilt-ridden. *Things weren't supposed to turn out like this…*

Just like the previous day, Guinevere walked to his side, gazing out with him. "We can't expect her to bounce back so soon," she murmured. "I sensed a lot more stress from her that we didn't have the chance to address. Give her time to process everything."

"I brought her here to help, but I feel like I just made things worse," he admitted. "I don't know what to do… Should I end my plans to visit the earth dragons? Do you think that would help her?"

The fairy type shook her head. "Her issues aren't with you nor the earth dragon society. It stems from the revealer and his society. Nothing you do in the present will change what happened to her in the past. For now, do what you feel is best for yourself."

The green hybrid narrowed his striped blue eyes. "I wouldn't want to go without her, though. And I don't want my leaving to hurt her on top of the pain she feels from her old revealer friend."

"But won't you be hurting yourself if you remain in the forest for the rest of your life to appease her?"

He gaped, turning to face the pale blue dragoness. "It's not fair… Either way, someone gets hurt."

"Gretel's pain is not your responsibility. In her current state, I doubt she will be receptive to help regardless if you stay. The only pain you have full control over helping with is your own."

The young earth dragon registered her words, frowning. "So I should just give up on her?"

"No–you should have faith in her to handle her own pain, as well. Whether she chooses to process it on her own, or seek out help from either of us, is up to her."

"Would I be a bad friend if I left without her…?"

"Would she be a bad friend if she disapproved of you leaving?"

"N-No! But–"

"Trust in your friendship. And trust in yourself to do what's right by you. If you think visiting the earth dragons will benefit you, I'd recommend going, with or without her."

Gadalik considered his options. As reluctant as he was to leave Gretel behind if she didn't change her mind by the end of autumn, he decided Guinevere was right.

Chapter 9

The next day, Gadalik restlessly paced his den. His adoptive mother watched him with increasing concern. “Settle down; you're gonna make a groove in the ground at this rate,” she said. “What's eating you?”

“Gretel usually stops by at noon every day, but it's been almost two hours and she's still not here," he fretted.

“Give her a break. You told me her hypnotism session didn't end well. I can't imagine she'd suddenly be in the mood to play just one day after the fact,” Glacia soothed him. When he sat and stared out of their den, his striped blue eyes searching the skies for his friend, she sighed. “Why don't we both pay Guinevere a visit to get your mind off of everything?”

“I don't know... I love Guinevere, but I also feel like I shouldn't have dragged her into Gretel's problems...”

“Oh, come on. Nobody blames you for how things turned out with Gretel."

The green hybrid looked away from her. *Nobody but me, I guess... I ruined everything. Gretel might never come back, all because I stuck my nose into her business–*

“If you're that worried about Guinevere, how about you spend the day with me instead?” the water dragoness suggested.

“What?”

“We can go visit the lake, like old times. I love the puddle you made me, but nothing compares to how spacious the lake is. And I'm sure you miss swimming after all this time, too, right? It'll be fun!”

He considered it. *That* does *sound fun...* “But what if Gretel comes while we're gone?”

“Psssh. You heard how great her sight is! And she knows that you and I hang out at the lake sometimes. She could find us there easily!”

“...True. Okay, let's go, then."

They crossed the plains together and he couldn't help smiling with amusement when his mother broke into a run for the last stretch and slid far along the water’s surface. *Sometimes she acts as excitable as a hatchling! It's hard not to get excited along with her.* Without thinking, he leapt into the depths after her.

It took the young earth dragon a second to remember how to swim, and he regretted not practicing in so long; it was hard to find the surface once he was submerged. Thankfully he felt familiar webbed hands around his torso as Glacia lifted him just far enough to raise his head above water, where he gulped in air. Just as quickly, though, she let Gadalik go and swam backwards away from him.

His large paws found their rhythm while his tiny wings helped keep him afloat as he paddled after her. He paused with playful suspicion when she grinned; the world seemed to move in slow motion as his striped blue eyes caught sight of her tail-fin rising upward with too much force for just swimming. His suspicion was confirmed when it breached the surface at an angle that flung water directly at him.

Time resumed and he knew exactly when to duck out of its way. "Ha! Nice try!"

"Oh? Well I'd love to see you dodge *this!*" She shot a bullet of water at him from her mouth.

The seer-hybrid once again perceived the attack, but it was much faster and more direct than the last one. Instinct to fly out of its way overcame him, but instead, his wings acted similarly to his mother's aquatic back fins and worked in sync with his paws to boost his movement speed; Gadalik managed to narrowly avoid it.

"Woah, you've gotten faster!" Glacia praised him, genuinely impressed.

He felt his face warm with bashfulness, then got another idea. "My turn!" Without breaking the pace of his paws, he used his wings to fling water back at her.

Instead of dodging, the water dragoness moved right into the projectiles and let them splash against her face. "Hmm, refreshing!"

He burst out laughing. All of his troubles seemed to melt away as he got immersed in their games. Hours later, when he'd grown too tired to expend the energy needed not to sink, he rested on the shore while she hunted a few fish for them. Exhausted, but content, they headed back to their forest home. The juvenile found himself glancing toward the sky through the entrance of their den as he settled into the moss inside for a nap. He sighed when there was nothing there, but forced himself to let it go, closing his eyes and drifting off.

The following afternoon, Gadalik found himself walking from his den to the boulder that he had met Gretel on, expecting to hear her sing while she awaited his arrival, as she often did. But there was silence aside from birdsong as he made it through the forest, and upon reaching the rocky area, his friend was still gone. The green dragon tightly shut his eyes in an attempt to block out how disappointed he felt. He climbed up their boulder and lay down on it, his hopes rising every time a new wind type passed overhead; despite knowing none of them was her, he couldn't help feeling crushed every time he confirmed it.

"Are you alright?" Guinevere asked, and Gadalik looked toward the sound of her voice to find the fairy dragoness safely beneath the trees on the outskirts of the forest. "It's hard to ignore how sad you are."

He sighed heavily, resting his head on his large dark green paws. "This is the second day Gretel's been gone. Do you think she'll ever come back…?"

"I cannot say one way or the other. When she left, she seemed honest when saying she'd visit the next day. I do not believe she intends to abandon you."

"What if she hates me…?"

"What reason would you have given her to hate you?"

"I didn't give her one, but her revealer friend did… She outright told us she hated him. And before that, she had been saying how similar I am to him, too. Is it possible she hates me because she sees him in me?"

"Perhaps, but I highly doubt it. Gretel was conflicted when she said she hated him, as well–and she was apologetic toward you for drawing that negative parallel to him. She knows you haven't done anything to warrant her hating you."

He let himself relax slightly with relief. "Thanks, Guinevere… I needed to hear that."

Gadalik watched the afternoon sky from his den a day later, unable to give up his expectation that Gretel would return. They had spent hours of every day dedicated to playing for *months*, so it was hard to get used to her absence, even though he knew it wasn't personal. *I hope she's okay…*

"I'm going to help Guinevere in her garden today," Glacia told him. "You should come with me."

His adoptive mother's voice snapped him out of it. "Huh?"

"Did you hear me? I said we should hang out with Guinevere."

"Oh! You two have gotten close, lately, haven't you?" her son asked with a warm smile.

The water dragoness shrugged modestly. "She's been through a lot, just like all of us. I know I said I don't trust anyone… besides you, of course. But she's proven herself trustworthy, multiple times now–even if I was in denial about it until recently. I wouldn't count on her for *everything*, mind you; I just think she's good company."

Gadalik's smile widened as he felt proud of her. "Alright–maybe I can help in her garden, too!"

She beamed. "I'm sure you can! Come on."

They trotted about half a mile northwest of their den to Guinevere's tree hollow. Now that he got a good look at it, her garden below had grown more sizable than he remembered. The pale-blue dragoness was snacking on some berries; her golden antennae perked up and she looked their way as they approached, and the pink glow of her four wings brightened.

"Heya! Hope you don't mind I brought Gadalik along today," Glacia greeted her, then paused, eyeing the berries curiously.

"Welcome," Guinevere returned her greeting, then addressed the hybrid. "I'm glad to see you."

He smiled. "Thanks. Your garden's really flourishing!"

Now it was her turn to give them a smile. “That's because I have good help,” Guinevere credited Glacia, yellow eyes looking to the water dragoness with gratitude.

“Aww,” the other adult instinctively cooed, as if astonished by the praise. Then she caught herself and shook her head, clearly chagrined after making such a sound.

Gadalik chuckled. *Glacia only lets herself react that way when it's just the two of us. She wasn't kidding about warming up to Guinevere if Glacia's guard drops this much around her.*

His voice must have reminded his mother that he was there. "Speaking of help, Gadalik says he's willing to."

The fairy dragoness's wings flashed yellow. “Is that so?”

“Yep," the green hybrid answered, standing taller with determination. "I'm not sure what I'd be able to do, but I'm willing to learn!"

“Earth dragons in particular would be great at digging. You could help rearrange my plants if you'd like."

“Rearrange them?”

“Yes; the most recent additions of plants that require more water were placed wherever they could fit. I feel it would be better to move them all into a designated area, preferably one that would catch more rainwater."

“Hm. I could probably make a groove in the ground for them to be planted in, so water would pool around them when it rains," he offered. "Kind of like how we intended Glacia’s puddle to be before I had gone overboard with it."

Guinevere's eyes shone along with her wings. “That would be wonderful. Allow me to finish eating and then we'll get started."

“How do those things taste?" Glacia blurted out, gazing almost longingly at the berries.

“Oh? These are my favorites because they are both sweet and nutritious." The glow of her wings briefly shifted to green, then orange, before returning to pink; if Gadalik didn't perceive time, he never would've noticed they changed at all. "You're welcome to try some."

She backed away to make room for the larger dragoness, who eagerly accepted the invitation and lifted her hand from the ground to pluck a berry from the bush, popping it into her mouth. Immediately Glacia cringed and spat it out. “Bleh! Tastes like dirty grass."

Guinevere laughed, and Gadalik couldn't help joining in as he pieced together that she had anticipated this reaction from his mother, yet hadn't dissuaded the latter just so they could witness it. *I never took Guinevere as one to have a playful side...!*

"What's so funny?" Glacia huffed, but seemed more upset about missing the joke than being the center of it.

“It's not surprising," the furred dragoness replied after catching her breath. "Water types are carnivorous predators, after all. I can't imagine berries or vegetation would have an appealing taste to any of them–to some, they may not even be digestible."

“Really?” he asked. It was hard for him to think of his mother in the same vein as the predatory scarlet wyvern from Guinevere's past, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized his adoptive mother’s diet *was* only meat–mostly fish, but also prey animals. “Huh. What are earth dragons?"

“Omnivores, like fairy types. Unlike us, though, they can hunt, while we are scavengers, and they also don't exactly *need* plants in their diet; they're merely able to digest them with no issues. Fairy types are more dependent on plants as food, but we still require certain nutrients from meat to survive."

Wow. I am kinda curious how those berries would taste to me, now. He opened his mouth to ask if he could try one as well, then hesitated. “What about seers?”

“Carnivores,” Glacia and Guinevere said simultaneously, and for a moment the latter’s wings dimmed to a frightened purple.

The seer-hybrid glanced between them and retreated a step; it was clear they were using a neutral tone to mask that the topic was making them uncomfortable. He frowned. “What makes seers any scarier than water dragons? They're both carnivores, right?”

“Seers… are big,” his mother explained vaguely. “At least, when they're fully grown."

He remembered the killer from his vision, who had easily stood nine-feet-tall on all fours. From what he could see of Gale in that same vision and the more recent one of him and Guinevere, the poison type dragon was the same height, but on two legs. He gulped. “Bigger doesn't mean dangerous, though, right? Guinevere once showed me my seer mother through hypnotism, and she also mentioned that my mother lived in the forest for three seasons without causing any trouble."

“Yes,” the fairy type assured him. “Everyone’s different. But just as it is nature that birds--particularly raptors, like some falcons--prey on other birds, large dragons may also prey on smaller dragon types."

“Oh…”

“They don't *have* to, though,” Glacia added quickly. “Deer and other game are just as filling."

“Then why eat other dragons at all?”

“It's more to do with opportunities and how scarce other prey is,” Guinevere explained. “And then… some just prefer the taste." Her wings once again briefly shifted to purple.

Gadalik winced sympathetically. He didn't want to pursue the topic if it upset her. “How big do earth dragons get?”

“Not much bigger than me,” Glacia said. “Same with wind types. But since you're a hybrid, you might end up taller than both of them."

I never thought about that. His striped blue eyes glanced back to the berries as Guinevere resumed eating them. “Can I try one, too?”

“Sure,” the small, furred dragoness permitted him.

Gadalik gave them a careful sniff, and–encouraged by their sweet scent–took one between his fangs. It did have an earthy taste like Glacia had described, but the underlying sweetness was there; if he focused on it enough, it was tolerable. He swallowed. “Not bad."

Gadalik spent the entire day with his adoptive mother helping Guinevere expand and rearrange the fairy type’s garden. The seer-earth dragon hybrid had used his strength not only to terraform spaces to suit them for specific plants, but also to help plow the ground for seeds and saplings that the three of them then left to gather.

Gadalik was amazed by how easily Guinevere could detect them with her empathic antennae; he was acutely aware that plants were just as alive as he was, with similar needs for nourishment too. So often he had passed them by without a second thought about running over top of them; he now felt guilty when he looked down to see he'd stepped on a sapling. "S-Sorry...! Did I kill it...?"

"Worry not, young one," the fairy type murmured. "The life in this forest is resilient; even an earth dragon's weight will not kill them unless it's applied consistently."

He sighed, relieved, then began unearthing it.

"They would simply be eaten by wildlife if we left them here, regardless; I find it would be beneficial for the future of the inhabitants here if we plant these in more sparse parts of the forest after we finish our work on the garden."

"Is this enough?" Glacia asked, walking upright with her arms full of them.

"That's more than enough. You did wonderfully finding them on your own," Guinevere praised her, and the other adult was once again astonished by her kindness.

They returned to the base of her tree hollow, and Glacia had helped more by dampening the upturned dirt and watering the seeds as they were planted, and then ventured out to the clearings to do the same with the tree saplings. Around evening, they admired the results of their collaborative efforts.

“Thank you both for your help,” the smaller dragoness told them wholeheartedly. “None of this would be possible without you."

Gadalik felt himself warm in a blush. “No problem! It was fun."

His mother yawned. “Fun," she agreed, "but tiring. I ran out of water, too. I'll have to get more from my puddle tomorrow... Ready to head home, Gadalik?”

She's tired? I feel like I could do this all night! “Guess so. See you, Guinevere!”

“Goodnight,” the fairy type replied. The glowing of her wings seemed extra prominent in the fading sunlight, and her antennae lifted slightly as she double checked the plants' lives in the garden. Then she flew into her tree hollow, and he turned around to follow Glacia back to their den.

Gadalik was suddenly running through the forest at night, overcome by a sense of panic. Gretel flew past him from behind, and her white body was splotched with red. He ran after her, worried and afraid, when something struck his back–he felt a sharp pain and cried out as he was knocked forward to the ground, but there was no volume. In the distance he saw Gretel continue fleeing without even a glance his way, disappearing into the trees ahead.

The world lightened back to evening. "I know that distant look in your eyes," Glacia said. "You had a vision just now, didn't you?"

"I did…?" He was still recovering, his back aching from whatever had attacked him. "Right… I did…"

"What was it? Are you okay?"

"I don't know… It was dark, and Gretel and I were hurt… We were being chased by something–something strong."

"Gretel?! How far into the future was it?" She shook her head. "What was chasing you? Did you get caught?!"

"I don't know…" *Did Gretel really leave me behind…? Maybe the vision ended before she turned around to save me?*

"You can't find out *anything* from it?"

He narrowed his eyes and tried to remember. "Well… I didn't recognize that part of the forest. I don't know if it was just because it was too dark to see clearly, or what." The ache faded. "Sorry. That's all I could gather. It all happened so fast…"

She pulled her son into a comforting hug until he could get his thoughts in order. "Let's just get some sleep," she murmured, "and we'll worry about this when it happens, okay?"

He nodded, and when they eventually settled inside their den, he saw Glacia keeping an eye out as he fell asleep.

"Gadalik," a familiar female's voice softly sang.

The sleeping hybrid was roused by it, and before he even opened his eyes, the smell of blood reached his muzzle. It was perhaps midnight. "Gretel…?"

"Who else?" she giggled. "Come on, I saw something cool I want to check out."

Gadalik sat up and looked at Glacia, who was still in her place guarding the mouth of their den, but was sleeping deeply; the physicality of their work on the garden must have taken its toll on her. *She probably stayed up as long as she could because of my vision, on top of it all…*

The scent of blood was real however, and he faced his friend, frowning to see gashes in her back presumably from a larger dragon's claws. The wound was recent, but just old enough to have scabbed over. It hadn't been cleaned, though, and drying blood that had dripped down from it was especially visible against the white of her scales. Before he could ask what happened, the young wyvern excitedly bounced out of the den, beckoning him to follow.

After giving his mother a gentle shake in an unsuccessful attempt to wake her, Gadalik braced himself and stepped outside. "Gretel, what's going on? What happened to you?"

She tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"I thought you weren't coming back...! And now you're hurt–"

"Wait–I told you I'd be back, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it's been three days..."

"Really? Huh. Guess I lost track of time. Speaking of time, we should go before we miss it!"

"Go? Where, before we miss what? And who hurt you–"

"I saw a glowing light on my way here," she interrupted with an eager flicking of her tail. "It was a pretty turquoise color. I want us to go see what it is before it's gone!" The juvenile wind dragoness headed west, stopping a few paces ahead to beckon him again. "Hurry!"

Gadalik glanced back at his mother once more. He knew waking her when she was sleeping this heavily would take a while, and he also knew Gretel was impatient. After days of her unexplained absence, he feared losing her again, and ultimately ran after his friend.

She grinned happily to see him join her, and she set a brisk pace on foot that he could thankfully match. "Gretel, that injury looks bad," he said quietly. "What--"

"Shh! It was this way. Come on." Gretel picked up her pace slightly, but again kept looking back to make sure the slower dragon wasn't left behind.

He recognized the splotches of blood on her from his vision, then hesitated. "I'm not sure this is a good idea..."

She stopped and turned to face him, confused. "What? It's just a light! Aren't you curious?"

"A turquoise light... from what?"

She shrugged. "That's what I want to find out."

"Gretel, it's the middle of the night, and I've never gone this far west before. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow, when Glacia and Guinevere are awake..."

"But it might be gone by then!"

"You don't understand," he cried. "I had a vision before I went to sleep; we were being attacked in an unfamiliar part of the forest, and–"

"Ehh, being attacked is nothing new to me. But if you don't want to go, you don't have to," she said simply. "I'll come back in the morning and let you know what it was." With that, she continued on her way to it.

"Wait!"

"What? Are you coming or not?"

"You still haven't told me how you got hurt..."

"I just did," she replied casually. "I told you: being attacked is nothing new to me."

He stared at her incredulously. Before he could think of what to say, she was leaving again. Gadalik shook his head and rushed to catch up with her. *I can't let her do this on her own; she'll get killed!*

She guided him beyond the thick of his familiar forest home and took flight, her hot pink eyes darting over the western forest ahead of them in search of the light. They gleamed and she let herself drop from the sky, cushioning her landing at the very last second with a controlled wind. "This way!"

Gadalik managed to keep up with her, but felt increasingly nervous the farther they went. The western forest had a completely different smell, and the reason why only deepened his fears: it lacked any scent of Guinevere. *We must have left her territory...* "Gretel, we should head back... If we get hurt out here, Guinevere won't find us until it's too late..."

The injured wyvern once again stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. "So? It's not like we haven't survived before meeting Guinevere."

"I only survived so long without her because Glacia was there to protect me," he argued, "and right now, *neither* of them are here...!"

"*I'm* here. Doesn't that count for something?"

He remembered his vision, wherein she had fled after he was attacked, and visibly tensed.

"Look, I'm not forcing you to go with me," she turned on him impatiently, lashing her bloodied purple-striped tail. "If you want to go home, stop complaining and just go home already!"

The seer hybrid froze, stung by her uncharacteristic agitation. "It's not about me wanting to go home; it's about *you* dying alone out here!"

Gretel rolled her eyes dismissively. "Do you *know* how many times I've almost died alone? I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"For how much longer?!"

"You worry too much."

"Gretel, you tell me this as you stand there covered in your own blood," he exclaimed, desperate to get through to her.

"I'm fine," she assured him, and without waiting for him to protest, she kept going.

He cursed to himself and followed her out of sheer concern. When he caught up, the young dragons moved swiftly through this new territory, Gadalik staying protectively by her side. He was startled by the distant hooting of owls, and gasped through his clenched teeth when a bat swooped past him. The glowing pupils of nocturnal animals in the trees and bushes they passed made him question if the rustling leaves were from the chilly breeze or potential predators. He felt hot with anxiety despite the cool night air, and without Guinevere's comforting scent, the forest felt all the more unsafe to him.

When Gretel finally slowed down, he picked up on a new fragrance: something similar to the fairy dragoness, yet different. The hybrid peered around his companion, and to his surprise, he did spy a faint turquoise glow not far ahead of them.

The wyvern gave an excited bounce. “I'm gonna check it out,” she told him, and silently creeped toward it. Her control over the air surrounding her allowed the juvenile wind dragoness to stifle what would be the crunching of the cold, browning leaves below her.

Gadalik drew in a breath and crouched, doing his best to mimic her movements and stay quiet behind her. Gretel noticed and extended her ability to him as well.

The duo stopped and hid before a small clearing when they saw the source of the light: the wings of a male fairy type whose dark brown fur was scruffy, and gold underbelly matched his forward-curled antennae. The tips of his muzzle and limbs were white like Guinevere's, but unlike hers, the tuft on his spotted tail’s tip was wavy. His eyes were the same color as his wings, glaring up at a tree with his back to them.

“Give it back,” the brown fairy dragon growled, directing his voice up at whatever was in the tree. When there was no response, he narrowed his turquoise eyes with frustration and spread his wings, their glow shifting hues in the same deliberate pattern as when Guinevere had used hypnotism.

After a beat, a small shiny object fell from the leaves to the ground. His wings returned to their default turquoise color and he moved to pick it up with his mouth. The second he gripped it between his teeth, a raccoon leapt from the branch and landed on his shoulder blades, the impact startling him enough to drop it. The feisty little mammal proceeded to jump down from the dragon’s back and swipe it once more, fleeing.

“Not *again*,” the fairy type snarled and gave chase.

Gadalik noticed that Gretel was laughing at the scene, although her ability kept her voice muted. Her companion did find it funny at first too, but he soon felt pity when the raccoon continuously dodged the fluffy dragon, who was growing more desperate.

He flashed his insectoid wings hypnotically each time he managed to land in front of the thief, but the latter simply changed direction without looking at them, rendering his visual ability useless. It darted into the bushes, and the fairy dragon raised his antennae to hone in on its location. Then he pounced with the aid of flight, only for the raccoon to dart under him before he landed.

After a few minutes of watching him struggle, Gretel eventually grew to pity him too. She ended her ability and showed herself. “Need help?”

“What?" The young adult fairy type instantly paused and turned to her, freezing with his ears perked like a deer upon seeing who the voice belonged to. “A wind dragon…?”

“Relax, I'm not after you. I just want to help,” she repeated. “I'm fast; I can catch it easily."

“A predator that wants to help,” he summarized in complete disbelief. “As if I'm dumb enough to buy *that*."

“She's telling the truth,” Gadalik stood up for his friend.

“Another one?! Of course a seer hybrid would defend her. Is this some kind of sick game where you lure your victims into a false sense of security? Because if it is, that's worse than simply hunting me."

“What? We're not going to hunt you... My friend is capable; if anyone can get your trinket back, it's her."

“Oh, so you're actually after my trinket?” he accused them.

“Seriously? Why would I care about a puny seashell?” the wyvern laughed. “There's a million just like it on the beach."

That made the stranger more upset, his wings darkening to reddish purple. "Get out of my territory. Both of you."

“So you don't want my help?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“Why should I accept help from a disrespectful brat, especially one that's a predator?!”

“Disrespectful…?” Her voice sounded meek, and if Gadalik hadn't heard it himself, he never would have guessed it came from his usually-confident friend.

“Hey, she never did anything to you,” her companion stated, stepping past Gretel protectively. “If you don't want our help, we'll leave. But there's no need for name-calling."

“I only call things what they are,” the older male muttered.

“But you don't know *who* we are," he pointed out. "I know my friend; she's kind and loyal."

“Heh... You've clearly lived a sheltered life as a social dragon. I'll bet you've *never* faced a predator like her since you're still a yearling. Allow me to show you how solitary hunters *truly* are."

“What…?”

Before Gadalik could react, his four wings glowed hypnotically once more.

It only lasted briefly, so the hybrid wasn't sure if it worked; the fairy dragon had ended it abruptly and looked backward, cowering as a dark blue wind type suddenly emerged from behind him... flying straight toward Gadalik. The juvenile turned and ran blindly through the dark forest, the large wyvern's nearing, chilling shrieks sending him into a panic.

“Where's your loyal companion now?” the fairy type's disembodied voice rang out.

As if in answer, Gretel flew past her friend from behind, and the latter once again was made aware of her injury from the red splotches on her back. He ran after her, worried and afraid, when he felt a sharp pain from the blue wind dragon's claws raking his back as it passed, and cried out as he was knocked forward to the ground from the force. In the distance he saw Gretel continue fleeing without even a glance his way, disappearing into the trees ahead.

Gadalik braced himself for his death, when his attacker suddenly vanished and the scenery returned to the clearing. He came to just in time to witness the fairy dragon's colorful wings settle on a singular, terrified purple as Gretel tackled him.

"W-What just happened…?" the confused seer-hybrid asked his companion. *That was my vision from last evening...* he recognized the scene.

"He hypnotized you," she answered, her pink eyes focused entirely on the brown dragon pinned under her.

"What are you going to do now?" the fairy type asked her quietly, his voice trembling almost as if he expected her to finish him off. His wings remained purple but their glow was brightening with the intensity of their reflected emotion.

"Nothing... If you don't want our help, then there's no point in staying." Addressing her friend, she added, "Come on; we're done here." The injured wyvern stepped off of the fairy type and turned around to leave.

The second she did, the scared dragon's purple glow gained a reddish tint and he suddenly got up, reactively slashing at her blood-stained back with his short claws in delayed self-defense.

An agonized roar escaped her; Gadalik didn't know why at first, but when blood was visibly shed, he instantly knew her existing wound was reopened from the assault that would have been harmless otherwise. He immediately rushed forward, headbutting her assailant with his earth dragon horns in a rash move to knock him away from her. "Gretel, are you okay?!"

She lay cringing on the ground in a forming red puddle.

"Gretel?!" the hybrid called again more urgently when the young dragoness's body relaxed. She was still breathing, but he knew from the amount of blood being lost that in a matter of time, she wouldn't be. Desperation overtook him and he rounded on the hostile dragon who was still recovering. "Why did you hurt her?!"

"I'm sorry," the older male stammered, his turquoise eyes widening with horror at what he'd done while his wings dimmed to a mix of blue and purple. He got up and moved toward them, but flinched when Gadalik gave a warning growl. The former took a breath and stood taller, staring the young male in the eye. "We have to stop the bleeding... Cover her wounds with something and apply pressure to them with it," he commanded sternly, despite the light of his wings and twitching tail betraying his fear.

He's... helping? The hybrid was confounded by their attacker's sudden change of heart. He shook his head, snapping himself back into reality. "Cover them with what?"

"Anything! Quickly!"

The green dragon wrapped his small wing over the opened gashes on his unconscious friend's back, hugging her tightly with it. "Now what?"

"Keep still until I come back; I have webs in my den that will be more effective." He flew off.

Gadalik held her more securely, his heart racing when he felt hers slowing. "Hang in there... You'll be alright... Everything will be alright," he murmured to her between shaky breaths.

His mind reflected on the encounter and felt choked from the realization that it aligned with everything Gretel had told him: she had approached a stranger and was attacked for it. *Is this what happened with the dragon that had injured her in the first place?* he wondered, a pang of sympathy hitting him so hard it caused nausea. *Why? She just wanted to help him… the same way she wanted to help me fly when we first met. Gretel didn't do anything wrong, so why would this keep happening to her?*

His sorrow morphed into anger as the brown fairy type's accusations replayed in his head. *Is it because she's a predator? That isn't fair! Nobody can change what type of dragon they are!*

The stranger returned and Gadalik once again growled when he got close. The green juvenile then stopped himself when he saw the brown dragon was carrying supplies in his front paws similar to what Guinevere had stored in her hollow, setting them down when he landed.

"Roll her onto her belly," the fairy type instructed, sounding a bit more confident; his wings had returned to their neutral turquoise. When Gadalik obliged, striped blue eyes watching him warily, the older male pulled the webs off the sticks he'd brought and put them precisely over the gashes on her back, clogging the blood-flow. "Keep an eye on her while I clean the wounds."

Gadalik gave a slight nod and monitored her breathing, occasionally glancing at the furred dragon as the latter used curly moss as a makeshift sponge to absorb the spilled blood and wipe off the dirt at the same time. Her breathing and pulse slowly regulated. "Will she be okay…?" the juvenile asked.

"Yeah… I think so. We helped right before it'd be too late." His turquoise eyes looked away guiltily, his fur rim-lit by blue.

"Why attack her in the first place if you didn't want something like this to happen?"

His insectoid wings regained that purple tint. "I'm sorry…"

"That doesn't answer my question," Gadalik pressed him. He quailed, and the hybrid sighed. "Well… I appreciate you helping in the end, regardless."

The fairy dragon let out a breath. "I'm Sebastion… I'm sorry for hypnotizing you; I was actually trying to *show* you why–" He stopped himself. "I wasn't trying to fight… but when she tackled me, I really thought I was done for."

Gadalik was still hung up on his motives. The scene he had been shown through hypnosis provided new insight on the stranger if he replaced himself with Sebastion in it, but this wasn't the time or place to question that. Instead, he focused on his friend, relaxing when she appeared to be merely sleeping now.

Chapter 10

Gretel

Gretel slowly regained consciousness, a male's soft voice fading in. The familiarity of it provided her a sense of comfort amid the searing pain in her back. *It's okay if I rest a little longer… Efron will protect me.* With those self-reassuring thoughts, she weakly curled up and let herself drift back into sleep.

When she later awakened, that voice sounded again, and this time she could distinguish his words:

"Are you up…? Don't push yourself…"

The white-and-purple wyvern opened her hot pink eyes to find the voice belonged to a green earth-seer hybrid. "Gadalik…?!" Gretel immediately sat up in spite of her soreness. "Where are we? What happened?!"

"Calm down…! We followed this light to that brown fairy dragon; we're in his den right now," he explained.

"What? Why?! He attacked us, didn't he?"

"Y-Yeah, but he also saved you afterward… It's complicated."

She snorted. "Whatever. Let's just leave before he changes his mind *again."* The juvenile wind dragoness got to her paws, then wobbled as she felt lightheaded and collapsed.

"Gretel, you're hurt pretty bad… You can't just up and leave in your condition. Besides, I've been talking to Sebastion, and I doubt he's going to attack us again."

Sebastion? So that's the new fairy type's name. She let her gaze explore the small den, relieved that its owner wasn't inside. It was lined with herbs and materials much like Guinevere's hollow. Then she found the exit and spotted the rising sun with horror. *How long was I out?!*

"You alright?" Gadalik asked, his striped blue eyes glistening with concern.

She scowled. *No, I'm not alright–but not because of my injury…! I'm a sitting duck here waiting for another predator to finish me off!*

"Gretel?" he pressed, more worried by her reaction.

"Ugh, don't look at me like that," she groaned dismissively. "I'm fine. We should go."

"Go? Where?"

Anywhere! she wanted to yell as her anxiety threatened to surface. *Don't you understand we're vulnerable here? We're at the mercy of the same dragon that just attacked us! And if any other predator smells my blood, they'll do* more *than just attack–we'll be goners!* She shook her head, forcing her emotions back. "I don't know…! All I know is we can't risk staying in one place for so long." She once again gathered her purple paws beneath her and stood to leave, this time summoning a light wind to support herself so she wouldn't fall. "Come on."

"Wait!" he cried, and she hesitated solely due to how genuine his worry was. "We traveled miles from my den last night... There's no way you can make it that far without your wounds reopening...!"

What other choice do I have?! Gretel shook her head. "I'm fine," she assured him for the second time, forcing herself to walk out of the den on paws that still trembled under her weight.

To her shock, Gadalik moved to block her path. "No, you're not," he argued, his voice quiet but stern as his blue eyes bore into hers.

She scoffed. "You're right. I won't be fine until I get out of here," she halfway joked.

The hybrid didn't laugh. "This isn't funny... You almost *died...!*"

"So? I already told you: this isn't the first time."

"There shouldn't be more than one time to begin with!" His voice rose slightly with desperation. "I warned you not to come here last night, but even after every single time you've nearly been killed in the past, you came here anyway! Do you *want* to die?!"

Gretel froze, dumbfounded. Then her striped tail whipped to and fro as she suddenly felt trapped, her eyes darting for a way out. When she found none, her anxiety boiled over and she rounded on her friend. "No–if I wanted to die, I'd stay here instead!"

He recoiled from her outburst. She instantly regretted lashing out and lowered her head apologetically, although she couldn't stop her tail; her pent up energy needed an outlet. The hybrid sighed. "If you want to leave so badly, I'll carry you," he offered gently.

Her tail stilled and she stared at him, astonished. "...What?"

"I understand not trusting Sebastion and wanting to distance yourself from him... But you really need to let yourself recover. Guinevere and Glacia will keep you safe; you trust *them*, don't you?"

"I guess...?"

"Then it's settled. Get on my back, and I'll take you home."

The young wyvern gave him a once-over, hating the thought that he saw her as someone weak enough to need carrying. But there was no trace of condescension in his body language. "Fine, I'll stay with you all... But I can make it there on my own." To prove it, she summoned more wind to boost her stride and stepped forward. Contrarily, her weakened legs buckled; she fell against Gadalik in her attempt to pass him.

He instantly caught her. "You're in no shape to keep going right now," he repeated calmly.

She glowered at the leaf-covered ground, considering his offer to carry her.

"Please... For once, just let me help you...!"

Gretel felt her entire body tense, triggered by those words. *Help? I'm not some pathetic, helpless piece of prey!* She caught herself before she could snap at him, then took a breath to steady her nerves. "I'm fine," she insisted, but couldn't conceal her frustration well enough this time; to her disdain, he picked up on it.

"Gretel, you have keen eyes... If you ride on my back, you can watch out for predators on our way to my den. I'm the one who needs your help, not the other way around," he tried a new approach.

She was taken aback by that, then couldn't stifle an amused laugh. *He's bad at lying... But he's not wrong; watching for other dragons is necessary, and he can't see as far as I can.* "Alright," she finally agreed.

Gretel fluttered ungracefully onto her friend's back, and the amount of energy drained from the action that would normally be effortless made her aware that he was right: she *couldn't* make it on her own given her condition. Her hot pink eyes narrowed scornfully at something invisible: the unwanted feelings of helplessness fighting her to the surface.

"Are you ready?" Gadalik asked gently, looking at her over his shoulder with care not to make any sudden movements.

His voice snapped her out of it, and she was relieved by the distraction. The juvenile wind dragoness smiled reassuringly. "Yep! Now... giddy up!" she playfully ordered, lightly slapping his flank with her purple-striped paws.

The young green hybrid burst out laughing, and Gretel could feel the tension in his muscles relax. His calmness was contagious; she found herself settling down too. Gadalik set out as quickly as he could without risking his friend falling, while the latter cast her gaze to the skies, on the lookout for danger.

Gretel then winced due to how bright the morning sun was, and when she reactively jerked to face away from it, that lightheadedness from earlier came back. She unintentionally slumped forward against him.

He stopped. "You okay?"

"I'm tired," she mumbled, suddenly struggling to keep her eyes open.

"What are you doing way out here?!" another female's sharp voice startled her awake. Gretel didn't have the strength to peer around Gadalik's head, but she didn't have to; the striped wyvern recognized the new voice as Glacia's.

Great, she thought, remembering how overprotective the water type was of him. *She'll probably scold me for inviting her son to go with me last night...*

"What happened to you guys?! Gretel looks half-dead! Are you hurt?" Glacia fussed, checking them over before Gadalik even had a chance to form a coherent answer to her first question.

Do I really look that bad...? The young wind type once again fought back feelings of helplessness. She tried to stand up from her place on the hybrid's back to jump down from it, but her sore and exhausted body wouldn't cooperate. Instead, she lifted her head and glared at Glacia. "I'm fine, and so is Gadalik!"

"Gretel, the wounds on your back have been dressed nicely, but I sense you are also concussed," a second newcomer informed her. It was a voice she also recognized, and with her head up she could look to confirm it was Guinevere. The fairy type must have located them and brought Glacia along. The juveniles hadn't made it too far in the forest from Sebastion's den.

"What?" Gadalik finally managed to say. "But she didn't hit her head–at least, not since I've been with her…"

"Did whoever chased you in your vision injure Gretel's back?" Glacia asked him.

"N-No… Well, Sebastion *did* reopen those injuries, but that's all he did; she had those injuries before she even came by last night."

"Sebastion?" Guinevere frowned.

The green dragon exchanged a curious look with his friend, then turned back to the pale blue adult. "Do you know him, Guinevere?"

"Guinevere?" Sebastion's voice sounded from behind Gretel, and the latter tensed.

The fairy dragoness frowned even more at his sudden reappearance, her wings' default pink glow gaining a slightly reddish hue.

Gretel hadn't known that the corners of her small mouth were even capable of moving that far down. *I've never seen her so angry! This oughta be good.*

"What's with the scowl?" the younger fairy type asked somewhat indignantly.

"Never mind that. Thank you for helping this young one, but I shall take over her care from here." Guinevere looked to her companions. "Let us take our leave now."

"But you only just arrived," Sebastion pointed out. She visibly tensed but didn't answer him. He sighed. "Why do you hate me?"

"I don't. But she is in bad condition. The sooner we get her to my hollow, the sooner I can treat her. We must be on our way."

"My den is closer, and I've already begun treating her…"

For the first time, Gretel saw Guinevere's tufted tail lash–just once, and so quickly that the former almost thought she imagined it. *Woah. I don't care what she says… she obviously* does *hate him!*

"Wait, are you that 'Sebastion' who reopened her wounds?" Glacia pieced the situation together. "Why on earth would we trust you to treat her if you're the reason she's hurt in the first place?!"

Sebastion's default turquoise wings were instantly dimmed to purple at the sight of the water dragoness. His eyes darted between her and Guinevere. "I'm sorry… Go ahead and leave then."

Before Gadalik could say anything–and his friend could tell he wanted to–the brown fairy dragon flew off.

"What's his deal?" Glacia muttered, watching Sebastion flee until he was out of sight. "Why did he attack you?"

"He was scared of us, that's all," Gadalik awkwardly defended him.

"Fear is no excuse to lose self-control," Guinevere stated, her voice low but her tone emphatic.

The hybrid opened his mouth as if to argue, then shut it in apparent agreement.

"Sounded like you two have a history," Gretel remarked. "So do you know who he is?"

"Sebastion is…"--the fairy dragoness paused as if to consider a way to phrase it nicely–"a mess."

The wyvern snorted with amusement. "I can tell."

"You've dealt with him before?" Glacia asked the other adult.

"Yes… unfortunately," Guinevere answered, and Gretel couldn't help snickering from her bluntness.

"Why? What did he do?" Gadalik inquired tentatively.

"It's less about what he did, and more about what he attempted to do," she replied vaguely.

Glacia leaned closer. "Come on, don't leave us in suspense! What did he attempt?"

"Well… We used to visit one another and exchange materials. Sometimes, even gifts. My gift to him was purely to show my gratitude for his help, but his gifts were… for another reason."

Gadalik tilted his head with confusion. "What reason?"

Gretel erupted in laughter–both at her friend's innocence, and as the reason was clear to her. "He was *courting* you?!" she managed to say between huffs and chortles. "Seriously? You're *way* out of his league!"

Guinevere's wings turned orange as she averted her yellow eyes, and Gadalik shrank, clearly embarrassed.

Glacia seemed more curious now than anything, though. "I don't think I've come across any other fairy types in the forest. Fairy dragons don't really travel, either. How would you go about finding a potential mate?"

"We do travel if we're seeking out a mate," Guinevere corrected her. "However, I have no desire for romance at this point in time. And so, I do not travel."

The water dragoness gave a thoughtful hum. "So, uh… what about Gale? He travels, right?"

"Yes, but I am not romantically interested in him–nor is he in me. We are both content with our friendship."

Glacia relaxed slightly, and Gadalik was once again looking between his maternal figures with innocent confusion. Gretel giggled. *I don't have the heart to tell him, but it's obvious that if Glacia has her way with this friend of Guinevere's, Gadalik might end up with a father.*

"Now, we should get going," Guinevere reminded them. She glanced at the injured wyvern on top of Gadalik. "Gretel, I have seeds that could help ease your pain in my hollow. Please hold out until we get there."

The young wind dragon blinked, confused by that offer at first, until she became aware once again of the soreness in her back when she'd tried to reposition herself. *Oh… Guess I'm so used to pain, I forgot I was hurt.*

As her friend followed the adults back toward the fairy dragoness's territory, Gretel struggled to stay awake. It was easy enough to keep herself alert during the commotion of their earlier chatter, but the journey was rather peaceful. Guinevere led the way with her golden antennae raised to sense for danger, and Glacia periodically looked the juveniles over, as if making sure they were okay. *With Guinevere's ability to sense intruders, and how overprotective Glacia is, I don't think I need to keep watch anymore. I'm glad they're on my side.* With those final thoughts, she let herself drift off into sleep.

"...No, she never told me anything other than she was used to being attacked," Gadalik's voice faded in as Gretel awakened. "She didn't have a concussion before she disappeared, right? So it had to be during that time away–when she also got clawed in the back."

The striped wyvern opened her eyes to find herself back in Guinevere's tree hollow. She sat up, then winced in pain from her back and nearly collapsed again from that lightheadedness. She groaned–but more from annoyance than anything.

"Gretel! Are you okay?" her friend asked worriedly.

"Pfft, I'm not *dying*," Gretel assured him. "But, uh... if Guinevere has some magical cure-all poultice, I wouldn't turn it down," she added with a laugh.

"I'm afraid such a thing does not exist," the fairy dragoness replied, the slightest bit amused. "A light dragon could magically heal you with their halos, but sadly I am no such type."

"Do you still have those seeds...?" she asked hesitantly, lowering her voice in hopes that Gadalik wouldn't hear her.

When the green hybrid's striped blue eyes softened sympathetically in response to overhearing his friend, she sighed. *I don't want your pity...! I just want to get better so I can take flight again. I can't stand being grounded and cooped up like this.*

Guinevere retrieved a large leaf with a small pile of poppy seeds on top and placed it down in front of her. "They might make you drowsy, but I had prepared this portion based on your size and weight. Eat as much as you want."

"Ugh... I'm tired enough as it is. I'd rather be in pain than asleep," Gretel muttered.

"You are tired because you have a concussion," she said as a matter of fact. "I'm also assuming based on your energy that you haven't slept properly in two days."

Oh. Her hot pink eyes looked away and she didn't argue.

"Gretel, what exactly happened to you while you were gone?" Gadalik prompted gently.

His friend shrugged. "I was just traveling."

He shook his head. "You don't get slashed and concussed just from traveling..."

"You do if you travel to a hostile dragon," she laughed half-heartedly.

Gadalik frowned. "This isn't funny... You could have been killed."

"But I wasn't," she pointed out with a proud grin.

"But you could have been…!"

Her smile fell. "But I wasn't…"

"That's enough of that," Guinevere intervened.

Gadalik bowed his head apologetically and Gretel sighed.

"Given the shape and size of the claw marks on your back–from what I can gather of them from my senses–I believe the hostile dragon you mentioned was a juvenile fire type," the adult concluded. "Is that correct?"

Gretel froze, memories rushing back too swiftly for her to process. She was overcome by familiar feelings of hope, disappointment, terror, and pain coursing through her in that order.

"Gretel…? Hey–it's okay…! Breathe," Gadalik told her, and the wyvern realized she was holding her breath.

She released it and shook her head fiercely–then winced as it ached from the motion. "Sorry… Yeah. It was a fire dragon." Her hot pink eyes stared absently at the moss-covered floor of the tree hollow.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Guinevere asked gently. The green dragon watched his friend, listening intently for her answer.

Gretel scowled. "What do you *think* happened? You both know about the gashes on my back."

"Yes, but–"

"That doesn't explain my concussion, I know," she interrupted, tail-tip flicking with agitation. "She blew gas in my face, then clawed my back when I fled. I don't remember much after that. Guess I passed out from the gas mid-flight and hit my head when I crash-landed. Alright? Are you happy now?"

"That isn't what I was going to ask," Guinevere replied calmly.

The wyvern eyed her skeptically. "…What?"

"Gadalik told me you have a history of approaching strangers and getting attacked by them. He even said that's what happened with Sebastion last night. I was going to ask what you're hoping to gain from these encounters."

Gretel tensed, starting to feel trapped. With every quickening heartbeat she remained still, her anxiety intensified. Images of a purple revealer dragon flashed before her eyes, and she was suddenly a vulnerable hatchling, crying out to him in pleas he disregarded. "I don't want new friends!" she finally snapped at him aloud. "And I don't want *you*, either!"

"What…?" Gadalik asked, the pain and fear in his voice palpable.

It snapped her out of it, and the juvenile wind dragoness glanced around, trying to catch her breath as she realized where she was again. "Huh? Gadalik?"

"I–I'm sorry… I didn't mean to upset you," he said, his meek voice wavering. "I won't ask you about your past anymore; just, please, give me a chance before you decide you don't want to be friends anymore…"

"What are you talking about?" Gretel huffed, lashing her tail with frustration.

Gadalik's panic morphed to confusion. "But... You just said you didn't want me...?"

"*What?!* No I didn't! I was talking to–" She froze, drawing a blank.

"If you weren't talking to *me* just now, then..." Gadalik's sentence trailed off and he shrank. "Sorry... Never mind..."

Gretel scowled again. "What?" the young wind dragoness demanded. When he didn't meet her gaze, she only got more agitated. "Spit it out! If you've got something to say, just say it already!"

"I said I wouldn't ask you about your past anymore... So I won't..."

She shook her head, frustrated. "I don't care what you ask me!" To her dismay, he cowered even more in response. That frightened look in his eyes was similar to Sabastion's: it was like he was prey, and thought she was hunting him. "Stop it!" she cried. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

He winced from her volume.

She retreated a step, overcome with guilt. "I'm sorry..." *Every time I get upset, I end up hurting him... Why? Why am I like this?! I need to calm down before I make things worse for everyone...* "I should go..." The wind type managed to turn toward the mouth of the tree hollow on shaking legs.

"W-Wait," he begged her, and Gretel hesitated, but she couldn't bring herself to look his way.

"Gretel, you're in no condition to travel," Guinevere spoke up calmly.

Who cares? If I don't make it after leaving, you'd all be better off...! The wyvern once again bit back a sob.

"I will respect your decision not to share your reasons with us, but I will *not* allow you to further harm yourself by leaving before you've recovered."

"Why does it matter?!" Gretel snapped at her. "I'm obviously harming Gadalik by staying!"

"What...?" the hybrid asked, and the genuine shock in his voice caught her off-guard. She finally faced her friend; Gadalik was half-sitting, half-crouched with his short tail and small wings hugging himself. But his head was raised to meet her gaze, and Gretel felt her heart sink when she still saw that fear in his eyes.

"I can sense that Gadalik is scared–but not of you..." the older dragoness corrected her, golden antennae raised to detect both of the juveniles' feelings. "Rather, he is scared of *losing* you."

"Why?!" she cried, even more guilty after that revelation.

"He didn't become frightened until after you said you didn't want any friends."

Oh...! "Gadalik, I'm sorry... Again, I wasn't talking to you when I said that..."

"Then who *were* you talking to?" Guinevere prompted gently.

"It was–" Gretel's mind drew a blank. *Why can't I remember...? It was just moments ago, wasn't it?*

"Gretel... it's okay... You don't have to tell us anything," Gadalik assured her quietly.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you–I just don't know," she confessed.

"I can offer my hypnosis if that is something you would be willing to try again," the fairy type said.

Gretel felt herself tense. "I don't know if that's a good idea after what happened the first time…"

"I understand."

"Wait… What exactly *did* happen last time…?" Most of what she recalled from the hypnotism still stuck–such as the memory of her singing on a tree branch during the storm in a forest below a plateau. She even remembered that she had in fact lived in a society, if only for a short time. The details, and everything after that, eluded her. What she *did* remember was how upset she had gotten at the end of it, and Gretel didn't want to feel that way ever again.

Gadalik opened his mouth as if to answer, but shut it. Then he seemed torn, and ultimately faced her. "You said you didn't want to remember 'him' and that you hated him. And… then you left."

"Oh… Then I think he was who I was talking to just now…" *But that doesn't tell me who he is…*

"You weren't that upset until I mentioned revealer dragons," Guinevere added.

Gretel froze. Anger and helplessness suddenly seized her. "I don't want to remember him…" she confirmed what the hybrid had said. "And ever since I met you, Gadalik, I haven't really been approaching other strangers as much. Not until after I left a few days ago."

"Is there a connection between these dangerous encounters and your memories of this revealer dragon?"

I never thought about that… "Maybe…?"

"Then I ask you again what you hope to gain from these encounters."

The wyvern frowned. "I don't know, okay?" she said honestly, tail-tip flicking with the slightest amount of aggravation directed at herself. "Maybe I'm trying to prove something to him… Or maybe to myself. Or maybe even to you guys."

"Prove what…?"

"I don't know…!"

"Guinevere, maybe we shouldn't press her," Gadalik murmured.

Gretel frowned. *Does he think I can't handle finding out?!* She shook her head and took a breath to regain composure, knowing he was only trying not to upset her. She sighed. "I guess… I just want to prove that I'm not–" She stopped herself from saying 'unlovable.' *Of course I'm lovable! It's not my fault other dragons like Sebastion are too stuck-up to let me prove that to them!* Her attempt at self-reassurance quickly faltered. *But they don't even give me a chance before they attack or flee… If* everyone *treats me that way, maybe that means* I *am the problem…? Maybe I'm unlovable after all…*

"I can feel immense sorrow from you," Guinevere sympathized, the glow of her pink wings shifting to blue. "Perhaps we should focus on why these encounters had stopped after meeting Gadalik instead."

"What…?"

"You mentioned that until you left after our last session days ago, you haven't been going near other dragons."

"Oh–right. Yeah... I still like exploring, but I stopped trying to approach strangers after I met Gadalik. I guess... because I didn't need to anymore? Gadalik is the only dragon who *didn't* run or hurt me when we first met... I felt safe with him, just like Efron."

"Efron...? Is that the name of your old revealer friend who liked your singing?"

Gretel froze, her tail lashing as an outlet for sudden anxiety and seething anger at her former friend. "He didn't like my singing..." she replied almost voicelessly. "He was a liar. He never cared about me...! He was just lonely, and I was the only one who was around him," the wyvern growled. "I... I hate him...!"

"Oh...?" The fairy dragoness tilted her head ever so slightly. "I believe you're telling the truth. However, I can sense that there is an underlying feeling of longing."

"Longing? For what?"

"You tell me."

"I am *not* longing for Efron! In fact, if I ever see him again, I'll roar his ears bloody!"

"It may not be a longing for Efron. Perhaps it is a longing for that safety you mentioned feeling with him."

"What...? Why would I care about that, when I have safety with Gadalik?"

"I cannot tell you the reasons behind your feelings; I can only tell you the feelings I sense from you. I am merely trying to fit them into the context of what you've told me."

"Maybe you *don't* feel safe with me?" the hybrid dared himself to suggest.

Gretel looked to her friend, stung by the implication. "As if!" she laughed reassuringly. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't, but you said Efron did," he pointed out, "and you kept saying how similar I am to him..."

She scoffed dismissively. "Oh, come on. You're similar, but you're way better than him!"

"You did get worried that I would abandon you to stay in the earth dragon society, though..."

Gretel shrank, her smile falling. "I'm sorry... You really are a lot like Efron when he and I first met... But like I said before I left: I trust you. And again, I feel safe with you."

"I detect a trace of doubt," Guinevere reported. Then her wings changed hue to green for a moment before flashing yellow and then settling on their neutral pink. "Hm. I think I understand why you approach strangers now."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes, but you can correct me if I'm wrong."

"I'm listening."

"I believe you're searching for someone who provides you safety, and Gadalik did meet your criteria for a time, which is why you resorted to exploring rather than approaching strangers since then until recently," the blue dragoness explained.

That makes sense...

“But… she started going after them again,” the hybrid reminded her. “First the fire dragon that slashed her, and then Sebastion. If she's after them to find safety, that means she *doesn't* feel safe with me anymore…”

“Gadalik, that isn't true,” Gretel immediately denied it to comfort her friend. Then she hesitated and looked to the fluffy adult for validation. “Right…?”

“Again, I do not know the reasons behind your feelings," Guinevere said. "Although, the faint doubt I sensed from you leads me to believe that the connection you've drawn between him and Efron makes you feel somewhat unsafe–as if you suspect things will end badly with Gadalik similarly to how things ended with him."

“No! I mean, I trust Gadalik! He'd never turn on me like that!”

“I'm sure you might have felt that exact way about Efron, once."

She shook her head in denial. “But Efron was horrible! Gadalik isn't! They're completely different!”

Guinevere softened. “Your conscious mind knows that… but your subconscious mind might not."

“Ugh, none of that makes any sense!”

“Allow me to use analogies. Let's say that your conscious mind is simply what you know, and your subconscious is something tangible–think of it like a part of your body. If your body gets wounded, and you know exactly why, then that wound will heal into a scar that you can take mindful steps to avoid reopening."

“Okay…? And?”

“If your body gets wounded, but you *don't* know or understand exactly why, then you'll either keep doing the things that you didn't know would reopen that scar, or you will avoid things you *think* might reopen it; in the latter's case, that's letting the scar stop you from living a fulfilling life. Sometimes, it's a combination."

“Well, that's dumb,” she muttered. “I already know why I feel this way--you just told me. That doesn't change how my 'wound' is still open..."

“Knowledge alone won't be enough to heal it, but knowledge is necessary to find out *how* to heal it."

"Yeah, but *how*?"

“There are many ways. Finding closure is one--"

She recoiled. "You want me to make up with Efron?!”

“Not necessarily. In your case, I think you should learn to accept others who give you that sense of safety–like Gadalik."

“I already told you, I *do* trust Gadalik–”

“Yet you repeatedly run from him, fear he'll leave you in favor of society, and refuse to accept his help."

Gretel wanted to argue, then realized she was right. *I didn't even notice I've been doing that...* "It's not personal toward Gadalik, though... I don't like accepting help from *anyone."*

"Hm. Can I ask why not?"

"I don't know! I just don't want others to think I'm not capable on my own."

"Everyone needs help at some points in their lives. That doesn't make you any less capable."

"I know that! But when *others* think I'm not capable, they'll call me useless and a waste of prey and–" Gretel caught herself. *Where is all of this coming from...?*

"Is that how Efron made you feel?" Gadalik asked sympathetically.

"No–it wasn't Efron... But he just..." Gretel let the sentence trail off and took a breath. "I'm sorry. I don't want to talk about it..."

"I understand," Guinevere said. "I appreciate you opening up to us... For now, get some rest.

Act 1.5

Chapter 1

Summer (Year 2)

Gretel

Four-month-old Gretel pounded her striped wings against the storm's strong gales. There was nothing but ocean in her immediate area, but through the misty thick gray clouds she was passing through, her hot pink eyes never lost sight of an island in the distance. The hatchling did her best to direct the air current into a tailwind, but both her body and powers were miniscule in comparison to nature, and the bombardment of cold raindrops weighing down her light frame made travel in this weather even harder.

She gave up trying to control the storm and decided to control herself instead. The tiny wyvern summoned new winds that aided her movements in flight, and she focused on dodging the raindrops simply because she hated how cold they felt. Then Gretel smiled, turning it into a game; if she could make it to the island while getting hit by as few raindrops as possible, she'd consider that a victory.

So she laughed and even managed to work with nature's gales now that she wasn't trying to seize the entirety of the storm; just focusing on redirecting the ones immediately around her helped her not only dodge the onslaught of rain, but also propel herself toward the island much more easily.

Gretel finally reached it, seeking the shelter of a forest in the lowlands. She picked the most stable tree and perched on its branch, nestling between the leaves. She caught her breath, then settled down, lightly gripping the bark with her claws so she wouldn't fall as the branch rocked precariously in the wind. The hatchling knew from similar experiences that it wouldn't break, though, so she didn't mind it.

Now that she could rest after flying so far from her place of emergence, Gretel let herself relax, taking in the drumming of the rain and the creaking of the trees around her. She found the spade-shaped tip of her tail thumping against the branch in rhythm with nature's music. Then the wind dragon hatchling opened her mouth and let her voice harmonize, improvising a song.

Whenever it grew quiet, the baby wyvern matched its volume, and when it picked back up, so did her voice. This continued until the storm finally passed.

Gretel rested her head on the branch and closed her eyes to sleep, still smiling. That's when a voice startled her awake.

"Was that *you*?" a young male called up to her from the ground.

She froze and looked down to see a violet revealer dragon, whose light green eyes were wide with astonishment. He was perhaps not much over a year older than her, his ears perked. "Was what me?" she asked.

"That singing. It was beautiful."

The hatchling grinned. "Thanks!"

"I've never heard anything like that in my life…" he admitted, the biped adjusting to a more comfortable stance by shifting his weight onto one leg and bending the other to rest its clawed foot behind him. "Can I ask… how you sing like that?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. I just go with the flow."

"I see..." His green ears lowered with disappointment and he hugged his lighter violet chest, the blue frills on either side of his head flowing lightly from the motion of him facing away. "That's okay. I guess sounds like those are just natural for wind type dragons."

"I can try to teach you, if you want," she offered.

"Really?" His previously straightened tail lifted up into the Z-shape that revealer dragons were normally seen with.

She giggled. "Why not?"

"I mean… don't you have places you're in a hurry to get to? Every other flighted dragon that stops here never stays for long."

Her gaze traveled to his small, blue wings. "What about you?"

He paused. "Revealers' wings don't fully develop until we're two years old… Until then, I'm kind of stuck down here."

"Where is your society? I could go get someone from there to pick you up–"

"*Wait!* That's… not a good idea."

"Huh? How come?"

"My parents live there."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"It is when they're the reason I'm down here in the first place…"

Gretel hesitated. Not wanting the awkward silence to last, she changed the subject. "Is there enough food? I can stop by every day and bring you some!"

"I'm good on food," he assured her. When she was visibly disappointed, he added, "But I'm not good on company. If you want to stop by just to hang out or give me singing lessons, I'd enjoy that."

She beamed. "Yay! My name's Gretel. What's yours?"

The revealer dragon tensed. "I don't really have one."

The hatchling gaped at him. "Wha-a-at?! But you're a social dragon! Aren't your parents supposed to name you?"

He shrugged, averting his green eyes. "Hard to name someone if you don't intend to raise them."

She hummed thoughtfully. "Solitary dragons name themselves, usually," she told him.

"Really?"

"Yeah! I liked 'Gretel' because I look pearlescent in color. Well, *some* solitary dragons are named by their parents if they share a home range–like poison types. But for ones who are usually alone from the start–like wind types–any name is fair game! If there are any names you've heard, just *take* one," she giggled. "O-o-or you could even make one up!"

"Revealer dragons are named after one of their traits–usually in relation to others... But I don't really interact with anyone, so I don't know what's fitting."

She shook her head and leapt down, landing lightly in front of him with a determined grin. "In that case, I'll think of the best name ever for you!"

Her new friend was taken aback at first, then laughed with a mixture of amusement and something akin to relief. He returned her playful smile. "I'll hold you to that...!"

"Count on it!" the wind type hatchling replied confidently. Then her stomach rumbled. "...Maybe after I eat," she corrected herself with a laugh. "Are you hungry?"

The violet revealer dragon yearling shook his head. "I already ate before the storm started. But you go ahead and hunt here if you want," he invited her, gesturing with his blue-spotted arm in the direction of what Gretel's distant sight could see was a foxhole.

"Oh, I've never hunted land animals before," she said. "Maybe you can teach me sometime! For now, I'm too hungry to focus on learning, so I'll just explore and find some birds along the way."

"Alright. Have fun." There was a neutrality to his tone as if he were masking disappointment.

She tilted her head. "What? I'll be right back!"

His ears instantly perked up at that, and he let out a relieved sigh. "Oh! Okay. S-Sorry...!"

The hatchling laughed. "You're good. See ya in a bit!"

With the skies clear, Gretel easily took flight and circled the large island on a tilted glide. In the highlands all the way on the other side from the forest she had met her new friend in, her keen eyes spotted roughly seven adult revealer dragons, two hatchlings around her own age, and a yearling. Three were fully grown–roughly twelve-and-a-half feet tall–and two were just slightly smaller, their size indicating they were twelve years old. But the final two adults, the youngest of the seven, were only around six-feet tall; they got her attention just because she recognized their colors: the female was violet while the male was blue. *I'll bet they're my friend's parents.*

Without thinking, she used her control over the surrounding air to stifle the sounds of her flapping wings and hovered in a steady descent to get nearer. Based on their sizes, the youngest adults were six years old, which made her second guess if they *were* his parents; given that he was over a year old, they must have been juveniles a year away from adulthood when they'd had him.

They seemed to be getting along, but she noticed they were actively avoiding the hatchlings, who were chasing each other around the second couple. The yearling stayed by the lone eldest dragon, who shared similar colors with him and one of the hatchlings, both keeping watch.

That must be the leader and his two sons, Gretel thought. *The female hatchling looks to be from the second youngest couple. Not much of a society, yet, if the ten of them are the only ones in it. I wonder if they've been on this island for long?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a growl from her empty stomach. Movement from a bird flying out from the treetops below her caught the white wyvern's hot pink eyes, and she instantly summoned a wind and spread her purple-striped wings to surf it swiftly toward the prey, catching it between her small-but-sharp fangs. She chomped then swallowed her kill nearly whole. Finally, she returned to the lowlands.

Her friend was waiting for her beneath the tree, almost as if he hadn't moved from that spot in the near-half-hour she'd been gone. He looked kind of in a daze, like he was daydreaming. Gretel silently landed behind him and summoned a light breeze against his backside, grateful that her volume control muted her giggles as she waited for him to notice her.

His folded wings opened slightly as if by instinct in response, but he didn't turn around. *He's really in his own head, isn't he? Well let's see him ignore this!* The striped hatchling pounced up with a strong enough tailwind to boost her, and the force of her front paws pushing his mid-back made him stumble forward.

"What the–" he cried, startled, then finally looked back to see the wyvern landing lightly from back-flipping off of him. She ended her abilities and audibly laughed at his bewildered expression. "What was that for?"

"Fun!" Gretel managed to answer after catching her breath. "Speaking of fun, what do you like to do? Have you been daydreaming this whole time?"

He hid behind his wings with embarrassment. "N-No!"

"It's okay if you were," she assured him. "I was just curious, that's all."

"Um... Maybe I'll tell you later."

"Oh, alright. By the way, I think I found your society!" the hatchling reported cheerfully. Her smile fell when his green eyes widened with horror. *What's with that look?*

"You didn't try to talk to them, did you...?" he asked quietly, but his tone had a serious weight to it.

"No way! I don't wanna get killed!"

He visibly relaxed.

"That's why I thought I'd talk to you instead," she continued. "Ten dragons is an awfully small society."

"Ten?" he echoed, shocked. "There were only eight besides me when I was there..."

"So, nine, including you? That's even smaller!"

"Yeah..."

"How come?"

"I don't know all of the details... I was hatched on this island, but my family apparently came here from some other land. Wanted a territory of their own, I guess."

"What other land?"

"Beats me."

Revealers can't fly as far as wind types, so their original island can't be far from here. Maybe I can find it!

"So, um... About what I do for fun..." the violet yearling continued. "There isn't really much to do by myself. I always liked listening to the birdsong, though. In open spaces where revealers usually live, we don't hear many birds or songs at all. That's... kind of why your singing drew me in."

"Oh, right! Do you still want me to teach you? To sing, I mean?"

"Yeah!" he immediately answered with an excited flap of his blue wings. Then the biped caught himself and retreated a step, covering his mouth with his clawed hands. "Th-That is, if you're still willing to teach me."

She giggled with amusement. "Of course!"The first thing you gotta know about singing is very important," she told the violet revealer dragon as they settled beneath the tree they had first met in.

"What is it?" he asked, as if worried it would stop him from learning.

"You gotta enjoy it!" She grinned, and he laughed.

"I think I can manage that. What next?"

"Next, you have to trust your gut feelings," she answered. "Like, if you feel like you're overwhelmed and need a release, just let it all out in a song!"

His green eyes shone with intrigue. "Really?"

"Yeah! If you're happy, or sad, or even bored, just vocalize it!"

"You mean, like... yelling?"

"No, silly! It doesn't have to be loud. If you're feeling a low amount of emotion, then sing at a low volume. Unless you want to be heard, of course!"

"That's easy enough. So... how do I sing in the first place?"

She shrugged. "I just improvise a tune based on my environment and feelings."

"Oh? Are the two related?"

"Definitely! When I arrived here yesterday, I was happy, because this environment sheltered me from the storm. So that's why I was singing when you found me."

"That's so cool," he genuinely remarked. "But how did you come up with the song itself?"

"Again, I based it off the environment. I felt the rhythm of the storm and rain, and went with it."

The violet revealer looked around the lowlands they were in. It was a warm and peaceful day, with the occasional breeze to keep them cool. "Yeah, I'm not hearing anything," he admitted.

"Exactly! And how does that make you feel? Is the silence peaceful, or scary, or...?"

"It's... lonely." He wrapped his arms around the pouch of his lower belly in a self-soothing embrace. His wings spread as he lifted his head to gaze up at the highlands.

"Oh…? Are you lonely right now?"

Her innocent question snapped him out of it. "Right now?" He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "I feel… happy that you're here, but also nervous that I won't be able to get your lessons right."

"There you go! Base your melody on that."

"On… which one? Happiness, or nervousness?"

"Both! You can't just pick one emotion to focus on if you're feeling more than one emotion. That defeats the whole purpose of singing! Let it express *everything* you're feeling."

His small wings lowered along with the corners of his mouth. "All at once?"

"If that's what you want, sure. For me, I like to focus on one emotion at a time. Like if *I* were happy, and also nervous, I would sing the nervous part first. That makes the happy part feel more special," she explained.

"I see… How would you go about expressing both at once, then?"

"I'd just switch between them."

"Like, taking turns, where each emotion gets expressed for the same amount of time?" he asked with uncertainty.

"No, don't plan it! Just go by which one you're feeling the most, when you feel it the most. So… if you're more happy than nervous, you start the song out happy. If you get more nervous than happy at any point, then change the song to reflect that."

"What if I'm *equally* happy and nervous?" he pressed, the tip of his thick Z-shaped tail flicking side to side as he struggled to understand her guidance.

"I don't know! You're overthinking it. Stop thinking, and *feel* it instead. Then let it out," she encouraged him.

He drew in a breath, his green eyes glancing between her and the ground. Then he sighed. "Sorry… I don't know if I can do it."

"Huh? You mean you don't want to?"

"I do want to, but I'm scared you'll think it's bad…"

She laughed genuinely. "Does it matter if it's bad? You shouldn't care what I think–or what anyone thinks! Not even you! The point isn't to be 'good,' it's to express yourself. Besides, you'll only get better with practice!"

The violet dragon gaped at her incredulously. After a beat, he inhaled, hesitated, then sighed again. "Sorry… I guess I'm more nervous than happy, after all," he chuckled half-heartedly.

"All the more reason to express it," she said with a smile.

"Huh… I think I get it now. It's kind of like venting, so I understand my emotions and feel better afterward. Right?"

"Sure! Any reason is valid."

He smiled slightly at that. "Alright. I'll try." The violet revealer closed his green eyes. He took another breath, then he released it in a quiet, shaky voice, which immediately petered out when he heard himself; his ears flattened shyly and he glanced at the wind dragon hatchling as if fearing her disapproval.

"That's a good start, but you're holding back," Gretel pointed out. "You don't have to start it with all of your emotions, but you should continue it until all of your emotions are out."

The young revealer dragon shrank modestly. "I don't know if I'm ready for that yet."

"That's okay! There's no rush. We can work on it more tomorrow, then. In the meantime, we can do something else."

He eyed her curiously. "Like what?"

"Li-i-ke, hide and seek! With my volume control, I'm a *master* at stealth," she said with a cheeky grin.

"True... But you're also excitable. With my reveal ability, you'll probably be too excited to keep quiet," he pointed out with a playful smile.

"Oh yeah? Let's put that to the test!" the hatchling challenged him with an eager wag of her striped tail. "You seek first, and I'll bet you my next meal that you won't find me!"

He chuckled, amused by her enthusiasm. "No need for bets. My victory will be enough after I win!"

The juvenile dragon turned to face the tree, and she heard him start counting. The tiny wind dragoness grinned and stilled the air around herself to silence her movements. Her first instinct was to hide above him in the tree. *That wouldn't really be fair, though, since he can't fly or climb... Hmm. Oh, I know!* She darted past him toward one of the foxholes he'd gestured to earlier that day, easily fitting inside it and laughing silently to herself. *He'll never find me!*

In the distance she heard him finish counting and call out, "Ready or not, here I come!"

She remained hidden, her hot pink eyes gazing up through the opening. Even from this far she saw the young violet revealer check the treetops first. *Smart!* Gretel commended him.

He checked a few other trees just to be sure before he started looking on the ground. After a minute, he paused, seeming thoughtful. Then a smile graced his muzzle and he spread his small wings. She could see their webbing shake loosely in the existing breeze. He continued his search with his wings still spread, then headed right in her direction.

Is he on to me? No–there's no way he'd know I'm here! Right? She watched her friend eagerly the closer he got. Only a few yards away from her, he stopped, looking around.

Eep, he's so close! What's stopping him? Gretel thought, and found herself rooting for him to win. *Come on–I'm right here! You can do it!*

For some reason she suddenly jumped out of the hole. "I'm right here, dummy! Just turn around already!" the hatchling exclaimed. Then she instantly was taken aback by what she'd done as the young revealer dragon burst out laughing. "Wait... Why did I *let* you win?!"

"I guess you truly wanted me to," he replied with a proud grin. "That's what my reveals do–they make you act on your hidden truths."

Gretel's eyes shone. "That's so cool!"

He rubbed the back of his ear, embarrassed by the praise.

"But how did you know I was over here?" she asked curiously. "Is that from an ability, too?"

"Yes–but not *mine*," the juvenile said. "I remembered how wind types can mute themselves by stopping the air flow around them. I figured you'd do that, so I used my wings to feel the breeze until there suddenly wasn't one."

She was genuinely astonished by his cleverness, and he once again seemed modest upon her reaction. She shook her head and laughed. "My turn to seek!"

The two played a few more rounds, with Gretel using her keen eyes to detect her hiding friend's movements, and the latter's reveal ability causing her to surrender similarly to the first time. In the end, it was a tie, but neither complained since they had so much fun.

The violet yearling then spotted a fox and licked his fangs hungrily.

That gave Gretel an idea. "Hey, can you teach me how to hunt on land?"

"Actually, yeah. Wind types are fast and stealthy, right? If you can just kill that fox, I'll do the rest," he promised.

"The rest?" she repeated, confused. "What's left to do after it's killed?"

"You don't know how revealers hunt? One puny fox isn't going to be filling enough. We need bigger game. It's actually getting the bait that's the hard part for us."

"Bait?"

"The smaller prey," he clarified. "In this case, the fox. So let's work together, okay? You kill the fox, I kill the wolf."

"*Wolf?!*"

"Shhh! You're gonna scare the fox off!"

The hatchling had no idea what he had planned, but she ultimately nodded. "So what exactly do I do to hunt it?"

"How do wind types normally hunt?"

"I like to swoop and bite," she growled playfully, baring her teeth and snapping her jaws a couple of times to showcase it.

"Hm. I don't know; these little guys are used to aerial predators. Maybe do the same thing you did to me earlier: sneak up with your volume control and then pounce quickly with your wind. It'll never know what hit it!"

"Oh–sounds fun! Lemme try it." Gretel did exactly that, silently circling behind the prey out of its field of vision and creating a downwind so it wouldn't catch her scent. She crept forward on stealthy paws; when she was in position, the hatchling summoned a tailwind to boost her speed as she lunged at it, catching it by the neck. She mercifully finished it off with a chomp, then dropped her kill, eyes shining when turned to her friend. "Did ya see? I got it!"

"That's amazing! Great job!" he cheered.

Gretel beamed. Then she looked down at it. "So now what? You said it's bait… for wolves?"

"Yep." The biped walked over and picked it up, then looked around. "Let's find an obvious spot for the trap."

"What trap? And shouldn't traps be, like, the *opposite* of obvious?"

"Not when you rely on the reveal ability. Just trust me on this." The juvenile male carried it to a clearing within the sparse-treed forest of the lowlands and placed the carcass down in the center.

Gretel watched him curiously, then recoiled with disgust when he began to rake his claws through the dead fox's pelt, drawing blood from it. "What are you doing?!" she cried, rushing to stop him. "That's so mean! It's already dead, so leave it alone!"

"S-Sorry; I'm not trying to disrespect it… But if we want to attract predators or scavengers, they need to be able to smell it. You only really broke its neck…"

"I don't get why drawing predators is so important! Besides, they're too smart to wander into the open like this, even if they're starving!"

"That's what I'm counting on."

"What?! That doesn't make any sense!"

"It's *because* they're smart enough to avoid the open space, that they'll suppress their desire to eat the fox within it. As soon as it's suppressed, my reveal will force them to act on that desire, so they'll have no choice but to take the bait."

Gretel could only gape at him, appalled. "That's cruel…" *When he used his reveal on me during hide-and-seek, I* did *want him to win, but at the same time I still didn't want to lose… which is why I suppressed my desire for him to win--and why his reveal made me let him. I still wanted to win, but I couldn't stop myself from losing…* "This poor predator will also want to survive, but it won't be able to stop itself from coming here to its death…"

Her friend's green ears lowered and he shrank. "Sorry… Again, I'm not trying to be cruel… That's just the only reliable way for revealers to eat enough. And reveals don't always work if our target has good enough self-control," the violet dragon assured her. When she was still reluctant to allow his trap to be set, he seemed to get a bit defensive, adding, "Honestly, it's our prey's fault for letting themselves *lose* that self-control. When their willpower is that weak, they're just *begging* to be eaten. It's survival of the fittest."

Gretel cowered at that. "What about me…?"

"…What?"

"Are you saying *I'm* begging to be eaten, too…? Because your reveals worked on me..." The white-and-purple wyvern was aware from experience that larger dragon types sometimes preyed on smaller ones. Revealers grew to be the third largest type of dragon as well, with light dragons being a few feet taller, and fire types being the tallest–but not by much.

The violet yearling instantly cringed, then shook his head fiercely. "Gretel, no offense, but you're still a hatchling. Dragons grow out of impulsiveness as they age. I don't see other dragons as prey, either–even if some revealers do."

She sniffled, slightly relieved that he didn't see her as potential prey, but she still wasn't happy about their hunting methods. "Why not just eat the fox, instead of using it as bait…? It's already dead…"

He exhaled through his nose, frowning. "Foxes aren't big enough for a meal… but their predators are. Plus, we can reuse the fox to lure more than one predator, like for our next meal, and it will even draw in scavengers as it decays over time. One fox as bait will draw in plenty of days' prey for us," her friend gently explained.

Gretel still didn't understand. "That doesn't answer my question... Why not just eat the bait yourself, since you've already killed it without the need to use your reveal?"

"We can use our reveals to lure our bait as well," he corrected her. "Revealers grow big; we're not stealthy enough to hunt without scaring off prey. Using reveals to draw our prey to us is really our best chance at getting food."

Gretel looked away. *I get it, but... manipulating others outside of fun and games just feels wrong...*

"And if we only lived by eating smaller prey, like foxes, then we'd end up wiping them out into extinction; there aren't enough of them to get us full," he continued, addressing the rest of her question in case that was why she wasn't supportive. "Besides, their bigger predators are at the top of the food chain, so dragons like us are necessary for keeping their population down instead of letting *them* hunt smaller prey into extinction. It's all just nature's way of balancing itself out."

The wind dragon hatchling heaved a sigh, still not looking at her friend. Instead, her hot pink eyes were narrowed at the bloodied fox's corpse.

Her silence made the violet yearling antsy. "Gretel?"

She jolted. "Huh?" When she caught his puzzled green eyes, she shrank. "I just… never saw a revealer hunt before. I didn't know about traps or how reveals worked. It's… unique."

"You don't seem impressed by it, though…" he pointed out, the young revealer's Z-shaped tail straightening in what his companion had come to recognize as disappointment.

The baby wyvern glanced between him and the bait, feeling guilty that her lack of support made the former sad. "Sorry... If that's what you need to do, then I won't stop you, but… I don't know if I can watch, or even eat your kills, without feeling bad for them…"

He seemed torn, then briefly shut his eyes. Gretel thought she caught sight of the blue gemstone that was naturally on his forehead glinting for just a moment. Then his demeanor completely changed and his tail lifted once more. "Okay. Then I won't do that anymore," he declared with a slight, but genuine, smile.

"...What?" Gretel was thrown by his sudden change of heart. *He was defensive about this just a minute ago!* "N-No–don't let me stop you–"

"It's okay," he laughed reassuringly, and it was that sound akin to relief again. "I'm too small to hunt predators right now, anyway, so I can settle for the bait until I'm older."

The tiny wind dragoness relaxed at that, but her sensitive hearing couldn't decipher what emotion was 'akin' to his relief. Then his words registered. "Wait–you *haven't* been hunting predators all this time?"

"Not yet. I'll have to when I'm older, though."

"Then what were you planning on doing just now?!"

"I was... planning on impressing you by trying," he confessed. His tail lowered, and Gretel once again felt guilty for not supporting him. Then the gem glinted again–she was sure of it now–and he faced her with another small wholehearted smile. "Guess I won't have to fake it around you, though, so that's good!"

The striped hatchling tensed this time. There was no trace of dishonesty in his voice or body language, yet the suddenness of his cheer threw her for a loop. "Are you sure? Are you okay?"

"Of course! At least, I *will* be, after I eat," he joked when his stomach audibly growled. He took a seat and, as promised, began consuming the fox. Gretel could only stare after him, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. The revealer noticed and blinked, confused. "Want some?" he guessed.

She was taken aback by his pure innocence. *Am I just used to seeing the mean dragons on my travels? I feel like someone this nice couldn't exist. But then, I've never made a friend before–so maybe this is how friends act...?*

The violet dragon tilted his head when she hadn't answered. "Well?"

"Huh? Oh! It's okay, I already–" Gretel stopped herself, suddenly recalling that a social dragon's offer to share their prey meant they respected the recipient. As a solitary type, she never thought she'd find herself interacting with a social one–or anyone, for that matter–and until this moment, she never thought she'd *want* to. But the tiny wyvern found herself feeling warm inside to be included and catered to–not only from his gesture with the prey, but also his willingness to put off hunting when she'd expressed discomfort about revealers' natural methods. She smiled. "Actually, yeah: I'd like some."

The two ate together and chatted about the events of their games until the sun eventually set.

"I should get going," Gretel said, suddenly aware of how late it was getting. The spade-shaped tip of her tail twitched with unease. Wind dragons were never designed to stay in one area for too long, especially when they were vulnerable hatchlings, but she had been so occupied with her nameless new friend that she'd completely lost track of time.

The revealer's green ears lowered. "Huh? How come? Is something wrong?"

She shook her head, realizing that her dragon type's nomadic lifestyle was foreign to him. "No, it's just instinct," she explained, and he was clearly relieved to know he hadn't caused her distress this time. "Wind types are… weak. Stronger dragons might prey on us when they see we're still or sleeping," she admitted. "But we're also fast–so if we *aren't* still, and fly to sleep in places they *can't* see, then they won't be able to catch us!"

The yearling gaped at her, both fascinated and horrified. "Oh yeah… you did seem worried about other dragons trying to eat you," he remembered, his tone sympathetic. "It's okay. Do what you need to."

"I'll be back tomorrow!" Gretel promised. "Oh–and don't forget to practice your singing, okay? I mean, it's good right now, but if you can get comfortable expressing yourself fully with it, then it'll be perfect!"

He seemed thoughtful at that, then gave her a determined look. "Okay…! Goodnight–see you tomorrow."

Chapter 2

Gretel soared across the morning sky on her way back to her friend's island. Thin air at this altitude had always been easier for her to breathe, and the mist of the clouds she passed through was refreshing. Even from two miles away, the wind-type hatchling's hot pink eyes could detect movement from that island and recognize the violet-and-blue revealer who was standing by their tree. His eyes were closed and the natural blue gemstone on his forehead gleamed in the sunlight.

As Gretel neared her nameless friend, an unusual sound captivated her. It was birdsong from the lowland's forest he was in, but there was also something else she couldn't place. She used her volume control ability to still the air around herself, silencing her movements as she eased into a glide and hovered not far from the older juvenile. To her astonishment, the sound turned out to be his voice.

There were intermittent pauses as he listened to the birds sing, before he responded in kind, almost mimicking their songs. *Is he trying to learn from them, or communicate with them?* Gretel wondered curiously. Her friend once again stopped and listened to them, but this time he didn't answer right away. His light green eyes gained that same distant look he'd had when she had caught him daydreaming before.

The wind dragon hatchling prepared to land and greet him, then froze when his voice started again–this time in an original melody. It started at a middle pitch, but instantly corrected to a lower one as his green ears picked up on the key of the birdsong. From that point onward, his voice harmonized with it.

Gretel would have been overwhelmed with pride if only his melody didn't convey such sadness. Her sensitive hearing picked up on the amateurish wavers and cracks in his voice, and lack of proper breathing techniques, but skill wasn't needed to express just how isolated he clearly felt.

The violet yearling once again began to pause in intervals, this time for the birds to respond to him. The white-and-purple wyvern fought the urge to join in, to add a comforting, happy melody to juxtapose his somber one and cheer him up, but she remained quietly listening instead.

By the time the violet revealer dragon finally finished, his usually Z-shaped tail–which also had a gemstone on the top of its tip matching the one on his forehead–had uncurled to fall against the soft grass beneath him, and his small blue wings were splayed and lowered. Tears threatened to fall from his watered green eyes.

Gretel landed perpendicular to him, releasing her hold on the air to let him hear her freely. "Are you okay…?"

He jolted at her sudden appearance, then faced her with panic, wiping his eyes despite them watering again afterward. "How long– I mean, did you–"

Despite his failed attempts at speech, she nodded in answer. “I was here the whole time, and I heard everything…”

He was horrified and retreated a step from her, once again wiping his eyes before tears could fall. “I'm sorry–it was horrible–I was just–”

The wind type shook her head. “It was perfect."

His ears perked up in shock. He seemed to relax slightly at that, but then he suddenly turned his back to her with his wings folding around himself as if to hide, but Gretel's keen eyes noticed the tears had finally fallen beforehand. She moved to comfort him but got distracted when the gem on his tail glinted in sync with the other and he turned around to face her with a nervous laugh, wiping his eyes which were suddenly drying to normal. His tail and wings lifted to their usual level and he smiled warmly.

“Thank you… I've been practicing since you left last night. But that was the first time I made up a song. I didn't expect you to get here before I could perfect it, though,” her friend chuckled.

“I didn't mean to sneak up on you; I just didn't want to interrupt,” Gretel murmured apologetically.

He nodded. “Yeah, I figured. But… you really liked it?”

“I loved it,” she replied genuinely.

The nameless revealer juvenile scratched his ear, abashed. “I might need more practice, but… I think I really like singing."

An idea popped into her head out of nowhere. “Wait–I know a good name for you!”

He recoiled from her volume, but her enthusiasm was infectious. “Huh? Really?! Tell me!”

“Efron!”

“…Efron?" The young blue-and-violet dragon narrowed his green eyes thoughtfully. “What does it mean?”

“Back when I was trying to name myself, I overheard some older wind dragons saying it meant ‘singing bird.’ With how you harmonized with the birdsong, and enjoyed it, I think it’s fitting,” she chimed.

“Wow. I do like the sound of that. It's also a trait, so maybe other revealers won't think it stands out too much, either. So… I guess that's what I'll be called from now on,” Efron said, then grinned as he added, “You really *did* find the perfect name."

“Yay!” Gretel squealed, delighted, and tackled Efron just to let her energy out. The older juvenile playfully feigned being hurt by the light touch, and the wind type hatchling laughed. “How does it feel to have a name after all this time?”

“Feels like the first step to getting out of here,” the violet revealer replied with a determined smile.

“Oh? I thought you didn't want to go back to your family?”

Efron seemed mortified at the mention of them. "I don't!" he confirmed immediately. "In fact, they're the reason I want to leave this island. The farther I can get from my parents, the better!"

"What… did they do to you?" Gretel couldn't stop herself from asking. *Social dragons usually have good relationships with their parents… While some solitary types like me have never even met theirs.*

Her friend tensed and his eyes gained that familiar distant look, staring past her at the ground as he scarcely breathed.

Is he daydreaming again? "…Efron?"

He snapped out of it, then shook his head and backed away from her, his breaths quick and shallow as if to make up for holding it.

No–he's panicking, Gretel realized after he couldn't catch his breath and also noticed his clawed hands trembling. She felt a pang of guilt for bringing it up, that she then forced aside out of worry for her friend. "I'm sorry… It's okay–they aren't here…! I have great sight, so if I see them coming, we can both hide!"

Her attempts to assure him fell flat. As a last resort to help, Gretel was about to summon a light wind to embrace him, which she had often done to self-soothe after scary encounters on her travels. Before she even had a chance to, though, she saw that glint of his gemstones and he immediately began to calm down.

The tiny wyvern hesitated, eyes trained on the gems. She found herself curious about the connection between his sudden positive mood shifts and them shining, but she was too scared of upsetting him again to ask, especially since he had calmed down by this point. "…Are you okay?" Gretel murmured.

Efron nodded, but turned away slightly as if ashamed by his reaction. "Sorry about that… You didn't do anything wrong. I just…" He sighed, gave it some thought, then tried again to explain, "When it ends, I get…"

When what ends? He gets what? The wind type sat attentively, awaiting him to finish his sentence. When the revealer didn't, green eyes still avoiding her gaze, she couldn't keep hers from looking at the gems again. *When the gemstone's powers end, he gets panicked?*

Efron exhaled and faced her, then immediately chuckled with amusement at how wide curiosity had made her hot pink eyes. "You like my gem? Bet you've never seen natural ones so close up before, huh?" he said with a genuine, somewhat proud smile. She could tell her friend was relieved by the change of topic, too.

"I heard revealers are born with them, but I don't know what they do," Gretel admitted. "Are they different from obtained gems?"

"Yep! I'd even say they're better than obtained ones–at least in terms of extenders, which is the only type of gem we can have naturally."

"Better how?"

"When they deplete, they just draw from our bodies to replete, so we can use them indefinitely."

"Natural gems deplete?"

"Y-Yeah. Just not permanently," the violet yearling said. "There's a wait time while they replete after we've depleted them... But I have two, so I can extend both of my abilities at once, one right after another, or even the same one twice in a row."

"Wait–revealers have more than *one* ability?!"

Efron froze, as if not meaning to share that, but ultimately nodded. "Reveals, and conceals."

"What are conceals?" she asked excitedly. *Can he use it to conceal himself during hide-and-seek? What other games can we play with it?!*

"They're... the opposite of reveals," he replied vaguely.

The hatchling tilted her head, confused. "So it makes others *avoid* your hunting traps?"

"Huh? No–conceals aren't used on *others*."

Gretel was completely lost. "Is it the opposite of reveals because you're revealing yourself instead of others? Why is it called 'conceal' then?"

He opened his mouth as if to explain, then closed it and shook his head. "You might be too young to understand right now. I'll tell you when you're older, okay...?"

She snorted. "I may be little, but I've probably been around more places and different dragons than you have!"

Efron bit his lower lip indecisively. "Well, instead of making others act on their hidden truths with reveals... Conceals let us hide our own truths–suppress them, so they don't bother us... at least, temporarily," he finally explained. "Our gemstones let us increase how long we can use either ability without draining our bodies; the gemstone gets drained, or depleted, instead."

"Is that why I see it glinting so much?!" she blurted out, horrified. *He's been repressing himself around me all this time?! Does he not trust me enough to be his true self when I'm here...?*

"You saw that?!" He was equally horrified. "I was trying to be discreet..."

She shook her head. "Why? What are you hiding?" Gretel thought back to the first time she'd seen them shine: when he had gotten defensive over his hunting methods. The next was when he had started crying after she'd caught him singing. *Those feelings are normal! Why suppress them?* "I won't judge you, I promise!"

The young revealer hesitated with reluctance once more. "Again, you might be too young to understand..."

Gretel could tell the topic was making him uncomfortable, so despite her desperate want for answers, she decided to let it go.

As if to lighten the mood, Efron changed the subject. "Wanna know why revealers are the only dragons with natural gemstones?"

Gretel beamed, curiosity overpowering her previous disappointment. "Yeah!"

He smiled and rested his back against their tree, shifting his weight to one foot. “When I was a hatchling, my grandpa told me that the heavens were a sacred place that only a couple of dragon types lived in, yet even flighted dragons below could never fly high enough to reach it. But if you *did* manage to get there, you would be rewarded for it substantially."

“Oh–I know about that! The heavens had hoards of rare gemstones that light dragons collected and restored! Wind dragons are, like, the best at flying, but even *we* can’t make it that high,” Gretel chimed in. “We do have stories about elites of our kind who made it there, though!”

“Yep! Not only would the ones who make it be given gemstones and an ‘elite’ status, but light dragons could also heal any injuries, and cure any sudden illness with their halos, too! So if someone got hurt or sick on their way to the heavens, they’d be healed *and* receive a gemstone for their success in reaching it."

“How does one even make it that far up, though? I’ve tried before, and after a while it gets too hard to breathe."

“I’m not entirely sure,” Efron replied, seeming thoughtful at that. “In revealers’ tales, some say Zephyr climbed to the tallest mountain in the world just to call out his plea to the heavens in hopes they’d hear him."

“Climbed? Why not fly?”

“This was before revealers ever had wings,” he replied.

“Wha-a-a-t?! I thought they always had wings!”

“Nope--not until Zephyr made it into the heavens," he replied. "Well, actually, Zephyr *didn’t* make it to the heavens... on his own, that is. All he managed to do was climb the mountain and hope the light dragons above would hear him. He was desperate, and begged them not for a gem or any elite status; all he wanted was for them to save his ill hatchling."

Gretel leaned in closer, completely invested. “Did they hear him?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” the violet juvenile answered, his green eyes glistening with childlike admiration for the legendary revealer in his tale. “It’s said that an elite light dragon had descended through the clouds onto the mountaintop, and lifted Zephyr to the heavens. They commended him for traveling so far to the mountain, and his success at climbing such great heights. But the light dragon told him the real reason they acknowledged him was because Zephyr’s heart and motivations were pure."

“Woah... I wonder if a pure heart is needed to reach the heavens, then, on top of skill?” she pondered. “That would explain why so many skilled wind dragons couldn’t reach it."

“I never thought about that,” Efron agreed, briefly distracted by considering her words.

“So did they cure his hatchling?” she pressed, eager to hear the rest of the story.

“Yes, but not just that! When Zephyr finally returned, his hatchling had been cured, *and* Zephyr had wings–the first any revealer has ever had–*and* a gemstone that never depleted!” he said, the tip of his Z-shaped tail almost wagging with excitement. “Those traits carried over to future hatchlings of our kind, too, even all across the world!”

"Wow! So now all revealers have them?"

"Yep!" His enthusiasm dwindled as he added, "But there's a price…"

The wind type hatchling tilted her tapered head. "What was it?"

"Adjustment." Efron's green eyes looked back at his small wings. "When revealers first hatch, we don't have any instinct to use our wings or gemstones… In some cases, our gemstones are active from the second we emerge, using our reveals on anyone nearby without any knowledge or control over it." He let himself slide his back down the tree to sit under it, then hugged his knees to the lighter violet ventral scales of his chest. "And, of course, our wings don't fully develop until we're two years old, so we can't fly right away, either. Even learning how to fly when we're old enough is a challenge."

Gretel fell silent, taking this in. "Would that reveal ability affect your–errrr, I mean, that hatchling's–parents if they were nearby when hatched…?"

Efron didn't meet her gaze, but nodded ever-so-slightly in answer. "That's why we developed the conceal ability–to protect ourselves against other revealers who don't have control of their gemstone yet. But… if the reveals come from a dragon who's stronger than the one concealing, well, the stronger one wins. My grandpa told me that not every stronger dragon is nice, though, and that's the closest reason he would give me for why my family left their old society."

"Your grandpa sounds nice," she said, hoping to cheer him up.

"Yeah. Aside from my older cousin, Gramps was the only one who was nice to me before I–" He caught himself.

The tiny wyvern managed to refrain from questioning him, but couldn't stop her hot pink eyes from widening again with that burning curiosity.

Efron finally faced her and laughed, that sudden shift to lightheartedness despite the lack of glinting from his gemstone leading her to believe he'd used his conceal ability again. "I escaped," the violet yearling finished his last sentence casually. "My grandpa helped by carrying me across the island to this forest where there was prey and shelter. But he can't visit because he and I agreed not to let my parents–err, his daughter–find out where I am."

She felt sympathy for him. "Was that other yearling your cousin, then?"

He recoiled, then remembered that she had outright told him she'd found his 'society' the day they met. "Yeah. Apparently, when my family first moved here, it was just my grandpa and his kids–my mom and uncle–and my uncle's mate from their old society. My cousin was hatched here, and my father was apparently a traveler who settled here after the fact; that's when I came along."

Gretel gave a hum to acknowledge him. "What about the rest? If it was your grandpa and his two kids, their two mates, and your cousin, that's six, not including you."

"Right, there were two new adults that joined right before I left–making eight besides me. I didn't get to find out their histories, though." Efron thought for a moment, then asked her, "You said there were two more?"

"Yeah; two hatchlings around my age. One had a similar violet color to the yearling, and the other looked similar to the pairing that I'm guessing are the ones not related to you."

"Oh! Makes sense. I've only really been gone for maybe five months now. That's enough time to have hatchlings." Then he froze as her words fully registered. "Similar to the yearling's color...? Um... Did they have any kind of... blue color to them...?"

She was confused by his sudden anxiety. "No? Mostly a purplish-red."

He let out a relieved sigh. "Must be a new cousin, then; my uncle's mate was red." His green eyes looked toward the highlands across the island. "I... kinda wish I could meet them..."

"I could go check on them for you, if you want," Gretel offered.

"N-No!" he shut her down, but the sharpness in his voice stemmed from fear more than anything. "If you get too close, you could be trapped by their reveals--just like our prey!"

"I can see pretty far, so I don't *have* to get close to tell you how they're doing," she assured him.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter! Powerful revealers have great range for their reveals, too–it's not worth risking your life over...!"

Gretel opened her mouth to protest, but the sheer panic in his eyes was enough for her to trust that this was a bad idea. She sighed. "Okay... I won't go there."

Efron averted his green eyes again, this time with guilt. "Sorry... I didn't mean to yell. But like you said earlier, bigger dragon types like us might prey on smaller ones like you, and while my grandpa is nice, he isn't one to turn down easy bait."

Gretel tensed, the wind hatchling suddenly aware of how tiny she was since she would have been used to lure in actual prey instead of being eaten herself. Then she got an idea and bounced to her paws excitedly. "Wait! What if I cooperated with you?"

"With... what? A new game?"

"No, silly," she giggled. "What if I can be used as live bait?"

The juvenile revealer stared at her, eyes and mouth wide open with horror. "What–I mean, why would you even–"

"Why not?" she asked, puzzled. "I'm fast enough to outrun any predator, especially if they can't fly after me, so I can lure them to you *without* the need to trap them with reveals! Everyone wins, that way!" Gretel gave another bounce, while the biped just stared at her, dumbfounded.

The violet yearling firmly shook his head. "Like I said, I'm too young to even hunt big prey right now. Besides, I wouldn't want you to get hurt if a predator *does* catch you, anyway."

"You're little, but your grandpa isn't," she pointed out. "If I can just tell him I'm there to help him get prey, then he won't need to prey on *me*, so I'm sure he'll let me stay and chat about your new cousin for you–"

"My grandpa isn't the problem...!"

"Huh? But he's the eldest! Doesn't that make him the leader? If he's as nice as you say, there's no reason why he wouldn't let me in if I can help–"

"He is nice–but that's *part* of the problem!" he cried, as if desperate for her trust that he knew better.

"Uhhh... How is being *nice* a problem...?"

"He'd rather send me off than correct his daughter! Doesn't that say enough?!" Efron spat as his emotions boiled over, but his anger wasn't directed toward Gretel. "Everyone saw how Mom treated me, but nobody dared to stop her. She–" He was starting to hyperventilate again.

The hatchling shrank. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to help... I promise you I won't go, okay?"

Efron hesitated to give her an apologetic glance, but was visibly shaken. He tightly shut his eyes and the gemstone shone for just a second, but unlike before, it was dim and immediately faded. The young revealer panicked even more when it obviously didn't work, then as a last resort, he turned his back to his friend and ran.

"Efron?! Wait!" Gretel chased him on foot, not even needing to fly to catch up to the slower dragon type.

His ears pinned back as he heard her coming, and with no other option to gain speed, he then spread his small blue wings and leapt, flapping them in a vain attempt at flying away. He managed to hover for just two seconds before he crash-landed on the ground with an audible thud, where he helplessly curled up in a trembling heap.

Gretel reached him but was distracted by the light of his gemstones as they repeatedly dimmed yet he continued his futile attempts at drawing from them. *They must be depleted,* she figured. *And his body must be out of energy to use conceals without it, too. Just how much has he been using this ability without help from the gemstones? If he doesn't draw from them, I have no way of knowing when he's using it, either... Why? Why is he so desperate not to feel certain emotions?*

She didn't have time to dwell on it. Instead she crouched beside her friend and stirred the existing air around them into a gentle embrace. Efron opened his eyes to see what it was, confused now on top of everything, but took a breath and relaxed slightly despite still clearly being in distress. After what felt like an eternity of them lying together in peaceful silence aside from the controlled breeze, he managed to calm down.

Gretel would have been relieved if her friend didn't immediately seem overcome with regret. "You okay...?" she finally spoke.

He opened his mouth to answer, but all that came from it at first was a shaky breath. "Y-Yeah... I just... I mean..." Efron breathed again to compose himself enough to say, "I'm sorry... Are *you* okay? Again, I shouldn't have yelled..."

She blinked, utterly perplexed by the contrition in his voice. *Anyone would yell if they were upset like that! I could tell I wasn't the one he was upset with, so why apologize?* "Don't worry about yelling around me! I'm a wind dragon; we *communicate* by yelling to hear each other–and even just to express ourselves if we're too emotional to keep quiet!" she assured him with a laugh, adding, "Just like singing!"

With some effort, the juvenile revealer sat up, but didn't meet her gaze, still clearly ashamed. He got that faraway look in his eyes again, but Gretel wasn't sure if his 'daydreams' were a good thing after the last time he had panicked. Without thinking, she instinctively tried to snap him out of it.

"Efron?" she called, but he didn't seem to hear her. "Efron!" she said again, a bit louder.

He started, coming to. "Huh?"

"What are you daydreaming about?"

The older dragon blinked, genuinely lost. "What?"

"What do you think about when you look like that?"

"Look like… what…?" Then he seemed to catch on, and winced. "I don't know. I wasn't really thinking about *anything*… I just…" He shook his head and looked away with that same remorse as he hugged his knees and folded his wings around the front of them; his Z-shaped tail unfurled to wrap around his clawed feet. In this pose, the bipedal yearling was almost as small as the wind type hatchling.

"Why do you keep feeling guilty for everything? And why keep using conceals, especially if they drain you?" she asked, more confused by his reactions than anything. "I told you yelling isn't a problem, and you weren't even mad at me when you did that! You didn't do anything to feel bad about."

Efron finally faced her, shock overriding him. "…What?"

"I just don't understand you sometimes," she admitted as a matter of fact.

He wiped his eyes and snorted, almost with relief. "Sometimes, I don't understand *myself*, either," he laughed half-heartedly.

Chapter 3

Gretel had spent the next morning searching nearby islands for any trace of a revealer society that Efron's family might have left. She had promised her friend not to get involved with his family, but the wind type hatchling was still determined to help him, especially since he had mentioned his goal was to leave his current island. *If I can find a new place with a better society he can join, then he'll be all set!*

What she didn't expect to find was a huge expanse of ocean between even the closest island, and to her disappointment after having spent hours reaching it, there were no revealer dragons inhabiting it. She glanced at the sky, realizing with horror that it was nearing noon. *Oh no! Efron expects me to come by in the mornings... He's probably wondering where I am. I can check out the other islands later,* she decided, changing the existing wind's direction so she could glide on it back to his home.

She frowned as the afternoon sun shone light almost directly into her sensitive eyes. Even so, she could make out the silhouette of a young revealer dragon flying unsteadily above the lowland's forest, and her heart skipped a beat, remembering Efron's attempt to fly just yesterday. *Did he succeed?! Maybe he was too drained to fly last time?* Gretel sped up in her excitement, blindly racing toward him.

His purplish back was to her as he was struggling to keep his wing beats in sync, and the wind type hatchling got an idea, silencing herself by stilling the air around her. Then she moved beneath him to summon a skyward gust that would support the juvenile revealer. Right when she got into position, without the harsh sunlight hindering her sight, she realized all too late that it wasn't Efron; it was his cousin, who spotted her the same time she'd recognized him.

The two stared each other down warily, until the violet-and-red juvenile lost focus on his wings and began to fall… right on her.

Gretel squealed as they both plummeted through the trees below. She managed to gather enough wind to cushion their fall, and while his attempts at staying airborne to avoid her were obvious, he still ended up crashing partly on top of the hatching.

"A wind type?" the older revealer finally spoke with mild surprise after getting to his feet, taking a single step away from her. Then he tensed. "Wait–are *you* the one I've heard singing…?!"

She opened her mouth to confirm it, then remembered how Efron had warned her to stay away from his family and hesitated despite her curiosity.

"If it wasn't you, that means there are other wind types down here," the stranger concluded, but didn't seem happy about it. His hazel eyes bore into hers, fear betraying his determination to get answers.

I don't care if he knows I'm the singer, and I don't want him to falsely think others of my kind are involved! But would I be breaking Efron's trust if I talked with him?

"Well? Was it you or not?" he pressed.

"It was me," she finally said. *It would be bad if he blamed other wind types for something only I've been doing. As long as I don't mention Efron to him, this interaction should be okay, right?*

He relaxed. "That's a relief. Wind types never stick around for long, so if you're just singing to claim this area as a retreat, be my guest."

She blinked, surprised. "Really?" *Is that his call to make? I thought his grandpa would be in charge…*

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me. Nobody goes down to this part of the island, anyway, so do what you want here."

Now it was her turn to relax. *I don't need an invitation to stay or not, but it's nice to know they won't chase me off.* "Thanks…!"

"I do have one last question for you, though… Why did you come after me just now?"

Gretel tilted her head. "Huh?"

"I was just practicing my flight, when suddenly, here *you* are–wa-a-ay too close for comfort. Were you trying to case me out for the hunt or something?"

"Wha-a-a-at? You're way bigger than me! If *anyone* should be worried about being hunted, it's me," she laughed.

He eyed her skeptically. "Then I ask again: what *were* you doing so close to me like that?"

She froze. *I can't tell him I thought he was Efron… As much as I want to know about my friend's family, I promised to stay away from them…!*

The older juvenile frowned upon her reaction. "Well? Answer me!" he demanded, that fear creeping back into his tone. When the hatchling reluctantly refused to, he leered at her with suspicion for a moment, then sighed and tried a gentler approach. "I'm not going to hurt you. But if *you're* going to hurt me or my family, I need to know," he explained.

"I just wanted to play, that's all," she replied vaguely.

The dragon glared at her with distrust. "A wind type… wanting to play with a revealer they've never met?" he summarized, and scoffed. "Like I believe *that*."

"What…?"

"Wind dragons are flighty–figuratively *and* literally. Your kind wouldn't approach a stranger of a different type unless you plan on hunting them or raiding their territory!"

"Er… You're *right,*" she agreed, "but…" The tiny wyvern stopped herself, not wanting him to know she had mistaken him for her friend.

"Then you *were* casing me out after all?!"

"What?! No!" she cried defensively. She instinctively reared on her hind paws and spread the striped wings of her forelimbs to fly away, but the larger predator seemed to pick up on that and immediately pinned her.

"Then this is your last chance: tell me what you were doing," he demanded, "or I'll make you reveal it myself!"

Gretel froze, fighting back panic from both the misunderstanding and his threat to make her clear it up, when doing the latter would mean exposing Efron. In this moment she felt the need to escape and never return to this island, but she fought it out of sheer loyalty to her friend. Yet that same loyalty was also why she kept her mouth shut to hide Efron from his family.

Ugh, this whole situation could be avoided if Efron would just let me help them reconcile! Maybe not with his parents since they seem to be mean, but if it were my choice, I'd happily tell his cousin everything! She hesitated, reminding herself, *But it's not my choice to make… and I'd never betray Efron by saying–*

"I thought you were your cousin," Gretel blurted out. All too late she realized what just happened: he'd made true on his threat to reveal her.

"Galen?" he asked, incredulous.

"Huh? Who's Galen?"

"My only cousin?" he answered, now as confused as she was. "Violet revealer just a few months younger than me. Blue wings, green eyes, and two gemstones. If that's not who you're talking about–and I'm assuming it's not, since he's long gone–then you're wrong about him being my cousin."

No–that's definitely Efron… Gretel tried to piece the situation together. She restrained herself from confirming that despite wanting to ask– "Is that his name?" The hatchling cursed to herself, discovering the hard way that his reveal ability was still active.

"It *was* his name," the biped corrected her. "Like I said, though, he's long gone, so it doesn't matter. What *does* matter is who you mistook me for; if it's not him, then who is it? Are other dragons here?"

"No!" she answered honestly; it was only herself and Efron–who was apparently Galen.

"Then who is it?!" he growled with frustration. That's when the realization struck him and he got off of her, his red wings lowering along with his voice. "Hang on… are you saying Galen *is* here…?"

Gretel willed herself to say nothing, and for the first time during a reveal, she succeeded.

"It would make sense that he wouldn't tell you his name after his mom took it back…" he continued, almost to himself.

"Took… what back?" she reluctantly asked.

"His name."

"You can take back names?"

"If you disown the one you've named, then yeah."

Efron's mom disowned him…? I guess that's why he had to escape, then… Gretel felt defensive on her friend's behalf. As much as she didn't want to besmirch his family, she did truly think– "His mother sounds horrible." She covered her mouth. *Stupid reveals!*

"...Yeah. She is. But she's strong–even stronger than Gramps. We kind of need her on our side to help score smarter prey that have too much self-control for the rest of us to reveal."

Right... self-control. Gretel once again willed herself to be silent. *Wait... What smarter prey are they talking about...?!*

"Galen was strong, too," the young red-and-violet revealer murmured, his hazel eyes looking away. "He put up a good resistance to her constant reveals, but in the end, she won."

Gretel sat forward, trying to understand. "Constant reveals...? Won? What do you mean?"

"His mother's... kind of a control freak. Galen couldn't do anything without her criticizing or interrogating him. She wasn't like that before he was hatched, though, so Gramps thought that maybe Galen's gemstones played a part in it."

"But you *all* have gemstones, right?" She caught sight of a red one on the back of his neck. "How do you know someone else wasn't making her mean?"

"Not counting my little brother–since he hadn't been born yet–Galen's the youngest one in our family. Er, *was*... when he was with us. The rest of us were all old enough to control our gems at that time. And, believe me, *nobody* would make her mad on purpose."

"Oh..."

"Gramps tried to talk sense into her multiple times; tried to keep the peace, but she never really stopped treating Galen like prey with her reveals. To his credit, Galen *did* tolerate it with his conceals for a very long time–until he finally reached a breaking point and willingly revealed just how he felt about her."

Good on him! she thought proudly.

"That *really* made her mad..." he continued, and her heart sank. "She wasn't used to anyone standing up to her. At that moment she reclaimed his name and..."--the yearling hesitated as if to think of a way to phrase it in a hatchling-friendly term–"retaliated."

"Like... physically...?" the baby wyvern guessed, tensing at the thought of her friend being in danger.

His cousin nodded. "Yeah. Hurt him pretty bad. Probably would have killed him if Gramps hadn't taken him away."

"You said he's been gone a long time... Where did you think he was...?"

"Gramps came back alone and upset, so we all just thought he died out here." The juvenile met the hatchling's gaze. "But he's alive, isn't he...? If he is who you've mistaken me for, I mean..."

Gretel once again willed herself to be silent, not sure how to handle the situation. *It's not my place to let anyone know his whereabouts... If his mother finds out he's still alive, she might finish him off. Given how strong his mother's reveals are, she'd probably get the truth out of her nephew if I* did *tell him, so it's better for everyone that I don't.*

"...Sorry. You never did confirm it was Galen, so maybe I'm just jumping to conclusions," the biped sighed. "Even if he *did* survive his injuries after Gramps took him away, I doubt he'd last too long out here alone, so it doesn't make a difference, I guess; he's dead either way."

"Huh? Why wouldn't he survive?" she asked impulsively, then once again covered her mouth. *I need to stop letting my curiosity get the better of me around revealers...*

"Revealers never fare well on their own," he answered, "especially when they're young, like Galen was."

"But if they know how to hunt, shouldn't they be okay?"

"Maybe physically. But social dragons aren't meant to be alone; isolation can hurt them just as much as hunger–maybe even worse."

The wind type hatchling's hot pink eyes studied the ground as she took this in, remembering Efron's sorrowful melody.

"And if he *is* alive, then I'm horrible for never looking for him all this time..." The young revealer's eyes watered and he faced away from her guiltily. Then she caught a glimpse of a brief light from the red gemstone on the back of his neck. Almost instantly the tears dried and he stood straighter, looking down at her again with more assertiveness. "Do what you want here... But if you value your life, stay away from me and my family."

Gretel gulped, unable to tell if that was a threat or a warning. Before she had a chance to ask, he managed to take flight back to the highlands. She remained sitting there, taking a moment to process everything, when she was startled by the bushes behind her rustling and turned to see her friend approach.

"Thanks for not telling him," the blue-and-violet revealer said quietly.

"Ef–" the striped wyvern began, but stopped herself. "Err, Galen...?"

His pale green eyes narrowed, almost in a wince. "...Don't call me that..."

Efron it is, then. "Efron, I'm sorry... I didn't mean to approach him–"

"I know. It's fine; I saw the whole thing."

"Are... you okay?"

He nodded. "Are you? Reveals can be hard for hatchlings to resist. I'm... impressed that you didn't tell him everything, especially since you can't conceal."

"I just... didn't want to risk you getting hurt," Gretel said.

Efron seemed taken aback by that, then gave a slight, genuine smile. "Thanks... You did great."

The hatchling beamed from the praise.

"Oh, yeah–where were you all morning?" he wondered.

"Exploring," she replied vaguely, not wanting to get her friend's hopes up about a new island to live on until she could manage to find one.

"Hm. Exploring sounds fun, really." He glanced back at his blue wings. "Maybe I can go exploring with you when I'm able to fly."

She followed his gaze. "How much longer will that be?"

"I'll be two years old in around three months. If I can last that long, then I'll be good to go," Efron answered with a determined grin.

Why wouldn't he last that long? Gretel pondered, but didn't want to dampen his mood by asking. Instead, she lifted her forepaw to inspect her own purple-striped wings that were folded upward so she could stand. "You know, the whole reason I approached your cousin just now was to help him fly–because I thought he was you. I can probably help you learn, even if your wings can't carry you on their own yet."

Once again, the violet juvenile seemed shocked by her consideration. "You'd do that?"

"Of course! I can easily summon winds to help you glide."

He stared at her, dumbstruck for a moment. Then he let out a slight laugh. "I'd appreciate that…!"

"Maybe we should start tomorrow just to make sure your cousin doesn't see us," she suggested.

"Oh, good thinking." Efron seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Can I ask… why you're helping me…?"

Gretel blinked. "Why shouldn't I?"

"You agreed with what he said to you about wind types being flighty and raiders… But you're not like that–not to me, anyway. And I'm sure you've heard bad things about revealers, too. I'm shocked you didn't flee when we first met."

She scoffed. "Only adults think that way about other dragon types. Them, or the hatchlings they teach the same lessons to. Solitary wind hatchlings like me get to see the world for ourselves! I've seen so many dragons of so many types, I know everyone is different."

Efron gaped at her.

"You were nice to me, so I was nice to you. That's all there is to it," she assured him.

He shifted his weight to one foot, the other nervously digging its claws into the grassy ground. "Is there anything I can help you with in return…?"

"Heh! I don't need help from *anyone!*" the wyvern boasted.

"Hm. There has to be *something* I can do…"

"We-e-e-ell, maybe you can duet with me sometime?"

"Duet…? Like, singing?"

"Yep!"

"Are you sure? I'm not very good… and I'm not as loud as you."

"Yes, I'm sure; it's not about being good, *and* I can match your volume. But there's no rush. In fact, the duet can wait until after you can fly! That way, I get something in exchange for helping you."

"…Alright. It's a deal."

The two had chatted about singing and new games, then played a few until evening, when Gretel once again said goodnight to the revealer yearling and took off. Instead of sleeping, however, the wind type hatchling resumed her search for a suitable island Efron could move to, this time heading west.

The tiny white wyvern summoned a tailwind for speed, relaxing her forelimbs to let the purple-striped wings stemming from them glide on it and conserve her energy. After breezing above the ocean for a few miles, she was pleasantly surprised to spot an island two more miles ahead.

Her keen hot-pink eyes shone with excitement as they caught sight of movement within it; she focused more intently, then let out a delighted chirp to discover it was a revealer dragon–lots of them. *This must be where Efron's family came from!*

The closest two were a yearling and a two-year-old, who were similar enough in their green-and-yellow coloring to assume they were sisters. The duo was on the outskirts of a forest on the edge of the island's cliff, the pouches on their lower bellies overfilled with plants, fruits, and berries. She could see their smiling mouths moving as they sat chatting with their legs over the ledge and watching the setting sun's light sparkle over the ocean.

Gretel dove close, then ended the tailwind when she was near enough to hover beneath the cliff out of their view and eavesdrop; the juvenile wind dragoness stilled the air around herself, preventing the sound waves from her wingbeats from spreading so she was effectively muted.

"But it's so pretty down here!" the younger revealer was saying. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

Her sister chuckled. "I wish we could, but you know everyone's waiting for us to come back."

The smaller juvenile frowned. "But I don't wanna leave yet…"

The older one sighed through her nose. "You can't just wander and play out here like when you were a hatchling; you're a forager now. The whole point of coming down here to the forest was to gather food for everyone."

"Can't we stay just a *few* more minutes?"

Yeah, what's the rush? Gretel silently sided with her.

"No. It's getting late and we've been gone long enough as it is… We need to get going," the eldest insisted.

The yearling's ears fanned out as she stood up and scowled at her sister. "It's not fair! The grownups get to stay out as long as they want!"

"That isn't true; they're only out late to keep watching for fire types."

Fire dragons? the wind type thought. *Don't they get too heavy to fly far from their volcanic homes?*

"Everyone has a job, and we need to finish ours by bringing the food back," the older revealer continued. "Now let's get going, okay?"

"Hmph. Well what if I don't *want* to be a forager? What if I want to keep watch like they do?" her little sister harrumphed.

"You're too young for that, and you know it," she chided. "If a fire dragon saw you, you wouldn't even be filling as a snack to them! In fact, the longer we stay out, the greater the chances we *both* will end up as snacks to them."

The youngest's ears lowered along with her Z-shaped tail. "Sorry... You're right. I just miss being able to play for as long as I want without others depending on me..."

Her sister's gaze softened sympathetically. "Remember what to do when we feel sad?"

The yearling nodded and sighed. The gemstone on her back between her wings glowed for a moment, then her tail and ears lifted again. "Hm," she hummed, glancing over the ocean as if wondering why she'd been upset in the first place.

Was that a conceal? Gretel recognized that sudden positive shift in demeanor. *Wait–that's something they're* taught *to do?!*

"Ready to go home now?" the eldest prompted her encouragingly.

"Yep!" she replied with genuine cheerfulness. She climbed onto the older one's back and the latter took flight toward the top of a very tall plateau.

The wind hatchling released the air around her after she was sure they were out of ear shot. *I guess suppressing normal emotions isn't unique to Efron and his cousin–but to all revealers... Maybe it's better that Efron keeps his distance from society.*

Then Gretel felt guilty for considering keeping him in the dark about the island when she remembered his cousin's words about social dragons–revealers in particular–not faring well alone.

She shook her head. *He isn't alone; he has me! He doesn't need a society if they'll tell him what he should or shouldn't feel. I'll show him what freedom looks like!*

Night of Day 3

As the sun set, Gretel tensed with discomfort. *I need to find a safe place to sleep for the night. If adult revealers* are *keeping watch, they'd probably chase me off too, even though I'm not a fire type. Either that–or they'll use me as bait for prey.* She shuddered, then scoured the ocean until finding the silhouette of another island in the south. The wind-type hatchling summoned a new tailwind and glided there, despite her extended use of her wind summons beginning to drain her. She shook her head, powering through her exhaustion until she finally came within two miles of it, by which time the sky was almost dark.

To her dismay, it was mostly desolate and mountainous; even from this distance, she could feel the heat emanating from a volcano which was oozing lava down ancient crevices in the earth, their glow visible from underground as night fell. The white-and-purple hatchling did spy trees far from the site, closer to the shore, but they were very tall and their only branches were at the top with very few leaves. *They won't make very good shelter like the ones on Efron's island...*

Gretel briefly debated staying with her friend overnight instead, but instinct deterred her; if she spent longer than five hours in a single place, she would be a target for larger predators–which included revealers and fire types. She planned on going to see Efron in the morning, so if she also stayed there during the night before it, that would be too long. *Besides, I'm getting tired... I don't know if I have the energy to fly all the way back there, even if I were willing to stay there for the night.*

There were some springs in the mountains around it, and the tiny wyvern realized just how thirsty she was, especially as the dry, hot air of the island contrasted sharply with the humidity over the ocean she had crossed to reach it.

Gretel carefully dove to land at the nearest body of water midway up the outer side of a mountain, then flinched when a geyser erupted from it, nearly scorching her with its steam alone. *Geez! No wonder there aren't proper trees here; this place is unlivable!* Her hot pink eyes looked toward the summits. *The air higher up is usually cooler. Maybe there's a spring I can drink from toward the peaks?*

She gave a single, forceful flap of her wings to create a downward gust that bounced back up from the ground and elevated her without the need for physical exertion. Unfortunately, in the place of physical energy loss, the wind type was becoming lightheaded and even more tired, both from overusing her abilities. *I can't travel for much longer; I really need rest before I pass out...!*

Gretel didn't see water at this height, so she took advantage of her summoned gust to keep ascending until it petered out. As soon as she neared the summit, though, a sudden light in the darkness of night caught her attention. It was small, but condensing into a sphere that was growing larger. *What is that?* she wondered, and like a moth to an ember, the hatchling was drawn to it.

Suddenly the light became a beam that shot directly at her. With a terrified yet baffled squeal, the baby wind dragoness barely managed to dodge by reflexively using her ability to shift the direction of the existing air so she'd be blown out of its path, learning the hard way that it was a light dragon's heat ray. *What the heck?! Why would a light dragon attack anyone--let alone me?! I didn't even know it was there!*

That lightheadedness increased from the strain of overusing her abilities, leaving her to rely solely on her physical strength–which was already waning due to how far she'd traveled–to stay airborne. Gretel took a deep breath to steady her pounding heart after the near-death from the heat ray, then eased into a glide, circling the midpoint of the mountain. To her relief, there was another spring, and she finally landed to quench her thirst.

Without a moment's hesitation, the wind type crouched by the water and lowered her head to its surface–which was hot in spite of the altitude, but not enough to burn–and closed her eyes as she lapped up her fill of it, allowing her tired body a much-needed rest in the meantime. She finished drinking and opened her eyes, then recoiled with a startled cry when she saw three other pairs staring up at her from the depths; her legitimate fear instinctively made her boost its volume enough to echo out against the moonlit sky as she was still reeling from both the heat ray and this new potential threat. Too drained for self-defense or fleeing, the only other option was to watch and brace herself.

An older, vibrant-red water dragon poked his head out of the spring, the protective veil over his cobalt eyes receding toward their tear ducts as he stared warily at her. "What was *that* for?!" he demanded.

What is he talking about? I didn't do anything bad! Is he mad at me for drinking from his home? "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to trespass," Gretel apologized, fearing that the opportunistic predator before her would prey on a baby wyvern, especially one as currently helpless as she before given a chance to recover. "Just... make it quick..."

A second–a swampy-green dragoness the same age–followed him out, but unlike her presumed mate's eyes, her violet ones were more worried than upset. "Calm down... We have a daughter your age. You're obviously in no shape to survive on your own right now; if you can keep quiet, we'll let you rest here," she offered.

First light dragons, and now water types? Maybe this island isn't as unlivable as I thought... for anyone but me, that is, she thought, calming down.

He gaped at the other adult, dumbstruck. "Keep quiet? It's too late for that; didn't you hear her alert? The last thing we need is a flock o' wyverns comin' after us for scaring one of their kind!"

Alert...? So that's what upset him... Gretel shook her head in denial. "No, please...! I didn't mean to alert anyone; it was accident...! If another wind type does come, I'll tell them–"

"I'm not putting my daughter in danger if they don't listen to you! So get away from us before they get here!" he snarled at the wind type. "Off with you!"

"But I'm too tired to–" Her sentence ended with another cry as a bullet of water whizzed past her head from his mouth in a warning shot.

"Scram!" he demanded again, even more nervous after her second vocalization.

Adrenaline from fear loaned her the temporary strength to take flight once more, this time toward a tree between the mountain and the cliff above the ocean. She landed on the top and curled up, hoping that any flighted dragons passing by wouldn't spot her through the thin layer of leaves as she reluctantly let sleep overcome her.

Chapter 4

"You okay?" an unfamiliar young female's voice faded in.

Gretel opened her hot pink eyes from a half-sleep, finding it was just before dawn. She was still lying on the top of a very tall tree, and lifted her gaze to meet the ice-blue eyes of a pale yellow juvenile wind dragoness hovering in front of the hatchling on blue-striped wings.

"I heard your distress call. You sounded terrified," the older wyvern explained, and with a laugh, she added, "Seeing that you're in fire dragon territory, I can guess why."

Fire dragon territory? With the rising sun casting light over the island for the first time since she arrived, Gretel looked down and past the mountain she'd fled from and froze to see a nineteen-foot-tall fire type dragon sleeping at the base of the volcano. There were a few juveniles and hatchlings, although not of similar colors to the adults or the fully grown male, but still also sleeping out in the open near him. They were much smaller and of varying sizes–the same height as any other bipedal dragon types of their ages. Some were even lying comfortably in the lava-filled grooves in the earth trailing down from the volcano. Their differing colors implied they may not all be related to one another–which made sense as she recalled they were solitary and just shared a home range similarly to poison types.

"Woah," the white-and-purple hatchling exclaimed quietly, awestruck. *I've never seen one in person! I knew they were big, but that's the real deal!*

"Wait, you didn't even *know?!"* the yellow dragoness realized with incredulous laughter. She shook her head dismissively. "If you're good on your own, then I'm outta here. I ain't stayin' around those monsters if I can help it."

Gretel got to her paws, grateful that her sleep had restored her energy for abilities even if she was still tired. "I'm good," she confirmed.

"'Kay. Just holler if you need help. Bye!" With that, the yellow-and-blue juvenile turned her back to the younger wind type and flapped her wings just once to gain height before she summoned a tailwind and flew off.

Guess the red water dragon was right to chase me off after my accidental alert, the hatchling reflected. Then she glanced toward the sleeping fire dragons again with fascination. When one of the juveniles–a male perhaps four years old, whose gold scales shimmered in the rising sun's light–stretched and woke up, she ducked against the treetop to stay out of his sight while still keeping watch.

His red eyes looked toward the sky as if to gauge what time it was. When a giant bird nearly the size of himself flew by overhead, his bat-like ears perked up and he instantly spread his crimson wings, taking flight to pursue it. The bird noticed him right away and changed course to flee. It was much faster than the dragon, but unlike the swift wind types, the fire dragon didn't need to make contact with it to hunt; instead, he opened his beak-like mouth and Gretel's keen eyes noticed a gas emitting from it. He used his powerful wings to fan the gas toward his prey, whose wing beats faltered slightly upon inhaling it. Then he parted his jaws a second time, and a breath of fire ignited the trail of gas in the air directly to the bird, catching its feathers aflame.

As it dropped, burning, from the sky, he snatched it out of the air in spite of the fire's heat in the sharp claws of his talon-like hands. "Heh! Dumb bird didn't even see what hit 'em," he chuckled to himself in a loud enough volume that suggested he didn't care if he drew attention from anyone.

Makes sense... Fire types don't really have natural predators, Gretel realized. She stilled the air around her to mute herself and then stealthily moved closer to the dragons, making extra sure to stay out of their sights.

The young male looked down at his peers. He landed with his kill in one hand, then gently roused a deep blue dragoness the same age as him with his free one. "Lazuli... Hey, Lazuli...!"

"Huh...? What? Citrine?" The other juvenile raised her head groggily. "What is it? It's not even morning yet!" she groaned.

"I got something for ya," he said in a sing-song voice, a wide grin on his face.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and opened them, then covered her mouth. "Did you *catch* this?!"

"Yep!"

"How?!"

"Heh, well you know what they say: the early dragon gets the bird," he snickered.

Lazuli rolled her eyes playfully. "That's not the saying," she giggled, but accepted the gift, biting into it with the beak-like hook of her muzzle. "Mm! It's great! I haven't seen a bird this big caught by anyone besides adults before," she admitted, not hiding how impressed she was. "Thanks, Citrine."

"You, uh... You can call me Rin, if you want," he invited her somewhat modestly.

Her eyes widened slightly, then she smiled. "Sure thing, Rin. And you can call me Lapis."

He beamed.

Gretel felt secondhand happiness from the scene, but then realized what time it was. *I'm not going to be late for my meeting with Efron today,* she told herself, and discreetly flew off to his island while the fire types were distracted.

She made it to Efron's island around midmorning, and once again was surprised to hear him singing. It was another original song, similar in the beginning to the first one, but towards the end a few notes had been changed to slightly higher ones, portraying a sense of hope. Gretel had muted herself so as not to interrupt, then landed perpendicular to him within plain sight since she didn't want to spook him like last time.

Efron's eyes were closed, though, and his open wings were lifted slightly, catching the natural breeze as if feeling the song itself, and even the encompassing music from the surrounding birds, which he also intermittently paused to let echo his melody back to him. The song ended a low, final note as if with determination. His light green eyes opened and he watched the mockingbirds still repeat the ending of it for several seconds.

The wind type hatchling admired how heartfelt it was even with all of its technical imperfections, releasing the air around herself so he could hear her. "That was beautiful. Even better than last time!"

The young revealer finally noticed her at that, recoiling with shock and embarrassment. "When did *you* get here?!"

"Right after you started," she answered honestly. "I didn't mean to scare you, though."

He relaxed some, but still seemed tense. "Sorry. After you came by after noon yesterday, I thought you'd be later today too, so I was trying to squeeze in some practice before you got here."

Gretel tilted her head slightly. "Why apologize for practicing?"

"Because I'm still not very good…"

"The whole *point* of practicing is to improve."

"Yeah, but… you… had to *hear* it not being very good…"

"I thought it was perfect. But even if you think it's not, what's the big deal?"

The violet revealer gaped at her. "…You *liked* it?"

"Uhh… yeah? Didn't I already say it was beautiful?"

He shook his head. "You're just being nice, aren't you…?"

Gretel took a step back, somewhat offended. "I'm not a liar!"

Efron jumped, covering his mouth with regret. "I–I didn't mean it that way–"

She snorted. "If you don't believe me, go ahead and use a reveal! I wouldn't be able to lie in that case, right?"

He shrank. "N-No, I believe you now! I'm sorry–I wasn't trying to call you a liar–"

The white-and-purple wyvern shook her head. "I know you didn't mean it that way. But I want you to believe me. So go ahead–reveal me; let me prove it."

The violet-and-blue juvenile calmed down with her assurance that she wasn't angry with him, standing straighter again. "…Are you sure? Again, I already believe you…"

Gretel nodded. "Try me!"

"…Alright." He drew in a nervous breath. "Did you really think my singing was beautiful–or perfect…?"

"Your singing wasn't," she admitted, then hesitated guiltily from the reveal. *That's true, but singing isn't the point!* "But the *song* was perfect!"

He blinked, confused. "What's the difference?"

"The song is what matters. It doesn't matter who sings it or how good it was sung. The song itself is what tells the story," the baby wind dragoness explained.

"If only the song matters, then why keep practicing singing…? Why should I sing at all, if anyone can sing the same song?"

"Because we *don't* sing the same songs! That would be rude unless we truly feel the same way as you."

Her friend seemed completely lost. "…What?"

"I told you, the point of singing is to express yourself. Singing someone else's song means you're expressing *them,* not you–and even then, their old song might not express how they currently feel."

Efron's ears perked slightly. "How exactly does a song express anything…? And I still don't see why someone's skill at singing doesn't matter…"

"Getting better at singing means the song will be more easily understood! Every note has a meaning, and while some were a little flat here or there–" she hesitated again with the slightest bit of guilt as she realized the reveal was still active, but decided to keep going, "--your singing was on key enough to know what note you were trying to hit. So I understood it–and your singing is good enough as it is because of that."

He stared at her incredulously. "Understood…? But I wasn't really thinking when I was singing just now… I just improvised based on how I felt in the moment, like you told me to. I wasn't attempting to give out a particular message…"

"Again, that's the whole point of singing! You don't need lyrics or words to send a message–you just need to let the feelings out verbally, and everyone will pick up on them."

He froze. "…Everyone…?"

She shrugged. "Wind types can, at least. I can't speak for every other dragon type."

"What… feelings… did you pick up from my song, then…?"

"You sounded sad, but hopeful, and like you were determined to keep hope." That was all Gretel intended to say, but impulsively added, "When you let the birds join in, it kinda made me feel like you wanted someone's validation." She cringed at herself slightly. *I didn't mean that to sound rude… Just how long do reveals last?*

The violet yearling's green eyes widened slightly. "That's… exactly how I was feeling," he confirmed. "Wow. You got all of that…? From a song I didn't even plan out?" She nodded. "How?"

"The notes and melody," Gretel replied simply. "Even if some of your notes weren't perfect, most were–enough to know the key and what you meant." She froze. "Sorry. I'm not trying to be rude about you not hitting the notes right…"

He shook his head. “It's fine. You're not being rude about it, just stating facts. I noticed it too–which is why I said I'm not very good yet."

She relaxed some. “Okay. Well, that's really it. So, uh… you can end the reveal now, if that's all you wanted to know."

Efron covered his mouth. “Oh–sorry! I forgot I was still using it." There was a beat of silence. “I stopped it now."

Gretel was still a bit uncertain, scared to say something else rudely just in case it was somehow still active.

“...You okay?” he prompted worriedly.

“How do I know when it's started or stopped?” she dared herself to ask. “I didn't see your gem glow or anything."

“Oh..." His voice sounded hurt from her lack of faith in him. He shook his head as if to dismiss that feeling, the blue frills on the sides of it flowing in the motion, and his demeanor shifted to neutrality again.

Was that a conceal–also without his gem? She frowned.

“When we have enough stamina in ourselves to use our abilities, we don't need to draw from our gems–unless we want our gems to extend how long our abilities last. I have stamina and I didn't want to extend my reveal on you just now, so I didn't use my gem,” he said with a small, reassuring smile.

Gretel sat down, taking this information in but still not happy about her lack of awareness of its usage. “So if you *don't* draw from the gem, how would I know when the ability is being used?”

“Hm. I guess you wouldn't... But you can always find out by lying."

“...Lying?”

“Sure. The reveals only work if you're trying *to hide* the truth, so it'll stop you from purposely lying to hide it. If the reveal isn't active–and I assure you, I did stop it--then you can lie as much as you want."

She laughed at the thought of saying something utterly ridiculous out of nowhere to test that. “Thanks; I trust that you stopped it."

“Are you sure…? Just like you wanted to prove to me that you were honest, I kinda want to show you that I am too. So go ahead, make something up,” he invited her.

Gretel beamed, rearing up on her hind paws in a mock-aggressive stance. “I'm actually a fire type, and I'm gonna gobble you up!” she growled playfully.

He laughed. “See? You wouldn't be able to call yourself a fire dragon if the reveal was still active."

She giggled. “So what *would* happen if I tried to lie during a reveal?”

“Hm. I don't know. Lying would be impossible, so I've always just said nothing or used conceals if I didn't want to tell the truth every time my mom would–” The sentence ended abruptly and his muscles visibly tensed.

Gretel then noticed a glinting of the blue gemstone on his forehead before he calmed down.

Efron realized she saw, and seemed the least bit ashamed again. "...Sorry. Talking about her upsets me," he murmured. Then he nervously clarified, "I was using a conceal just now–I wasn't revealing you."

"It's okay," she assured him. Then the hatchling got an idea. "Why not reveal me again?"

"Uh... You actually *want* me to?"

"Yeah! We can find out what happens if we try to lie during a reveal!"

He gave a thoughtful hum. "I'm curious about that, too, actually. Ready?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay–I started it. Tell me the biggest lie you can think of," he encouraged her with a playful grin.

Gretel couldn't think of one besides the fire dragon lie from earlier. *Maybe I should just say something blatantly untrue, like the sky being green, even though I know it's blue.* "The sky is blue!" she said instead, then paused awkwardly.

The young revealer dragon was confused at first, as if he wasn't sure if she was stating a fact or trying to lie. Then his green eyes shone with fascination when he realized it was the latter. "Wow. So you really *can't* lie during a reveal."

"Is it still active?" she asked him.

He jumped, as if forgetting again. "Yeah–but I can end it now if you want."

"Wait! I wanna see what else reveals can do," she confessed. "What if I truly wanted to tell a *lie* that I was hiding?"

"Huh?"

"Reveals only make us act on our hidden truths, right? So what about hidden lies that I truly want to tell?"

"Um... I don't think anyone would hide a lie–especially if they wanted to tell it. It wouldn't make sense; lies are told on purpose to hide truths."

"That's exactly why I'm curious," she giggled.

"...Huh. Good point. Well, my reveal is still active, so go ahead."

She grinned. "Let me come up with a secret lie real quick." Gretel wanted to be more creative with it this time–to conjure a lie that sounded believable. *I got it! The lie will be that wind dragons' eyes change color a week after we hatch. But Efron can't find out about this lie, even though the point is that I truly want to tell it to him.* "Okay–ask me what it is."

He squinted his eyes at her with mock-suspicion. "What lie are you keeping secret?"

"It's a lie that wind dragons' eyes change color a week after we hatch!" she blurted out, then realized what she said.

"It's a lie?" he quoted her, intrigued.

"I didn't mean to say *that* part," she admitted. "That must be the reveal talking."

"I guess that answers that. I'm starting to get a little bit drained, so I'm gonna end the reveal now, okay?"

She nodded. "I'm a fire dragon," she repeated just to make sure it was truly over, then laughed with relief. "Sorry. Just checking."

He chuckled. "It's okay. I know from experience that reveals can be scary. I don't blame you for wanting to be sure it's ended."

Experience…? Gretel echoed his word in her mind, puzzled. Then she remembered his cousin mentioned how Efron's control-freak of a mother had constantly revealed him much like their prey. *I've got nothing to hide, but even I got nervous when Efron revealed me just now–and I had asked him to! If he had revealed me without my knowledge or permission, I don't know if I'd ever trust him again. Yet he tolerated over a year of her doing that to him…* The wind-type hatchling shuddered.

"…Are you alright?" her friend asked her again, growing concerned by her silence. "Wait–*did* I scare you after all…?!"

"N-No! I'm okay; you didn't do anything wrong," Gretel assured him. She wanted to clarify that *he* was the one she was worried about having been scared–by his mother in the past–but the baby wyvern knew the mention of her usually sent him into a panic, and so changed the subject. "Enough about reveals. Let's focus on your other ability now!"

He blinked, confused. "…Conceals?"

"No, silly! Your flight! I promised to help you learn to fly, right?"

Efron's green eyes shone with excitement at that. "Really? Like, right now?"

"Why not? Are you too drained from the reveals?"

"No–revealers, and every other dragon type besides wind, really–rely on physical strength for flight, not any magical abilities."

Gretel tilted her head slightly. "So do wind types," she corrected him. "Our magic over wind direction and summons just lets us fly without using too much of our physical strength."

"Huh. I never would've guessed; the way you all glide around makes it look so effortless…"

She giggled. "With my abilities, I'm sure you can glide around the same way!"

"Are you sure it's that easy?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

He shrugged. "Wind types are as light as feathers. I'm… not."

"Hm. Well, let's give it a try anyway!"

"…Alright. Um… What should I do…?"

"How high can you climb a tree?"

"…What?" The violet revealer suddenly seemed wary of her methods. "Revealers can't really climb anything without footholds. But why does it matter?"

"It's easier to fly if you're falling; your wings should instinctively spread, so when they do, I can catch you on a summoned wind."

Efron grimaced ever so subtly, but Gretel's sharp eyes noticed it.

"What?" she prompted innocently.

"I mentioned before that flight isn't instinctual to revealers, since our wings weren't naturally evolved like other dragon types'; ours were gifts from the heavens after that story I told you about Zephyr reaching it," he reminded her quietly. "Falling from too high is dangerous for us until after we've learned to fly."

"Wait... You're telling me that story was *real* history?! Are you sure revealer's wings weren't just evolved generations after Zephyr reached the heavens? I mean, it's possible you didn't start to evolve to have them until after Zephyr returned; maybe other revealers decided to climb the mountain to reach the light dragons after they healed his hatchling, and that could've played a part. Because light dragons *can* heal–that's a fact–but they can't give dragons wings or natural gemstones or *anything*. They can't just *make* things like that occur in nature."

"It wasn't light dragons who gave them to us," he stated, the tip of his lowered tail twitching slightly. "Sure, some parts of the story were probably exaggerated–with the mountain he climbed being the 'tallest in the world,' for instance. But everything else is true...!"

Gretel narrowed her hot pink eyes skeptically. "If your wings weren't evolved, and weren't a gift from light dragons, then how did revealers suddenly get them?"

"The second dragon type inhabiting the heavens..."

"...Huh? Aren't they just a myth? There are only eleven different dragon types."

"That we've seen," he pointed out the least bit defensively, the twitching of his tail-tip becoming more frequent as if with building frustration. Then he paused for moment and immediately his demeanor changed to more neutrality.

Another conceal? She frowned again. "You know you're allowed to have emotions, right?"

"...What?"

"I don't know what you've been taught, but it's okay to get defensive. I admit I don't know much about revealer dragons' history, so you're right to be upset if I'm being insensitive. And... sorry if I *was* being that way. I'm just trying to understand, that's all."

"...Taught?"

"Sorry. I don't know for sure if revealers are taught to use conceals. I just assumed."

"Gretel, I'm not concealing my emotions because I'm 'not allowed to have them.' I'm concealing them out of respect," he explained calmly.

"...Respect? For what?"

"You," he chuckled, slightly amused and relieved to know her disapproval stemmed from poor communication.

"How exactly are conceals respectful...?" she asked, genuinely wanting to understand.

"Because I don't want to be defensive or anxious or any other negative thing around you. I want to get along and keep peace between us."

His friend gaped at him, astonished. "I never thought about it that way..."

"It's okay. Different dragon types don't really spend much time together like we do. Just a few minutes ago I thought your flight was magical, remember? There's a lot we don't take the time to learn about each other."

"True..." Gretel sat down and mulled over his words. *Now that I think about it, the rumors of the twelfth dragon type were only spread by elites–dragons who have actually been to the heavens themselves. Maybe they* aren't *a myth after all...?*

"Anyways... I can jump and hover on my own, for a few seconds I mean. If that's enough for you to help me fly," he said, circling the topic back to her offer.

"Oh! Okay–yeah! Let's do this!"

Efron moved to the edge of the sparse forest and Gretel positioned herself a few paces behind him. The young revealer dragon glanced back at his friend, who gave an encouraging nod and summoned a tailwind. He then got a running start and leapt up, flapping his small wings which did catch her wind with each downbeat.

He yelped when the summoned gust had propelled him forward at an unexpected speed.

"Sorry," Gretel chuckled nervously as he struggled to adjust.

She lessened its strength, but by that point he had just gotten used to the original force and now was unprepared for the change; Efron immediately fell without the previous amount of support.

"Eep!" she chirped in a panic, stopping the forward wind altogether to redirect it skyward so he wouldn't crash-land.

That was when she realized he was right about the difference in their weight: revealers were a lot heavier than wind dragons, even though he was young and fit. She steadily increased the force of her wind but couldn't strengthen it enough in time to keep him airborne. It did cushion his fall, though; he managed to catch himself on his hands and knees.

She ended her abilities and rushed to his side. "Are you okay?!"

"That... was a lot," he said with a breathless, somewhat hysterical laugh.

Gretel shrank. "Sorry. I've never tried to carry another dragon before. Ma-a-a-aybe we should plan ahead..."

He rocked backward over his haunches to sit with his legs in front of him, still trying to orient himself. "I see... I think I can adapt, but only if you keep the winds consistent."

"I *can* keep it consistent, but that would mean the consistent wind has to be the perfect force and direction for you from the start; if it isn't, you'll fall unless I change it. The problem is trying to figure out exactly what 'perfect' is."

"How do we find out?"

"Hm... I know! Stand up, spread your wings, and hold still," she instructed, and he obliged her. "I'm gonna send a gust at you with more and more force until it knocks you over. Ready?"

"Oh–uh, okay. Ready!"

The tiny white wyvern backed up a fair distance, reared onto her hind legs, then flapped her purple-striped wings just once to summon wind directly at him. The heavier dragon type was unfazed at first, until she picked up its strength into an eventual gale; he shielded his eyes from the debris, dust, and loose leaves scattering around him. His feet planted into the ground, their claws digging in to grip the flattened grass between his toes. He was fighting to keep his wings from being blown back.

She frowned. "Your wings really *are* weak, aren't they?" she called, her volume control letting her be heard over the wind. "Do you want to stop? If you can't keep your wings open, I don't know if flight is possible for you yet."

Efron opened his mouth and she vaguely heard his voice, but it couldn't reach her. He realized this and shook his head in answer. The young violet revealer stiffened his blue wings, actively trying harder to keep them spread and still. With that effort, they caught her wind and he was blown backward clean off his feet, landing ungracefully on his rump.

Gretel whooped and ended her ability. "Yay! I got the force down! If you can keep your wings steady like that, then you *can* glide after all!"

"Really?" He gathered his legs beneath him to stand, beaming. "Great! So what are we waiting for? Let's try it, then!"

"Right! Now... get in position, maggot!" she commanded with a laugh to show she was kidding.

"Sir, yes, sir!" he chuckled, playing along. The two went back to the forest's outskirts.

"Ready-y-y-y? *Go!*"

Just like before, he leapt and she summoned a tailwind, but this time she aimed it up at him with the same force that had knocked him over, and he kept his wings stiffened enough not to bend back under the pressure.

"I... I'm doing it...!" Efron realized. "I'm gliding...! Gretel, you did it! I'm gliding!" he called out joyously.

Gretel couldn't bring herself to respond; her head was beginning to throb. *I'm overexerting myself... But I can't quit now--we only just started! I have to keep pushing.*

When she didn't answer, he risked a glance over his shoulder; the motion unbalanced him, though. He flapped his wings in an attempt to orient himself, but his wingbeats were unsynchronized and he panicked too much to find a rhythm. "Gretel, what's the matter? I–" The sentence ended in a gasp when her wind petered out and she collapsed.

"Gretel?!" he called again, more worried about his friend than himself even though he was now dropping from the sky. He crash-landed, momentarily stunned from the pain, but forced himself up and raced to her. "Are you alright...?!"

"I..." she tried to speak between labored breaths, but the world faded out.

Night of Day 4

Gretel slowly regained consciousness, a male's soft voice fading in with it. She opened her hot pink eyes, confused at first by the dim lighting of her new location before she recognized it was the foxhole she had hid in during their first game of hide-and-seek. Efron was lying on his belly beside her, his arms crossed under his chin before he lifted his head to speak more respectfully.

"Are you okay?" he murmured the slightest bit louder, as if repeating the phrase to be sure she heard him this time. His green eyes were glistening with concern.

Gretel blinked. "Did I faint?"

Efron nodded, and looked away guiltily. "I'm sorry… I never should have asked you to help me fly again so soon after the force test… I should've known it'd drain you like that…"

"What? Don't apologize! You didn't do anything wrong; I just pushed myself too hard… and I knew it, so it's my own fault, really." She got to her paws and moved forward to exit the den, then realized with horror how late it was; the dim lighting wasn't just from their shelter. Her heartbeat quickened. *I should have recovered after a half-hour, at most–but the day's almost over now!* "How long was I out?!"

His ears flattened from her volume. "I'm not sure how to tell the difference between being fainted and sleeping," he admitted, "but you looked exhausted, so I let you rest…"

Every instinct she had screamed for her to take flight and leave the island until morning. "I-I gotta go," she stammered anxiously.

"Go… where?"

"Anywhere!" she yelled. "I'm an idiot for pushing myself so hard after I didn't sleep properly last night. Now I'm a sitting duck here! I can't just wait around for another predator to find me–"

"Wouldn't one find you easier if you left the foxhole at this hour?"

The white-and-purple hatchling froze. "You're right, but that doesn't change how I feel…" She forced herself to turn away from the exit, but ended up pacing as an outlet for her increasing anxiety.

"Did something happen last night?" he pressed gently, referring to what she mentioned about not sleeping.

Gretel paused. "Kinda. I just pushed myself too hard back then, too," she partially lied, not wanting to admit how scared she'd been after the light- and water-type dragons had attacked her.

"Oh. I've… always wondered where you go after you leave every day."

"Every day, I wonder that too," she said with a half-hearted laugh. "I don't usually visit or stay in the same area twice unless it's a retreat that I *know* is safe."

"Huh. Does that mean my island here is a retreat? You visit me daily. But I guess, if you want to leave, you *don't* exactly feel safe here…"

"Y-Yeah, but that has nothing to do with you," she assured him; "I don't feel safe *anywhere*."

The violet revealer yearling calmed slightly to know it wasn't his fault, but then seemed even more worried about her. "Why not…?"

"I told you before that if wind types stay too long in one area, we risk getting hunted… We don't have set territories or home ranges or families to protect us. The closest we have to territories are retreats–so we *can* get a little protective over those safe spaces whenever we return to them. But I'm… still kinda looking for retreats of my own."

"And you're okay with that…?" Efron asked, his face scrunched up as if struggling to understand how she could be.

"With what?"

"Not having a home or family…"

"Well, yeah. Wind dragons are solitary; we don't *need* family." More optimistically, she continued, "But that doesn't mean we're completely without help if we need it! Wind types may not travel together, but *since* we travel, there's usually one that will hear us if we call for them. That's why we can get loud, and why expressing ourselves with singing is so important!"

"So singing isn't just for fun?!"

"Who says important things can't also be fun?"

"Wow," was the only word he could muster, but it was clear he was impressed. "Why don't you travel together, though? Wouldn't that make things easier? Why travel at all, for that matter? Social dragons stay in one place with their families and society; we protect each other."

"We don't have homes on *purpose*, because we're liable to be hunted if we stay in one place too long. As for why we don't travel together, well, we do sometimes–if it's with a mate or if we're being guided to someone else's retreat. But again, sticking together means there's a greater chance more of us will be hunted at the same time. It's better for one of us to get killed on our own than for all of us to be killed at once, y'know?"

"Hunted… by revealers?" he asked hesitantly.

"Depends on where we are. Revealers are a danger to us when we're in dry, open spaces like the highlands, but water dragons are a danger to us *everywhere*. I've never been around revealers until I met you, though, but I guess both of those types of dragons take advantage of their prey's needs to survive–by luring us with food and water, respectively. The whole reason wind dragons travel is to *fulfill* those needs and *not* become prey," she explained, and with a humorless chuckle, added, "You can see our dilemma."

"Hm. What about other dragons? If wind types don't need families, how do you protect yourselves from them?"

"Depends. If they're small or flighted, I'd do exactly what I just did to you today: blow them away–and then flee before they can steady themselves. But if they're bigger and more skilled at flight, like seer dragons, I'd probably have to roar them away."

"You can scare seers away with just a roar?!"

"Not just seers, and not just any roar; one that's at a high enough pitch would do more than just *scare* them," the hatchling giggled, widening her stance to let her folded wings spread from the backs of her forelimbs in a mock battle-pose. "Depending on the frequency, bystanders of other dragons types may not even hear it, but we'll choose the most effective pitch for our target and boost its volume to *rattle their brains!*" She playfully growled the last three words.

Efron gulped. "And I thought *reveals* were scary…"

"Don't worry! It takes a lot out of us, so we wouldn't do that unless we have to. Besides, I may be loud on accident sometimes, but volume and pitch are to-o-otally different. Pitch is purposeful."

The violet juvenile gave a thoughtful hum. "Pitch, huh? Is that why you're so perfect at singing?"

Gretel beamed. "Yep!"

"How come volume can be accidental when pitch can't be? Wind types have volume control, don't they?"

"Well, *yes,* but… solitary dragons only know how to use their abilities based on instinct until we're old enough to figure out how to use them on command--or to suppress that instinct, which is the part I'm still struggling with."

His jaw dropped. "Really? I thought all solitary types were skilled from the get-go!"

"Heh! That'd be nice, but no. We're just as unaware of everything when we first hatch as social dragons. The only difference is instinct–it activates our abilities on its own to keep us safe before we even gain awareness. Just last night I accidentally sent a distress call, and boy, it nearly caused a water dragon to shoot my face in!"

He recoiled. "What…? Are you okay?"

"Uhh, yeah? It was just a warning shot."

"*Warning…*?! For what…?!"

"He got scared of my distress call."

"You mean he wasn't the *reason* for it?!"

"Well, kinda? I was startled by him, but only because I was already in a panic from the light dragon."

"*Light dragon?!*"

"Well, not the light dragon itself," she said, and he relaxed slightly, only to become horrified when she clarified, "it was their heat ray."

He froze, then let out another hysterical laugh to release the tension. "Where exactly did you *go* last night…?!"

"The volcano."

"Where the fire dragons live?!" he exclaimed. "Do you have a death wish?!"

"Rela-a-ax, it was an accident. I'm not dumb enough to approach predators like that on purpose. They didn't even know I was there!"

He caught his shaky breath in an attempt to steady his nerves.

Gretel tilted her head. *He isn't using a conceal this time,* she noticed, and wondered what that meant. "Uhh... Are we good?"

"Huh? Yeah–why?"

"If conceals are a sign of respect because you don't want to panic around me, why not use one right now? Do you not respect me anymore…?"

"*What?!* Gretel, I'm stressing right now because I'm *worried* about you! You almost got killed three times in one night!"

"Three?"

"The heat ray, the water shot, and the fire dragons…"

"Oh. But usually you use conceals when you get like this."

He shook his head. "It'd be disrespectful if I *did* use a conceal in this instance. My concern for you is honest; concealing it would make you think I don't care that you nearly died. I *do* care, so why hide that?"

Conceals are more nuanced than I thought... But I guess that makes sense. Then she grinned playfully at the other juvenile. "Heh, you must care about me a *lot* if you get this worked up over nothing!"

"It's not 'nothing,'" he argued. "And of *course* I care about you! You're like a sister to me–" Efron stopped himself and covered his mouth with regret given how she had just explained solitary dragons' lack of necessity for family. "S-S-Sorry…! I didn't mean to say that– I just–"

Gretel laughed genuinely, flattered. "It's fine. You social dragons value family, so I'll take that as a compliment."

Efron seemed somewhat embarrassed by her laughter, but didn't pursue the topic. "I guess… I owe you that duet now, huh?" he changed the subject.

"So soon? But you haven't learned to fly yet," Gretel pointed out.

"Well, flight won't be possible for me for a few more months. I managed to glide–and that's the best I can do right now. I-If *you* count it, I mean…"

The wyvern hummed thoughtfully. Her hot-pink irises studied her friend, trying to make out his opinion on the duet. She could tell he wasn't using a conceal, but even then, it was hard for her to get a read on him when it came down to what he wanted. "Would me counting it as flying be a good or a bad thing?"

The juvenile revealer's eyes glanced from his friend to the exit of the foxhole, as if he were looking for a way to avoid the question.

Gretel sighed. "If you don't wanna sing together yet, you don't have to, y'know?"

He recoiled. "I *do* want to sing with you! But I…"

"But you what?"

The juvenile revealer shrugged. "Never mind. If you don't want to count gliding as flying, then just forget I brought it up."

The white wyvern shook her head. "Why do you only care what *I* think counts? Don't *you* get a say in anything?"

Efron's green eyes widened slightly as they finally met hers again. He opened his mouth as if to answer, but then shut it in a near-grimace.

"What's the matter?"

"I… feel like I haven't really earned the right to sing with you yet…"

"Oh? Why not?"

He shrank, not answering.

"Efron?"

"W-Well, I'm not good enough at singing, for one… And for another, I don't know if you count gliding as flying. And I don't know if gliding *should* count if I can't do it without your help…! And I don't know if you should *help* me glide if it drains you like that– And–"

"He-e-ey, now. Chill out," she soothed him when he was clearly getting anxious again. "You overthink everything."

He took a shaky breath. "W-What?"

"You think of so many problems that I can't even keep track of everything you just said!" she laughed.

"S-Sorry…" He looked away guiltily.

"Wha-a-a-at? Don't be sorry! You didn't do anything wrong."

"So… what, then…?"

"Let me put it this way: if I didn't think you earned it, I'd just say so."

"But you *didn't* say so… You haven't mentioned it at all."

"Exactly! That means I think you've earned it."

Efron paused, processing this. "…Huh. That… makes sense."

Gretel giggled. "See?"

"How do you know these things?" he wondered.

"Uh… Know what?"

"Exactly what to say and do…"

She tilted her head. "I don't."

"But you're always so… carefree. Even after you've nearly been killed just last night. And you always know what to say when my thoughts spiral."

The striped wyvern sat and stared at him blankly. *I never thought about it.* "I guess I don't see a point in dwelling on things. But the knowledge of what to say might also be because wind types rely on direct communication. If I send out a message that was nothing but questions and doubts, I'd be ignored by rescuers who either can't decipher my message, or who won't take the time to even hear the full thing. If we need help, we have to identify the main issue and then communicate only that."

He stared incredulously at her. "…Wow," was all he managed to say at first.

"So what about you? Why do your thoughts 'spiral' or whatever you called it?"

"Uh... I don't really know. Maybe because revealers kind of expect things of you–without outright telling you what those expectations are... So it's really up to us to figure it out–to 'overthink' them as you said... And if we *don't* meet those unspoken expectations, whether or not we figure out what they are, then... we get..." The sentence trailed off. He reached one hand across his ventral scales, clutching his upper left side just under his armpit while wincing ever so slightly.

Gretel blinked with confusion and peered around her friend to see if he was injured there. "What's wrong? Did you get hurt when you fell earlier?"

He seemed to snap out of it. "Huh?"

"Your side. Is it hurting? Are you bruised? I'm sorry... I should have rested before carrying you instead of taking the risk of letting you fall–"

"N-N-No, you didn't hurt me! I was sore from the fall, but I wasn't injured..."

"Oh? Then what's the matter?"

"N-Nothing! Just... forget it. I'm fine. We, uh... We can practice the duet tomorrow. Are you hungry?"

As if in answer, Gretel's stomach growled. "Well, yeah, but... Are you *sure* you're okay?"

"Yep! In fact, I'll find us something to eat," the violet yearling assured her. "You just rest until I get back, alright?"

"Um... o-*kay*, if you're sure," his companion hesitantly agreed. She could tell he was looking to escape the conversation, so she didn't pressure him into telling her more than he was willing to share, despite her concern. When he crawled out of the foxhole, that's when her keen eyes noticed it: a faded scar under his left arm. With horror, the words of her friend's cousin rushed to the forefront of her mind:

"His mother never really stopped treating Galen like prey with her reveals. To his credit, Galen did tolerate it with his conceals for a very long time–until he finally reached a breaking point and willingly revealed just how he felt about her. That really made her angry... She wasn't used to anyone standing up to her. At that moment she reclaimed his name and... retaliated. Hurt him pretty bad. Probably would have killed him if Gramps hadn't taken him away."

A sense of unease surged through Gretel's body. *So it wasn't just his mother who would get physically violent when defied by their kin...? That's something all revealers do?!*

She fought the urge to call Efron back, to beg him to tell her this wasn't true–that his scar had been obtained by some irrelevant accident. But there was no mistaking that subtle wince indicating that he related it to his own perceived failure of living up to their expectations.

I've spent my entire life searching for a retreat where I wouldn't risk getting attacked... Yet the place revealers call home is where they get attacked by their own kin...?! She shook her head fiercely. *I can't let him go back to a revealer society... I can't let him go* anywhere *that he'll get hurt or killed!*

Gretel paced within the foxhole. *What should I say about the revealer island? Where else can I bring him once he's able to fly? Would he be okay without me afterward?*

Her tail lashed as an outlet for her anxiety. As she considered all the nearest places she's been to, her mind flashed back to the light dragon's unexpected heat ray that would have burnt a hole clean through her wing had she been any later dodging it, and her heart skipped a beat before racing as the terror she'd felt back then presently overwhelmed her.

No place is safe… for either of us. Even light dragons–who are supposed to be healers–won't hesitate to maim strangers… The wind-type hatchling felt herself trembling and she halfway-sat, halfway collapsed under her own weight, trying unsuccessfully to catch her breath.

No! I can't let doubts consume me…! I'll find a safe retreat just for me and Efron, Gretel thought decisively. But that internal assurance was extremely outweighed by the external symptoms those doubts had triggered. She still felt too constricted to breathe, too weak to stand, and that feeling of unease was enough to drag her hope back down into the depths of helplessness. *But what if I never find a retreat of my own…?*

Gretel let her front paws slide forward until she was somewhere between crouching and lying down, feeling lightheaded as she wasn't getting enough oxygen. *Why can't I breathe…? Am I dying…?*

Almost as if in answer, her vision clouded as her head pounded. The world went dark.

Gretel caught the scent of a rabbit before she realized she was awake. The tiny wyvern opened her eyes to see one freshly killed on the ground beside her, then glanced up at her friend, who seemed to be daydreaming again as he rested against the inner walls of the foxhole gazing absently outside.

She was about to call to him, but her stomach growled again despite her lost appetite. Everything felt kind of surreal. She was physically hungry but the thought of eating at this moment made her feel sick. Instead she took a deep breath–grateful that she could–and then curled up and tried to get her thoughts in order. Unfortunately she couldn't focus on anything, almost drawing blanks anytime she managed to pin down any single thought. Eventually she gave up and just shut her eyes again until she dozed.

"Are you okay?" Efron's voice faded in. "I brought food."

"…Huh?" was all Gretel managed to say, once again realizing she was awake. "Oh. Thanks."

That pang of hunger was stronger than ever, and by this point she was starting to feel back to normal. So the little wyvern went ahead and took a small bite. Her hot pink eyes shone. “Mmm! I don't think I've ever tried a rabbit before. This is good!”

Efron chuckled with amusement at her enthusiasm, watching her chow down. “It was fast. Took me a while to catch it for you without reveals."

“You did great,” she praised him between mouthfuls.

He beamed from her approval.

She swallowed and licked the scraps off her muzzle. “Aren’tcha gonna eat too?”

"Hm? Oh, uh, I'll eat whatever's leftover. Consider this a ‘thank you’ present for helping me so much."

“Aw, thanks! Well, I'm full now,” she lied, “so you can have the rest."

Efron blinked. “Are you sure?”

“Yep!”

“Alright." He picked the remains of it up in his clawed hands and began eating his share.

Gretel looked outside to see that dawn was nearing. For once she didn't feel deterred by her instincts to leave. *I guess it doesn't matter where I am... Efron will keep me safe.*

Chapter 5

At noon, after they had both gotten enough sleep and had lunch, Gretel felt more confident staying on Efron's island even if her instincts nagged her to leave. *I'll continue my search for a retreat this evening,* she decided. *In the meantime…* "Are you ready to practice the duet?" she asked her friend.

The violet yearling swallowed his last bit of lunch and seemed to cower slightly at her suggestion. "Uh… Right now?"

"Yeah; why not? You said you'd practice today."

"Oh… W-Well, I…"

The baby wyvern tilted her head. "You changed your mind?"

"N-No, but I'd rather practice singing for our duet alone…"

"Oh, okay! No problem. Should I leave, then?" She felt relieved by the excuse to act on her instincts.

"You can if you want," Efron answered, "but if you're willing to stay and plan out my half of the duet with you, I'd like that."

"Plan?" Gretel frowned. "You're still overthinking things. You can plan your half if you want to lead the duet, but my half will be improvised in response to yours. If you don't want to lead it, then you'd have a hard time planning around my improvisation."

"Oh… Should I improvise too…?"

"I mean, if you prefer improvising for it, then sure."

"Alright… I think I will, then. But I'd also like to lead it, if that's okay…?"

"Of course it's okay," she giggled reassuringly. "It'll be more fun for me that way."

He smiled slightly. "Thanks."

"Should I leave now and let you practice, then?" she asked again, losing the battle with her instincts ever since the opportunity to leave first arose.

"If you want to," the revealer repeated.

"Okay!" Gretel chirped. "Then I'll see you tomorrow!"

"See ya."

The wind-type hatchling couldn't help grinning as she eagerly took flight, proud of her friend. *I'm glad he's actually telling me what he wants to do. When we first met, he only tried to do things that he thought would impress me, or change his mind about doing them if I disapproved–like using traps to hunt. It's a process, but this is progress! If he learns to be independent enough, I'm sure he'd have no issues staying in my future retreat, even if other social dragons don't fare well outside of societies. He'll be the exception–there's hope for him yet! Speaking of retreats, I now have the rest of the day to look for one, too!*

The white-and-purple wyvern went south of Efron's home. She had been hatched farther north last season, and had already explored some islands east of her friend's; the revealer society had been west of it, and the fire dragons' territory had been southwest of it, so she refused to go west at all this time. She could see silhouettes of many islands in the distance, and most appeared to be just as vast as the volcanic one, if not larger. That was promising; the bigger the land, the greater the chances of her finding a piece of it outside of claimed territories; the last thing she'd want to do was get caught trespassing again, especially after she narrowly avoided that light dragon's heat ray a couple nights ago.

Gretel glided easily on her summoned wind until she reached the nearest one: a huge tropical island. Similar to the volcanic one, it sloped up from a beach to more mountainous terrain, just with a large jungle in between. The mountains had thick waterfalls that either pooled into springs and lakes, or trailed out into rushing rivers. The wind type was drawn in by their beauty. Taking the precaution of silencing herself and double checking to make sure no light dragon was within sight, she passed over the upper parts of the jungle's trees and began to dive down toward the lowest mountain spring.

Instinct once again took control of the hatchling, causing her to swiftly move backward before she realized what she was dodging; all Gretel felt in the moment was the disturbance of the air exactly where she had previously been, and now that she was out of harm's way, she felt terror upon seeing what caused it: the jaws of a humongous orange seer dragon snapping shut. He had emerged from the trees on clawed, spindly wings, much like a shark from water.

"Did you get her?" another male's voice sounded from below.

"She's quick, even for a juvenile," the would-be killer growled in a frustrated answer, but his large amber eyes never left Gretel, even as she tried to seize that moment of distraction to fly away.

"My perception's better than yours. Let me at her," the second replied.

Her mind raced in a panic as she still felt the first's wingbeats disturbing the air behind her. *I've never faced a seer before... What should I do...? I know I'm faster, but they can perceive time, can't they? Fleeing is useless if they can predict where I go...!* Her thoughts were interrupted by a younger, dark blue seer dragon intercepting her path, swatting her down with his large paw from above.

It hurt; no doubt her back would be bruised by the effortless attack that had knocked her from the sky. As she was falling toward the ocean's crashing waves, trying to recover her flight by redirecting the existing air beneath her skyward despite her pain, Gretel remembered what she had told Efron about how wind types dealt with larger threats: by amplifying their voice into a dangerous pitch and volume.

"You idiots!" sounded a third seer's roar at the first two. "She's the siren I foretold you of! If you don't want her to blow out our eardrums, then *leave her alone!*"

"*This* puny thing?!" the orange one exclaimed in utter disbelief.

"S-Sorry," the blue one muttered.

To Gretel's relief, she no longer felt them pursue her as she recuperated and flew off. The little wyvern went around the seers' island in a wide semicircle just to be safe, then continued south toward the silhouette of another large island. Her back ached with each flap of her winged forelimbs. She wasn't sure how long she could stay airborne at a time without the pain consuming her, especially now that the adrenaline from her near-death encounters was waning.

Gretel frowned as she came within two miles of the new island, realizing that it wasn't large at all, instead crescent-shaped, mostly a flat beach halfway outlined by a mesa with a few lone trees on top; the silhouette had just been in a misleading perspective. Still, she couldn't pass up the opportunity to rest her sore muscles. Without a second thought, the wind-type hatchling landed atop a palm tree to recover… but even as she got comfortable and lied still, the ache persisted.

Gretel was startled when the tree suddenly quivered as if from something impacting it.

"I win!" a young dragon's voice declared from below.

"No fair! You're bigger than me!" a second one complained.

The white-and-purple wyvern peered between the palm fronds to see two little water types chasing each other around the tree. The youngest was around her own age given their similar sizes, the other perhaps a couple months older. Their shared purple coloring made her think they were siblings.

"It's *totally* fair; you knew I was bigger before you challenged me to the race," the elder one argued, smugly adding, "It's not *my* fault you're a weak little baby."

"I'll show *you* 'weak,'" the smaller one growled with mock-indignation and playfully tackled his brother. The two tumbled and rolled until Gretel felt the tree quiver a second time. "Da-a-ad!" he abruptly whined.

"Shut up, tattletale! I didn't even touch you," the other shushed him dismissively, but the wind type could detect genuine distress in his younger sibling's pitch. She knew it wasn't a petty complaint, but rather, a call for help. Gretel impulsively wanted to jump down and to make sure he was okay until a fully grown indigo male approached them; she froze fearfully and remained hidden.

"Hey, go easy on your little brother," he scolded.

"But I didn't do anything!" the eldest defended himself. "We were just playing! He tackled me first, then we bumped into the tree–"

"It hurts," the youngest interrupted with another whine, and the other two water dragons hesitated when they realized he was serious.

"Hang on, I'll see if Valerie can help," their father assured them. He picked up the injured hatchling, put him securely between the large fins on his back, and rushed along the base of the mesa with the eldest right behind him. Gretel watched the family enter a cavern within it, then her sharp eyes detected a faint rose-colored glow from inside. Curiosity got the better of her and she silenced herself to land lightly outside of it, peeking in.

The glow was from the wings of a fairy type dragoness, who seemed to have fluttered down from somewhere above. Her white-spotted pale green-and-blue fur was sleek, and the tuft of her twitching tail puffy. Her rose-red irises darted over the sniveling juvenile as his father set him down in front of her. She pressed her white-tipped forepaw on his shoulder, and he winced.

"I know it hurts," Valerie acknowledged him as a matter of fact, then addressed the other adult as she added, "but the bones and muscles are fine. It'll bruise, but it'll heal on its own."

The father sighed with relief. "Thanks, Val." He turned to his sons. "Come on, you two. Back to the water. No more roughhousing until it's healed, you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad," they muttered simultaneously, following him out.

Gretel panicked as they neared the mouth of the cavern; she redirected the air skyward and rode it to the top of the mesa, then watched the trio swim out into the ocean until they dove out of sight. She let out a shaky breath, relieved they hadn't noticed her.

"*You* aren't as lucky with your injury," Valerie's voice suddenly sounded from behind her, and a startled squeal escaped the striped, white juvenile.

"W-W-What?" Gretel stammered, retreating a step. Fairy types weren't known to be violent, but she had heard stories of how cruel their sensory manipulations and hypnotic persuasions could be.

"Relax; I won't harm you. But I can sense the pain in your back, even if you're trying to ignore it. It's also visibly bruised and swollen. Please allow me to assess it further."

The smaller female paused with indecision, then crouched and braced herself, letting Valerie lightly place her paw over the spot that hurt the most. When the furred dragoness pressed down slightly, her forward-curled golden antennae lifting as if to gauge the hatchling's reaction, Gretel cried out in agony and reflexively jerked away from the touch.

The fairy type frowned, the light of her wings briefly shifting to blue. Gretel didn't know what that meant; it was all she could do to fight back the tears that had watered her hot pink eyes.

"It's a very thin fracture, but it may worsen if you strain yourself by flying," Valerie reported. "I'd recommend resting until it's healed in a few weeks."

"A few weeks?!" Gretel repeated, horrified. "I can't sit around for that long!"

The adult shrugged with indifference, although her wings' glow gained a reddish tint for a moment. "Do what you must, but you have been warned." Without waiting for the speechless wind type to think of a response, Valerie slinked into a burrow that presumably connected to the cavern.

Night of Day 5

It can't be that bad... Right...? Gretel lied to herself. *I'm sure if I take some breaks along the way, I can fly back to Efron.*

The striped hatchling reared on her hind legs and flapped her wings just once to summon a gust of wind, then cringed as the pain in her back flared up; she fell to all fours again, realizing the fairy type was right: she was in no condition to fly. "Valerie...?" she called, but there was no response.

By now it was evening, nearing night. Gretel considered her options: she could rest on this island, or call for help... and the thought of Efron being alone for weeks to wonder if she'd ever return made her feel too guilty to stay. So the wyvern decisively opened her mouth in a song that she projected as far as possible with her volume control.

The notes alternated between middle pitch–to represent the safety of her environment–and a lower, raspier pitch to represent her injury. She paused after, searching the skies for any trace of a rescuer. When she didn't see any, Gretel repeated the message.

In the distance she saw a brown wind dragon gliding toward her from the north, and she bounced to her paws, hoping he saw her too. But he hesitated before the seer's island, and he glanced between the jungle's trees and Gretel. Ultimately he turned and fled.

The hatchling's hope shattered. *I guess nobody but me is stupid enough to go near seers... Serves me right...* She sunk to the ground and curled up.

"I *knew* I recognized that voice!" a familiar female's giggle sounded from the west.

"Hey!" Gretel scrambled upright happily, turning to see the same pastel yellow-and-blue wind dragoness that had heeded her accidental distress call back on the volcanic island. Her back ached from the sudden motion, though.

The older wind type caught sight of her injury and winced empathetically. "Geez, that's a bad bruise... Did a fire type get you after all?"

"Well, no; it was a seer," Gretel admitted.

"Really?" She was genuinely surprised. "How'd that happen? Seers don't typically leave their jungles."

Gretel opened her mouth to tell her everything, but instead closed it, once again feeling stupid for having approached their island in the first place. "It was my own fault for trespassing... I should've known better than to fly over the trees..."

"H-Hey, don't beat yourself up! You're only, what, five months old? Can't expect to do *everything* right at your age," the older wind type assured her. "And given how nasty that bruise is, calling for help *was* the right thing to do just now. It's all a learning experience!"

The white-and-purple juvenile felt encouraged by her words. "Thanks...! I'm Gretel, by the way."

"Aw, what a fitting name! Strong, yet cute," the rescuer chimed. "I'm Chryssa. Nice to officially meet you!" She landed and gestured with a flick of her tail-tip for Gretel to climb on her back, and the hatchling obliged. "So, where's your retreat?"

"Uh..." *I don't have one yet...*

"I'll bet it's that little island east of here," Chryssa guessed. "That'd be perfect for you."

A perfect little island to the east? Hope of finding her own retreat was restored by this revelation. But for now, Efron took priority. "Actually, can you take me to my friend?"

"Oh, okay! Sure. Just guide me to 'em!"

Gretel did. She couldn't help admiring the older female's speed and how Chryssa seemed to know exactly which route to take to avoid potential predators.

The yellow dragoness slowed down as they continued North. "Uh, we're getting close to revealer territory," she warned the hatchling.

Oh. Gretel had almost forgotten that revealers viewed wind dragons just as unfavorably as the seers who had attacked her. "Just drop me off in the lowlands and they won't even know we're there."

"Are you sure? I don't want you getting attacked again..."

"Yep! Don't worry; my friend will protect me."

"Hm. Alright." Chryssa regained speed and descended gracefully until they landed beneath the trees on Efron's island, moonlight barely seeping between the leaves. "Stay safe out here, okay?"

"Alright," Gretel promised.

"Also, go easy on yourself. Remember: we're all still learning!"

The hatchling smiled genuinely. *I really needed to hear that.* "Thanks...!"

With that, Chryssa took off. Gretel glanced toward the foxhole she assumed housed Efron. It was almost midnight, though, so she didn't want to disturb him. Remembering Valerie's burrow, the wyvern got an idea; she moved to dig her own as best she could, through the pain in her back, then nestled inside it and shut her eyes, the entire day's events finally taking their toll on her as she succumbed to sleep.

Day 6

Gretel woke from a commotion nearby. She opened her eyes to see it was dawn, and a rabbit raced past her makeshift burrow a short distance away, followed a few seconds behind by Efron, who didn't seem to notice his friend. The violet yearling chased it for a few moments longer before bending to rest his clawed hands on his knees, panting.

"I can't keep hunting without reveals," he muttered to himself as he caught his breath, his green eyes focused on his fleeing target. He cringed when his stomach audibly growled, then allowed himself to fall backward where he sat there on the ground. He shook his head fiercely and Gretel felt a pang of concern when she saw his gemstone glow, as if he were trying to conceal his own starvation. It clearly didn't work.

The wind type hatchling couldn't stand to see him like this. She silenced herself as she emerged, then approached him. "Efron? Uh, you okay?"

The young revealer jolted and spun to face her. "G-Gretel?! What are you *doing* here so early? I'm fine; I was just–trying to hunt..." His sentence trailed off as his widening eyes noticed her bruised back. "Are *you* okay? Who did that to you...?!"

Gretel exhaled. "It's a long story... I'll tell you later. But forget about me; why aren't you using your reveals to hunt?" she asked him directly.

He recoiled. "I-I-I thought you didn't want me to," he stammered in a panic.

She shook her head. "I said *I* wouldn't eat your kills if that's how you lured them... I didn't say *you* couldn't," the striped juvenile pointed out.

Efron took a step back from her. "S-Sorry... I just..." His gem glowed successfully this time and he looked away from her guiltily as he calmed himself.

I thought he had finally been making progress yesterday when it came down to asserting himself... Was I wrong? Am I making things worse for him by being here, if he's just going to sacrifice his needs to appease me...? "Don't apologize. I don't care about any of that anymore, alright? So do whatever you need to."

Efron eyed her skeptically. "I mean... If you're truly okay with it, then..."

She scowled. "Why does it matter so much to you what I think? What about *you?* What do *you* think?"

Efron cowered from her expression alone. "I don't know... I'm sorry..."

"Stop apologizing!" she exclaimed, exasperated. Her lack of proper sleep and the persistent aches of her body weren't helping her mood. "You didn't do anything wrong!"

He opened his mouth as if to apologize again, then closed it and hugged his knees to his chest helplessly. "I don't get why you keep saying that when you're clearly mad at me..."

"What?" Gretel took a breath to calm herself. "Sorry… I'm not mad at you; I just had a rough night," she chuckled half-heartedly in an attempt to ease the tension.

His tone rose slightly with desperation. "But you were so proud of me for catching the rabbit without reveals the other night… And now, you're… *upset* about it?"

"Efron…"

"I don't–I don't know what I'm supposed to do…" His eyes watered and he buried his face in his arms as if to hide that. The gemstone glinted but instantly dimmed, indicating it was depleted. That only added to his stress.

"You're not *supposed* to do anything," Gretel murmured. "You should be yourself, that's all."

He shrank even more upon hearing that. "Be myself…?" He let out a voiceless, somewhat hysterical laugh. "I don't even know who that is…!"

The wind type was completely caught off guard by that response. She could tell just from his voice that he truly meant it. *How much of himself has he spent his whole life concealing…?*

He futilely attempted to draw from his gemstones over and over as he obviously stifled sobs.

Gretel finally moved to sit beside him. "You wanna know why my back is injured…? It's because I was looking for my *own* place in the world, and learned the hard way that I ended up at the wrong one… again," she confessed. "So I'm still looking. We're *all* still learning. Maybe we can figure ourselves out together."

Efron sniffled and finally raised his head from his arms, facing his friend hesitantly with still-watery green eyes, studying her as if to determine the sincerity of her words. He seemed torn between placing faith in the future and remembering how he had lost that faith in the first place.

Gretel gave the violet yearling a genuine, determined grin in response. *Things will work out for both of us as long as we don't give up. It won't be easy, and we're bound to make more mistakes along the way, but all that matters is what we learn from them so we know better next time.* "Everything will be okay," the wyvern assured him confidently.

Efron's tears fell once more, but this time with something akin to relief. He wiped them, then hugged her securely, stifling another sob.

The white hatchling's battered body reflexively assumed it was under another attack from the sudden physical contact, and for a split second she was overcome with fear; as a solitary quadruped, hugs via arms weren't a natural experience for her. But Gretel just as quickly understood he meant no harm, so she drew in a breath and released it in a sigh to relax. The embrace reminded her of the burrow she had sheltered in last night, and that comparison brought her a sense of safety. She eased into his hold, letting him cry it out.

"Do you want me to hunt that rabbit down for you?" Gretel offered after they had finally pulled apart.

The young revealer considered it. "I think I might be able to catch it on my own, if I hunt my usual way…" He hesitated, glancing her way as if awaiting her approval to act.

Gretel stared him down intently with her best impassive expression. *He can't keep waiting for others' permission to let him survive! I'm not going to influence that for him anymore. He needs to decide for himself, or he'll never gain independence!*

He frowned a bit anxiously, but when his stomach growled for the second time, he couldn't afford to wait for her to answer him. Without any other option, Efron walked off to a small berry patch in the more dense part of the forest. After plucking a few, he stalked over to the rabbit hole his prey had escaped to earlier. He kneeled out of sight beside the entrance, then scattered the berries in front of it.

Gretel's keen eyes noticed the familiar glint of his gemstone that had presumably been restored by now. Almost instantly the rabbit was forced to act on its suppressed impulse by coming out to inspect the berries.

Efron immediately lunged at his prey, snatching it in his hands and finishing it off with one swift bite.

She beamed with pride, but when he once again looked to her as if for confirmation that he was allowed to eat it, Gretel quickly dropped her smile and sat with clear indifference. The wind type could tell he was the slightest bit frustrated by her lack of feedback, but ultimately, he couldn't resist taking a bite. After that, hunger overpowered any self doubt he had left, and he finally ate it in earnest.

"I'm gonna go hunt too, okay?" the white-and-purple hatchling informed him. She reared up and spread her wings in preparation to fly in search of some birds. The second she flapped them, the motion caused her back's injury to flare up and she cried out in pain, dropping back down.

"Gretel, are you okay?!" Efron rushed to check on her.

"Y-Yeah, just sore," she muttered, more annoyed by her injury than hurt as resting there let the pain ebb to that dull ache which had persisted since yesterday. "It'll heal in a few weeks. No big deal." *...If I can figure out how to eat in the meantime, that is...*

"Want me to find another rabbit?"

She hesitated. *I still don't like the idea of eating something that was manipulated into letting itself be hunted... But what other choice do I have? The last time I tried to live off of berries and vegetation, it made me puke. Wind types just can't digest that stuff.*

"Gretel?" he asked again, more concerned when his friend hadn't answered him.

Scavenging on this island would be risky, since the only other predators are too big for me to fight, and I'm too hurt to flee; if they catch me looking for their leftovers, I'll be killed for sure. The striped wyvern's hot pink eyes looked toward the highlands. *After the threat of Efron's cousin, I can't risk going near them in the highlands either. So... what else can I do?*

Gretel sat up and wrapped her tail loosely around her paws, the spade-shaped tip of it twitching irritably. She was so caught up in her own thoughts that she hadn't even noticed Efron had left her side until he suddenly returned with a fox that he dropped in front of her.

She jumped. "You hunted this? Just *now*? That was fast!"

His green ears lowered shyly as if he were abashed by the passing compliment, until he seemed to second-guess himself. "I *did,* but… I also had to use another reveal for it. S-Sorry… I know you said you didn't want to eat prey that was hunted that way, but… that's really the only way I can hunt consistently…"

Gretel exhaled through her nose. *I guess the method of hunting prey doesn't matter too much if it's hunted all the same in the end.* "Thanks, Efron," she murmured. Out of the corner of her eye as she ate, she saw him gaze up toward his old society too. His expression was as difficult for her to read as it always was, but Gretel could hear the slightly unsteady breaths he emitted, and noticed he was trying to steady them.

He's scared… the young wind type recognized, *but he's determined not to be.* She felt herself smile slightly with hope.

Chapter 6

Autumn

Day 1

Gretel never expected that ‘a few weeks’ for her fracture to heal would turn into eight. She realized her impatience to take flight before recovering only reverted her injury to its original severity, prolonging her need to rest it.

Resting tortured the juvenile wind dragon even more than the pain of her injury; every day, her instincts to leave and travel in search of a safe retreat fought against her awareness that doing so would worsen her condition. Gretel also hated how useless she felt in the meantime, since she couldn't contribute to Efron while she relied on him to provide her food.

Even still, the violet revealer had assured his friend that she could help him with singing lessons while she rested, and Gretel had jumped at the opportunities, both for fun and to return the favor of his care for her. During some sleepless nights, Efron did confess to her that he truly did enjoy singing; the birdsong had been the only thing to bring him joy since he had been isolated from his society. He also admitted that he wanted to postpone their duet until he felt good enough–by his own standards–at singing, regardless if Gretel thought he was already adequate.

He had eventually stopped trying to appease her when he had caught on to the fact that she was refusing to react whenever he tried to ask her permission for anything. Gretel was proud of how independent and self-confident he was becoming without relying on her constant approval.

As for flight, Gretel did notice that the blue-spotted juvenile’s wings had developed a longer span and thicker muscles over time. Her injury prevented her from helping too much with wind summons, but she did compensate with her basic knowledge of how to fly. She would study his attempts and instruct him how to steer by tilting and directional wingbeats, how to keep balanced, and how to recover if his wingbeats became out of sync. Efron had taken her lessons seriously, both with singing and flight. Gretel even noticed that her lack of ability to aid his flight made him all the more determined to fly on his own.

It wasn't until two months after her initial injury, at the dawn of autumn, that seven-month-old Gretel had fully recovered, able to fly again without any pain at all. That's when two-year-old Efron had mastered flight, but hadn’t attempted to go high or far since he didn't want his mother to discover him, and because he didn't want to leave Gretel before she was capable of flying painlessly.

The young, striped wyvern also mentioned that they should wait until she found a suitable retreat for them to seek refuge in before leaving this island, and Efron agreed.

Presently, Gretel recalled Chryssa's mention of a small island east of the crescent one that the older wind dragoness had described as perfect. The issue there lied with how far it would be for Efron to travel with her, and the risk of getting attacked again by the seers on the jungled island between. After spending two whole months in pain that exacerbated each time she let her impulse to fly ruin her recovery, Gretel refused to take risks near islands inhabited by predators anymore. *The last thing I need is another 'few weeks' to recover from a new fracture.*

"I'll be right back, Efron. Gonna test my wings and explore south-west a little bit, okay?" she informed her companion. During her time spent gazing longingly at the sky, she had noticed that lots of birds roosted on a small island just miles from Efron's. That was a sure sign that there weren't any predators there, else the birds would have avoided it.

"Should I come with you?" Efron asked.

They both hesitated when Gretel's hot pink eyes focused on the top of the highlands where his family resided. "Maybe not yet… That time when your cousin caught me, he said nobody would care if a wind type made the lowlands a retreat. I've seen your family look directly at me sometimes when I had tried to fly off in the past couple months. They don't seem to care about me as long as I keep my distance from them," she explained. "But if they see *you,* then…"

Efron halfway frowned with uncertainty. "…Yeah. I'd rather not learn the hard way how they'd react to finding out I survived my mother's attack back when she disowned me."

Gretel nodded. She was also aware of how much more open her friend had become about his past traumas as she'd gotten older. There were a lot of smaller issues involved that the wyvern wouldn't have been able to understand back then, either.

His self-reflection ever since she had decided to be impassive to him made him realize that his deference to Gretel stemmed from fearing the consequences of not deferring to his abusive mother, and that seemed to be the key to him realizing just how free he was to be himself while away from the other revealer; he knew his friend wouldn't punish him like that, even if he did still get anxious now and then, especially if the wyvern ever lost her temper–which had happened occasionally due to how stir-crazy she'd get during her recovery. For the most part they had learned to trust one another and themselves… because they had to, and because they wanted to as friends.

"Alright, then. I'll see how things go," the white-and-purple juvenile said as she reared onto her hind legs and stretched her winged forelimbs. She flapped them just once to summon a tailwind, then again to take flight by riding it. The chilly autumn air barely hindered her, and she flapped to gain altitude just because she was able to without pain.

Gretel laughed with a mix of relief and enjoyment as she did a celebratory aileron roll, then did a backward loop. Her movements were as instinctive and graceful as they had been before she had ever gotten injured. She hovered and spun one-eighty degrees to look back at Efron, who was grinning just as widely as his friend was at the confirmation that she had fully recovered.

With that, she resumed her search for a safe retreat near enough for them both to fly to. Gretel followed the birds to a wooded area outlining a prairie. Its grass was tall and flowery, and the young wyvern's hot pink eyes caught sight of water reflecting beneath it. *A wet prairie?* The white-and-purple juvenile silenced herself as she descended to get a better view of the woodlands through the trees. Aside from the migrating birds chirping noisily as they roosted, everything seemed quiet.

Too quiet, Gretel realized suspiciously. She remembered how her visit to the volcanic island had gone just months ago; what appeared to be such a desolate place had turned out to be inhabited by many different types of dragons. She narrowed her keen eyes, intending to detect any traces of unnatural movement instead.

The seven-month-old wyvern cautiously circled the island from above, scouting the grass, trees, and shorelines from a distance that only wind types' eyes could see clearly at. Then she spotted movement and hovered, focusing intently.

The movement had been from a very young, tangerine-colored revealer hatchling falling over near the outskirts of the woodland. The tiny thing must only be a month old, at most; Gretel wanted to go down there and check if it was okay, but she knew better than to risk showing herself.

That's when an impulse overcame her; Gretel suddenly found herself diving into the trees and landing before the baby revealer. "You alright?" *Wait–why did I do that?! I'm so stupid! What if its parents are nearby and they try to kill me?!* Then she remembered what Efron had told her about his kind's natural gemstones being active by default when they're young, and she took notice of the three gems on the tangerine hatchling's forehead, a bigger one between her eyes, and three on the back of her neck and tail. *Oh... I'm not stupid; I guess this little one revealed me just now.*

Just as Gretel calmed down and tried to use her own willpower to overcome the reveal, which Efron had also helped train her to do when she had asked him to during her recovery, the wyvern cried out from literal shock; electricity through the small puddle of water she had landed in coursed through her body for just two seconds that seemed to last an eternity.

Frightened, she took flight as soon as she was mobile. But instead of fleeing like she planned to, that reveal ability caused her to act on her impulsive desire to find out who attacked her.

It turned out to be a turquoise electric dragon, whose yellow-green eyes glared up at her. The curly-tufted tip of his very long tail was twitching with agitation, and for several moments, the two just stared each other down. Gretel awkwardly looked between him and the revealer hatchling, then once again used her willpower to overcome her reveal and fly out of his sight.

What was that about? she couldn't help wondering. *If he was a predator, surely he'd do more to hunt me down than just a tiny shock... And he didn't target the hatchling, either; she would have been easier prey for him than me.* Gretel once again circled the island. There was no trace of other revealers, but she did catch sight of other differently-colored electric types foraging around the forest or playing in the waters of the field. One spotted her, but fled instead of attacking.

It doesn't seem to have any other predators... And if electric types are more common here, they wouldn't stand a chance against Efron. This place does seem to be an ideal for retreat for both of us.

The white-and-purple wind type found herself back at the area with the baby revealer. Curiosity got the better of her and she silenced herself to land on a tree top, hidden from sight and peering down at the scene.

"You're alright... The scary wyvern is gone. She won't hurt you," the turquoise electric type was stating as a matter of fact, helping the tangerine hatchling to her feet.

The little revealer's red eyes looked up at him as if trying to understand his words through his tone and facial expression. Electric dragons in general had shapely muzzles tipped with a canid-esque nose, and long fang-like maxillas with no teeth; only the corners of their mouths emoted the way other dragon types' did. But even still, despite his neutral frown, his eyes were narrowed with calm concern, and his clawed hand gently patted the hatchling's head.

The revealer smiled and hugged him, gripping the long yellow-green curly mane over his shoulders, and nuzzling her tiny muzzle into his matching-colored ventral scales.

Gretel had to use a lot of self-control to avoid landing and starting a conversation with him, to not act on her curiosity as to why a solitary electric type would care for a revealer; and why a social revealer hatchling would be alone so far from the plateau island Efron's family had left.

She shook her head. *It's not my business. As long as I don't antagonize anyone, I'm sure this place will be safe. But there is one way to make sure of that.*

The white-and-purple siren left the tree and glided on a summoned tailwind to land in the middle of the prairie. Then she opened her mouth and improvised a song. Similar to her call for help on the crescent island when she'd been injured months ago, Gretel alternated between two notes: a neutral middle pitch to represent the safety of her environment, and then rising it into a higher pitch questioningly, and she kept her volume only loud enough for the inhabitants of the island to hear.

She glanced around, seeing a ton of electric types staring expectantly at her from within the surrounding tall grass; their fur and body-length manes blended pretty well with the texture of their environment, and if Gretel weren't a wind type, she wouldn't have noticed them at all. Still, she waited, but nobody made a move. A few of them resumed playing or left the area when they realized she wasn't seeking them out.

Toward the shore she saw a dark brown fully grown water dragon resting in the nearby mud that almost concealed him. His light blue eyes were watching her a bit curiously, but when she met his gaze, he tensed and looked toward the forest.

Gretel followed his line of sight with her own to see the turquoise electric type glaring back at her. She couldn't tell if he was suspicious or seething. They once again stared each other down until the little revealer peeked out from behind him and he tore his attention away from Gretel to usher the hatchling back to the safety of the trees.

He still isn't attacking me. I don't think I have to worry about him. She looked back at the water dragon, then gulped fearfully when he stood up and spread the large fins on his back, flicking the mud off to reveal they were tipped with a pale grassy green color. Even though water dragons didn't get much taller than six feet on all fours, she could tell from his more sluggish movements that he was an older adult, perhaps pushing twenty years old.

"Hey, little lady. You're looking for a retreat, I'll bet," he greeted her with a toothy grin.

Gretel cautiously stepped back from him at the sight of his fangs.

"My name's Clay. You're more than welcome to stay here," he assured her, "but I would recommend keeping your distance from those two in particular. Ever since that little revealer was abandoned here, she's been unintentionally causing a lot of drama with whoever goes in range of her gems. Ga–err, I mean, the turquoise dragon with her can also be overprotective of her, so I'd avoid him too if you don't wanna get zapped."

Abandoned? she thought sympathetically. "I'm Gretel. This place looks safe enough to me, but, uh… How would everyone react to another revealer staying here too?"

"Depends. How old are they? Are they friendly?"

"He's two years old, and he's my friend; like me, he's just looking for a safe place to live…"

Clay seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Hm. Two-year-old revealers can control their gemstones, right? As long as he doesn't purposely stir up drama with his reveals, I'd reckon we'd all get along."

Gretel let out a relieved sigh. "So nobody would care if I claim this land as a retreat for me and him?"

"Nah. Go for it."

The siren grinned, then centered herself and improvised another song: two neutral middle tones, the first clear, the other growly and possessive, repeated a few times and projected as far into the skies as she could with her volume control.

She waited a few minutes; that brown wind dragon from before passed overhead, his gaze focused on the source of the song somewhat curiously before he continued on his way. Gretel smiled, then took flight back to Efron. *We did it…!*

On her way back to Efron's island, Gretel's instincts warned her of something wrong. Every part of the juvenile wind dragon's body screamed for her to stay away, to turn around and flee to the prairie, because something ahead was extremely dangerous. But it was precisely those feelings that drove her to keep going; her friend was there, and she refused to leave him on his own to face whatever it was.

The purple-striped wyvern silenced herself when she reached the familiar lowlands, glancing toward the foxhole Efron had often sheltered in. Gretel didn't have time to check on him before a large shadow passed overhead, and she dared herself to look up at what had cast it.

Her heart skipped a beat to see it was a seven-foot-tall violet revealer dragoness. Her green eyes scoured the trees of the small forest before she spread her white wings after landing, and Gretel's sharp eyes noticed their webbing quivering in the chilly autumn breeze. The wind type recognized that wing motion: it was the same thing Efron had done during their first-ever game of hide-and-seek; he had used that tactic to find his friend because her volume control stopped the air from circulating around her whenever she used it for silence.

That's Efron's mother… But she's looking for… me? Why? Gretel quickly landed and released the air around herself, holding still so as not to make a sound and hoping against knowledge that the large revealer wouldn't spot her through the falling leaves of the canopies. *I can't let her find Efron! I have to stop her!* she thought, but restrained herself. *No–I have to stay hidden, or she'll find us both…*

Then that same impulse Gretel had felt on the prairie took a hold of herself. She did her best to retain self-control, but the more she repressed it, the stronger the impulse seemed to grow. She felt trapped, fighting an internal war on whether or not to fight the external one with the bipedal dragoness.

Gretel was distracted from her thoughts by a faint glow from within Efron's foxhole. *No… No, no, no! I'm sure he's using conceals to resist his mother's reveals, but if she sees his gemstone glow, it'll be the death of him…!*

"Is she gone?" sounded a younger male's voice, the sound of which Gretel recognized as Efron's cousin's.

"We all heard her sing from the prairie isle. That means she must have moved from here, since she claimed it," his aunt said. "But something's not right."

"W-What do you mean…?"

"You know *exactly* what I mean. You think I'd call you down here with me if I thought she'd interfere?"

The red-winged juvenile cowered slightly, but seemed to use a conceal without reliance on his red gemstone as he maintained composure. "Interfere… with what, Aunt Kendra…?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Auden," she hissed, towering over her nephew threateningly. "I know you've been hiding something about that wyvern. You know the reason she stuck around here for so long without claiming this territory as her retreat."

Auden backed away from her, his hazel eyes looking for an escape. "I don't know anything about the wind type… I swear…!"

Kendra leered at him. "Funny. You sure have been using conceals an awful lot ever since you crash-landed down here–where *she* was."

Gretel heard his breathing audibly quicken. Somewhere between Kendra's active reveal and the wyvern's waning efforts to resist it, the striped juvenile felt the need to protect Auden. She relinquished her self-control and boosted her volume to call out rather childishly, "If you have something to say about me, say it to my face!"

Instantly Kendra swung around to face her.

"Why did you come back here?!" Auden roared at Gretel, but his voice carried a worried panic instead of anger. *"Run!"*

"No! I'm not gonna let her keep abusing everyone!" the wind type snapped. Solitary dragons didn't have rulers; Kendra's authority meant nothing to her.

"*Abuse?*" the adult huffed as if offended. "I gave my family everything they needed: warm bedding, fresh food, and protection from predators… And what did these unruly ingrates do in return? *This* one betrayed me by keeping your little secret about his cousin's survival all this time. And his cousin?" She laughed mockingly."He was just an *embarrassment;* couldn't even figure out how to set a basic hunting trap!"

"That's not true… He had me tutor him after your rant about how 'dumb' he was," Auden said in his cousin's defense. "He *did* figure it out…"

"No–he had deliberately joined you for the hunt behind my back! And it's one thing for him to sneak off without my permission; *all* hatchlings try to do bad things without their parents finding out," she ranted. "But he's got to be even *dumber* than a hatchling since he didn't care I doubled as his alpha! I had to be a mother to him *and* a leader to everyone, so that idiot crossed *two* lines that day; and *you* weren't any better for agreeing to teach him without my say!"

Wait… Efron's mother *is the alpha?!* Gretel realized.

"Only because the way you taught it was hard to understand…" he hesitantly admitted, no doubt due to her active reveal. The wind type could hear genuine fear in his nervous voice, as if they'd had this conversation before… and the last time hadn't ended well. "When I showed him my way, he *did* understand… He's not stupid; you were just… going about teaching him all the wrong ways…"

"…What did you say?" Kendra hissed. "You're calling my methods *wrong*?!"

Auden grimaced and shrank submissively. "N-No! They were right, but… they weren't right for *him* in particular–"

"Then you're *admitting* he's a failure for not learning it right! I taught it the *correct* way my mother showed me, and how she had been taught by hers. This foolish boy was the *only* one in our lineage too *stupid* to understand it!"

"That's not it! You *knew* his father wasn't from you and Dad's old society… Your method was foreign to both of them, but you didn't even let his father explain how he adjusted… Instead of trying to show him any other ways when he was struggling, all *you* ever did when he asked for help was go on *rants* about how 'stupid' he was for not learning it the way you were taught…"

"Because it's true! My mate *did* struggle to adjust at first, but even *he* figured it out; so what was stopping that boy from learning, aside from his own stupidity? His constant failures only dragged my reputation through the mud!"

"No… You ruined your *own* reputation by treating him so bad…" Auden muttered under his breath.

"You little *brat!* How *dare* you speak to your alpha that way? That boy was *lucky* I was patient with him for an entire *year*! What I *should* have done was abandon him the *second* he had hatched as a male!" she ranted. "I had such high hopes of leading this territory, but it turns out my only kin are either *idiots* like your cousin, or traitors like *you!* I have been nothing but *merciful* until now. You want to see mistreatment?! I'll *show* you mistreatment!" She swung her claws down at the cowering juvenile, who could only brace himself.

Gretel was still fighting off her instinct to flee against the self-control she needed to intervene, especially with the powerful reveal being active on top of it all. By the time she could move to defend Auden, Efron had charged out of hiding instead, shoving his cousin out of the way.

Kendra's claws raked open her disowned son's arm in place of his cousin as the former blocked her attack with it; the metallic scent of blood tainted the cold, crisp air.

The striped young dragoness caught up to her friend, but he gestured with his uninjured hand for her to guard Auden. Meanwhile Efron stood straighter, almost dignified, staring straight at his mother despite his injury.

"I knew it…" Kendra laughed humorlessly. "I *knew* you had a connection to that wind dragon down here. Why else would she be so afraid to claim the territory she visited so often?"

Her son said nothing, his neutral expression unwavering. The silence was so deafening that Gretel could hear the droplets of blood trickling down his arm splat onto the dried, fallen leaves underfoot.

"You've been telling that siren a-a-all about me, haven't you, boy?" she continued with a knowing grin that was devoid of happiness. "And *you*"--she rounded on Auden–"You made her confess that your cousin was still alive, and you've been concealing that fact from me ever since."

Auden was shivering, still on the ground where he had fallen after Efron's protective shove. His hazel eyes were wide and fixed up at her as he scarcely managed to breathe.

"Well?" the large revealer demanded more authoritatively, "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I-I… I didn't think Galen survived… Honest…!" her nephew stammered.

"Galen?" she repeated with mock-surprise. "Who is that? I had a son named Galen, once… Such a fitting name for a calm, passive hatchling. But that name no longer fit him when he *disobeyed* me!"

Hearing his former name finally got a reaction from Efron as he reflexively winced when she had said it. His mother seemed to delight in the fact that she broke through his calm facade.

"He only defended himself," Gretel snapped, unable to stand by while her friend was under such scrutiny.

Efron immediately faced the younger dragon, trying his best to stay calm even though his voice wavered when he warned her, "Gretel, don't talk back to her… It'll just make things worse. Take Auden and fly away from here."

His warning came too late. Kendra laughed shamelessly. "Aww, what's the matter? Scared your new friend will find out how pathetic you truly are?"

"What are you *talking* about?!" Gretel demanded, tail lashing.

"Gretel, *please,"* Efron tried again, unable to conceal the anxiety in his tone.

"You have to ask?" Kendra replied, completely disregarding her disowned son. "After all of these months you've spent together, I'm surprised you haven't seen it for yourself. This boy is a failure who will never amount to anything. I had done him a *favor* by killing him, but he even *failed* at dying!" she laughed.

Gretel felt sick as the white-winged revealer's laughter continued, not attempting to hide how much the older dragoness was relishing every ounce of power she still held over Efron.

"He didn't fail at dying… He succeeded in surviving. And not only that, but he's been thriving–all because he's not with *you!"* Gretel snarled.

"Gretel!" Efron cried out in a third warning for his friend to behave, but he was once again ignored by the females.

Kendra chuckled. "Is *this* what you call thriving: hiding away in a foxhole?"

"It is compared to his life with *you,"* the striped juvenile retorted. "He's survived happily on his own for *months!"*

"On his own? Really?" She scoffed. "Then what do you call your daily visits here?"

"It's called *companionship*–something you've *clearly* never heard of!"

Kendra's smile fell and she glared at the wyvern. "Are you questioning my *intelligence*?"

"Stop it! Both of you, *stop!"* Efron finally broke down helplessly.

I can't stop now; it's already escalated too far! Gretel thought, but felt remorse upon seeing how serious her friend was. She took a breath and suppressed her desire to argue with the adult further. Then that impulse from Kendra's active reveal overcame her and she was too upset to resist it. She rounded on the older dragoness. "There's no 'question' about it! *You're* the idiot if you think that, as an adult, being smarter than a *juvenile* makes you intelligent–or rather, makes *them* less so! What kind of leader are you?! Does it make you feel good to hold your power over literal *hatchlings?!"*

At this point Auden got up and tried to pull the wyvern away from the scene, but when Gretel growled at him to release her, he instinctively obliged and exchanged a helpless look with Efron, who was panicking. The youngest revealer gestured wildly for his cousin to flee, and Auden gave a nod, taking flight on his red wings back to the highlands.

"Insolent brat!" Kendra roared loudly at her, not acknowledging any point she had made.

"Brainless brute!" the young wyvern roared back immaturely, using her volume control to be even louder than the adult. Her instincts screamed at her again to flee, but she consciously ignored them, as she had trained herself to do when she'd get stir crazy during her recovery over the past few months. *Someone needs to put her in her place!*

The large dragoness moved to attack her in a fit of rage, and Gretel was too heated to react in time without relying on her instinct.

Efron instantly leapt up with the aid of his wings and latched onto his mother's lashing arm, biting down hard on it with his sharp fangs to stop her.

This infuriated her even more. Kendra grabbed him by the throat with her free hand and forcefully yanked him off, holding him at arm's length and visibly tightening her grip until he could barely inhale.

"Let go of him!" Gretel shrieked, and Kendra's green ears flattened from the volume alone; the wyvern copied Efron by pouncing up and biting his mother's wrist, hoping it'd make her drop him. Wind dragons' wide jaws were strong in proportion to their bodies, designed to crush any prey whose scales were too tough for their fangs to pierce. But even so, Kendra simply used her free arm to swat the little juvenile off of her as though the latter were a mere pest.

"Let him *go!*" Gretel cried even louder out of sheer desperation. She bit the large revealer's ankle, but that earned her a harsh kick from the other clawed foot.

The wyvern's light frame skidded across the fallen leaves on the ground from the impact.

"Last time, I didn't wait to make sure you bled out before I let my father 'bury' you out here," Kendra hissed at the young revealer. "This time, I'll just bury you *myself.*"

Efron's struggles were growing weaker by the second.

"*Stop it!*" Gretel's overwhelming fear for his life caused her cry to instinctually raise in both volume and pitch, the echo physically palpable. Both of the other dragons' ears pinned back as it had visibly pained them, and during that brief moment of distraction, Kendra had loosened her grip enough for Efron to finally get a breath in.

Seeing that reaction urged Gretel to try her sonic attack on their assailant, but she didn't want to harm her friend in the crossfire. That's when she got an idea. *Maybe I can silence my voice to everyone except for Kendra? I'd have to compress the air around it like I normally to do silence myself, but this time I'll need to leave openings for my voice to reach Kendra through. It'll be tricky...*

"Gretel, *run,*" Efron begged his friend now that he could breathe enough to speak.

"Shut up," his mother snapped, redoubling her efforts.

Now! Gretel concentrated as much magical power as she could to create a horizontal vortex of wind as a barrier that doubled as a pathway aimed directly at the adult, making sure her voice's sound waves would be contained by it, then shrieked as high and loud as she naturally could straight through the eye of it, amplifying her voice with her volume control. She felt her head throbbing from overextending herself, but adrenaline loaned her the strength to push past her limits.

Kendra's mouth opened as if in a scream, but whatever sound she made was drowned out by the wind dragon. She tossed Efron down where he landed in a dizzy, breathless heap so she could use both hands to cover her ears in a vain attempt to shield herself. Blood seeped out between her fingers.

Gretel felt her own stamina depleting fast; she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep up the attack without passing out.

Luckily, Kendra fainted first; blood pooled under her head from her ears. Gretel immediately ended her abilities at once and looked to make sure Efron was okay.

Her friend was staring, stunned, at his unconscious abuser, but aside from the bleeding gash on his arm and the bruising imprint on his neck, he seemed unharmed… physically.

"We need to go before she wakes up," Gretel called to him, snapping the blue-winged revealer out of his daze.

"…*Will* she wake up…?" he asked voicelessly. His companion couldn't tell if he feared his mother would wake up, or wouldn't.

"She's still breathing," Gretel reported. "And if *we* want to be, we have to get out of here!"

"…What about Auden… and my dad… and Gramps…?"

"What about *you?!*"

He winced, hugging himself across his ventral scales with indecision.

"Neither of us are any help to the rest of your family if we die here," Gretel pointed out. "Your arm is still bleeding, and I feel too drained to stay awake for much longer… We *have* to go--*now,* before we both pass out here and she finishes us off."

Her determined hot pink eyes bore into his watered green ones as he stifled a distressed sob. Then he drew in a hoarse breath through his injured throat and finally decided to take flight, letting his friend lead the way to their new retreat.

Night of Day 1

The swift young wind dragon paced herself so that her revealer friend wouldn't be left behind. She could feel the air disturbed by his wingbeats behind her as she guided him, but immediately grew concerned when they stilled into a steeply descending glide toward the ocean below them.

"Efron?" Gretel paused and turned to check on him. Her keen eyes saw his mouth open as if he were speaking a reply, but it wasn't loud enough for her to hear. She didn't have time to ask what he said; his green eyes closed and he fell limply.

"Efron!" she cried again, directing the air beneath him skyward in an attempt to keep him airborne. Her head throbbed from trying to carry his weight and the exertion from her sonic attack against their enemy just minutes ago. The unconscious violet revealer plunged into the churning waves, despite his companion's efforts. Forming red swirls in the water from the gash in his arm were the only visual cues she had to pinpoint where he was.

Gretel dove down to the surface and tried to breach it, but wind dragons' light frames were naturally buoyant; she couldn't submerge regardless of how much she tried. With no other option, the striped siren cried out in utter despair. Everything was happening so fast, yet it felt like an eternity that she could do nothing at all to rescue Efron. She tried to use her voice and wind summons to brute-force a hole through the water and reach him through, but she saw stars from the effort.

Just as she was blacking out, Gretel felt the water stir beneath her. *Efron? No–it's way bigger than him...! It must be a predator,* she realized with dread. She sniffled. *I was stupid for thinking we'd survive... But at least we'll be together in our last moments.* The exhausted and drained wind dragoness braced herself and let her mind slip into unconsciousness.

"Come on, now. Breathe for me," a familiar older male's voice sounded a few feet away from Gretel as the latter awakened.

She found herself on the wet prairie isle that she and her injured friend had been on their way to. The striped juvenile sat up and looked toward the voice to find it belonged to Clay; the brown water dragon was pressing rhythmically on Efron's chest as the latter lay motionless. The second Gretel managed to stand on her weakened legs, the young revealer suddenly vomited seawater, audibly breathing afterward, but he remained unconscious. Her hot pink eyes looked toward her friend's arm, wincing as the salt from the ocean had cleansed it enough to show her just how deep the injury was.

"Clay?" Gretel dared herself to speak up quietly. *So he was the predator I sensed in the ocean...* Even still, she was terrified their rescuer would say Efron wasn't going to survive.

"He's lost a lot of blood," he reported, and even though he maintained a neutral tone, the wind type could detect an underlying fear within it on top of his deliberately paced breathing.

If Clay is this scared, it can't be good… "What–What can we do…?"

"You're fast, right? Hurry to the woodland and ask Gavin for help. He's skilled with electricity and has cottonwood catkins in his den."

"Gavin? Who's–"

"You've met him before. The one with the revealer hatchling. Quickly, now; it's a miracle your friend isn't dead yet. Can't say how much longer it'll be until he is, though."

Gretel took a breath before she rushed off as fast as her sore and tired muscles would allow her to. "Gavin?" she projected her voice down despairingly from above the tall grayish trees. When there wasn't an immediate answer, the wind type looked for anything at all that matched what Clay had described. *What are catkins?* She shook her head. *I don't have time for this!* She ascended and let her gaze sweep the woodlands for the turquoise electric dragon. "Gavin!" she called a second time, fearing she was taking too long.

He was nowhere in sight. She wanted to keep looking, but the thought of Efron dying alone made her suppress her want so Gretel hovered in preparation to fly back to her friend–only to feel an impulse to keep looking. *Wait–that's a reveal! That means the hatchling is near! And if she is, no doubt Gavin's with her.*

She relinquished her self control to give in to the baby revealer's ability, pinpointing her by way of which direction made the impulse stronger. Finally Gretel spotted a den on the far end of the woodlands and landed at the mouth of it. "Gavin, I need your help! I need catkins!"

A faint commotion sounded from inside for just a moment. Then yellow-green eyes opened, briefly glowing in the darkness as if by a spark. "Is someone hurt?" he demanded without making a move.

"Yes–my friend's bleeding out–"

His eyes narrowed intensely. "Where?"

"Clay brought him ashore–"

There was another commotion and his eyes vanished from sight. Gretel worriedly peered in, only for Gavin to shoot past the wind type out of the den. Her sharp eyes had caught sight of the tangerine hatchling clinging to his back, protected underneath his long curly mane, and also noticed what looked like a fluffy stem in his hand. He was fast; perhaps even faster than Gretel, as he leapt across the slope down from the woodlands, then leapt again toward the muddy beach as soon as he landed. In just four bounds, he had reached the other males.

Gretel had flown on a direct path after him, which was the only reason she could keep up.

Clay had been using his webbed hands to keep pressure on Efron's open wound. Gavin used the fluffy seeds to clean and dry the fresh blood off, then gestured for both Clay and Gretel to step behind him. The latter hesitated when she noticed the water type kept backing up.

"Come on, little lady. If you're in the way, it won't be pretty," the brown dragon warned her.

She heeded his words but had no idea what was going on. *In the way of what?*

In answer, there was bright sparking of electricity and the scent of charring flesh. Her stomach lurched. "What are you *doing*?! Don't *burn* him!"

Clay grabbed her tail to stop her from intervening. "Easy, now. He's cauterizing it."

"What does *that* mean?!"

The tangerine revealer still clinging to the electric type's shoulders let out a little whimper as her red ears flattened from the siren's panicked voice.

"Lower your volume, please," Clay said sternly, and Gretel bit her tongue. "It means he's only burning it to stop the bleeding. Gavin knows what he's doing; he wouldn't intentionally harm someone who isn't a threat."

The two looked back to the scene and Gavin then used static to stick multiple fluffy pieces together into a thin wrap over Efron's wound. His yellow-green eyes inspected it as if to make sure it would hold, then he looked over his shoulder and gave Clay a nod of farewell before bounding back to his den. Gretel watched Gavin leave, then returned her attention to Efron, making sure the latter was breathing.

"He should be fine after a while," Clay assured her. "But maybe we should find some shelter for him in the meantime. I don't know who slashed his arm like that, but if they're still around, I wouldn't want 'em to see he survived."

The wind type blinked, still trying to process everything that's happened. "Oh… Where should we hide…?"

"Gavin said revealers fare better in higher, drier spaces. I don't know too much about them, myself, but he learns more through experience and results, so I'd take his word for it and bring your friend to the woodlands to recover. Would you like me to carry him there for you?"

"If you can," Gretel replied, and when he nodded, she helped gently roll the violet revealer onto Clay's back; the latter secured him between his large blue-and-green fins and set a casual pace toward the slope from the prairie leading to the trees. Her mind was racing with questions and an instinctive need to comprehend the safety of her current environment. "Experience…? Results? Just who *is* Gavin? Back on my first visit here, you warned me to stay away from him and the hatchling he has… but he's the first one you had me get to help my friend."

"It's complicated," the brown water dragon admitted, "and it's really not my story to tell. But Gavin and I go way back. I'm the only one he really trusts. If I hadn't told you his name, he probably wouldn't have come out to help."

Gretel tilted her head. "What's so important about names? I know they're tied to our self-identities, but…"

Clay chuckled slightly. "As a wind type, you grew up solitary, I reckon. Names hold a lot of power for social dragons, or solitary ones who choose to live social lives. We only give our names out to those we either already trust, or those we wish to build trust with; hence why I introduced myself to you."

A solitary dragon choosing to live a social life? Why on earth would one sacrifice their independence like that?!

"Earning a solitary dragon's trust enough for them to tell me their name isn't an easy feat, but when I succeeded with Gavin, it's the least I can do out of respect not to share his name with every stranger who visits here. Giving out someone's name without their knowledge is extremely disrespectful, but in this case, it was literally a life-or-death situation. Me–as someone he trusted–sharing his name with *you* meant you were also trustworthy, instead of a predator trying to lure him out of his den."

"I hear you, and I knew about the connection between trust and introductions. But I don't understand the rest," she admitted. "Why choose to live a social life?"

"You tell me," the older dragon laughed heartily. "I don't know your history with this friend of yours, but it's pretty reminiscent of Gavin raising that hatchling."

Gretel scowled. "My friend isn't raising me! I don't depend on *anyone!*"

He shrugged. "Again, I don't know your history. But it seems to me that you care a lot about him, regardless of the dynamic between you. In fact, you seem to have taken responsibility for *him* to a degree, since you mentioned seeking a retreat for you both instead of just for yourself."

She hesitated. *That's true… And I was the one who gave Efron his new name after his mother disowned him…* "Uh… If giving someone my name means I want to trust them, then what would me giving someone else a name imply?"

"Depends on the type of name, really. Casual terms of address aren't exactly personal; I call you 'little lady' to show I mean you no harm. But if I gave you a nickname, like 'El' for example, that *would* be personal; nicknames are only given to ones we're already close friends with."

"What about actual names?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like… Um…" *How do I phrase this without giving away that I'm the one who named Efron? Oh–I got it!* "Like, if that hatchling Gavin found didn't have a name, and he *gave* her a name. What would *that* mean to a social dragon?"

"Ah, I see. That would mean a familial bond."

"Familial? Like… parental?"

"Sometimes, but not always. In Gavin's case, when he named the abandoned hatchling, it *was* parental. But if you're naming a peer–such as another solitary dragon who hasn't found a name for themselves yet, or an abandoned social dragon, who in either case are close in age to you–then that suggests a sibling bond."

Gretel processed this. Then she remembered Efron confessing that he viewed her as a sister. *That was because I named him?!* The tip of her tail twitched as an outlet for her budding anxiety. *What did I get myself into here? Did I take on responsibility for Efron by naming him, even if it's viewed as being a sibling? I didn't know social dragons took names that way…!*

"Uh, you alright? You look like you just saw a ghost," the older dragon chuckled nervously.

"Umm, Clay, what does it mean to be a sibling to a social dragon?" she dared herself to ask. "You're right: I *have* been solitary my whole life. I've never met any siblings I might have, either."

"Ah. Well, in most societies, a sibling is someone you mutually trust and depend on. Especially if it has to do with shared interests or issues commonly faced among those in your age group, that parents may be too old to relate to."

"...Oh." *Come to think of it, I did have to depend on Efron to hunt for me while I was injured... But that wasn't one-sided, because he also relied on me for flight lessons. And we have a shared interest in singing, too.*

Clay glanced between Gretel and Efron as if assessing their relationship based on the context of her questions, given her lack of response.

The young solitary dragoness tensed at that. "D-Don't get the wrong idea!" she stammered nervously. "We're just friends, okay? Companions. We help one another, and play together. There is *no* dependence; we just enjoy each other's company, that's all!"

"I see, I see," Clay acknowledged her. "But for solitary dragons to have a companion in the first place leans more into having a social life, regardless of dependence."

Really? Huh. I guess I never thought about it that way...

"Is this a good place?" he continued, stopping under the shade of a single, wide weeping willow tree.

His voice snapped her out of it. "Oh! Y-Yeah. Thank you..."

Clay gently set Efron down beneath the shelter of its branches. Gretel noticed her injured friend's breathing had gotten stronger by this point, giving her hope that he would be okay after all. "Wishing you both a speedy recovery. I'll be by the shore if you need anything, alright?" With that, the adult turned to leave, waving a back-fin in farewell.

Both? Gretel thought, then realized how sore she was from Kendra's kick and strike. The wind type hadn't rested properly since fainting in the ocean after overusing her abilities, too. She let out a defeated sigh and curled up on the ground near her friend in the shadow of the willow cast by the evening sun, then let sleep overcome her.

Chapter 7

Gretel woke up around midmorning the next day. She immediately looked at the violet revealer beside her to make sure he was still breathing; to her surprise, he was awake, lying on his belly with his arms crossed under his chin. His green eyes were staring ahead at nothing in particular.

"Efron?" she prompted gently, scared by that distant look he had. *Back when I was recovering, he mentioned that this wasn't daydreaming, but him getting completely disconnected from the world...*

His friend's voice didn't seem to reach him at first. Then he blinked and came to. "Huh? Gretel?"

"Yeah!" the little wind dragoness chirped. "You feeling okay? Yesterday was rough..."

Efron squinted as if trying to figure out what she was talking about.

"Uh..." She decided not to press it. "How's your arm?"

"Hm?" The violet revealer pushed himself up to sit, then inspected his arms, hesitating at the sight of the wrap. He was genuinely confused. "What happened?"

"It was crazy," she laughed nervously. "You passed out mid-flight when you bled too much, and this old water type brought us to shore, and then this electric type 'cauterized' your wound and made that wrap to stop the bleeding! It all happened so fast, too, I didn't know what was happening either!"

"...Bled?" There was a hint of panic in his otherwise calm tone. "From what?"

Gretel froze. "You don't remember?"

Efron's mouth opened as if to answer, but nothing came out and he seemed distracted again. Then he shook his head. "Water and electric types...? So that means you made this island your retreat after all, then?"

"Wh-What? I mean, *yes,* but... Are you sure you're okay?"

His green ears lowered a bit shyly and his eyes glanced awkwardly between her and the shore. "...Yes?"

She frowned. "Really?"

He shrank. "Why shouldn't I be?"

Gretel eyed her friend's bruised neck then his bandaged arm in answer. "You're not in *pain?*"

"W-Well... now that you mention it, yeah–I'm pretty sore..."

"Not just physically, though...! After what happened yesterday, I mean..."

He tilted his head. "What happened yesterday? You found this retreat, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, but we were attacked before we left for it," she pointed out.

"What…?!" The genuine shock in his quiet voice caught her off-guard. "By what–a predator? *Wait*–did that seer who fractured your back a few months ago suddenly track us down?!"

"What? N-No! You *really* don't remember…?!"

Efron seemed to panic even more from the realization that he truly didn't. "Last I recall, you said you were going to explore south-west–which is *this* island, right?"

Gretel gaped at him. "Yes, but… after that, we were…"

He strenuously stood up, then staggered dizzily and held his head as he fell backward to a seat on the damp grass. "I don't understand… I can't remember anything after that," he murmured, and his quickening breaths and the wavers he was trying to suppress proved to the wind type that he truly meant it, and his lack of recollection was scaring him.

"Did you use a conceal, and that's why you don't remember?"

"No," he said honestly, and that seemed to stress him out even more. "If we conceal a memory, all it does is temporarily stop us from being reminded of it. Conceals don't stop us from consciously remembering things…! I–I don't know what's wrong–I–" His breaths quickened even more, and there was a slight wheeze to them due to the visible bruising on his neck. Then he coughed dryly.

"Efron…?!"

"I'm… really thirsty…"

Gretel hesitated. There were plenty of freshwater puddles covering the wet prairie below, and even some nearby in the woodland they were sheltered in. "Can you walk? There's water right over here," she directed him.

Her friend tried to stand a second time, gathering his legs beneath him in a kneeling position, but she noticed how his limbs trembled weakly in their attempts to support him. He didn't have the strength to rise.

"Mornin', little lady," Clay's voice sounded from the base of the slope. "I brought breakfast for you and your pal, if you haven't hunted yet." A few moments later when he reached the top of it on level ground with the juveniles, he froze at the sight. "H-Hey, now, don't push yourself, pal! You need to recover! Was a nasty gash, that," he said to Efron, gesturing to the latter's wrapped arm.

The revealer's green ears pinned back with fear at the sight of the large predator before them; Efron instinctively threw himself between Gretel and Clay, his blue wings folded in front of him like a shield.

"Efron, it's okay! He's a friend!" she informed him. "He saved us!"

The violet dragon was still hyperventilating in a panic both from his lack of memory and now from Clay, but he drew in a deep breath in an attempt to calm down after Gretel's reassurance. When he was still clearly anxious after the fact, though, his gemstone glowed in a conceal. He visibly calmed down, but his green eyes were still focused warily on the stranger.

"It's alright," Clay soothed him. "I get it; you must have been through a lot leading up to that wound. Rest assured I mean you no harm."

Efron breathed again, then looked back at Gretel, fully relaxing when she nodded to confirm it.

"I'm Clay. When I found you both in the water last night, you were cold and pale from blood-loss, *and* still bleeding. I wasn't sure you'd survive even after your wound was cauterized," the blue-eyed water type admitted. "You can't expect to bounce back so soon after that. Gotta rest and stay hydrated, okay? I brought some food; eating should help regain your strength." He dropped a few large fish from his back in front of the younger dragons.

Gretel sniffed hers curiously. *I've never eaten a fish before.* When her stomach growled at the scent of its exposed fatal wound, she scooped the kill up in her wide mouth and chomped it down. "Hmph." *Decent taste, but weird texture. Hopefully there's better prey on the island.*

Efron stared blankly at the prey that still occasionally flapped its tail even though its life was quickly fading. "I don't feel too hungry," he admitted, wincing as his voice came out hoarse. "I just… need water…"

"Ah. No problem. I'll help you up, then," the facultative bipedal dragon said, rising to his hind legs and extending a webbed hand to the younger male.

Efron hesitantly took it in his own clawed one, letting himself be pulled up to stand with Clay's support. The juvenile was barely three feet tall, but he seemed even smaller compared to the adult. Gretel accompanied them as the water dragon helped the injured revealer walk to the nearest puddle, keeping a steadying hold on the latter when Efron kneeled and cupped water in both hands to drink.

The purple-striped quadruped lowered her head to lap at the surface of it. When she and her friend had quenched their thirst, Efron stood a bit stronger on his own, giving Clay a grateful nod.

"Anything else I can help with?" the brown dragon asked them both.

"W-Well… You seemed to understand a lot of medical stuff, right?" Gretel said. "You got Efron to breathe after he almost drowned, and you knew what cauterizing was… Do you think you could tell me what would cause him to have memory loss?"

"I'm not a medic, but I've heard from someone who *is* one that–in your friend's case–it may have something to do with how much blood he lost; or rather, the lack of proper blood-flow to his head for such a long time."

Efron opened his mouth as if to deny that anything had caused him to bleed so much or even drown, but closed it upon once again seeing his wrapped, injured arm.

"There's a medic here? Is it your friend?" the wind type asked Clay.

"No–my friend isn't a medic. But again, he learns fast, and even the medic praised him for that," the water dragon chuckled. "If you want me to introduce you to her, I can. But she's… skittish."

Gretel turned to her friend. "Wanna meet her?"

The violet revealer hesitated, but ultimately nodded.

"Alright," Clay said, dropping back to all-fours. "Just let me know when you're ready."

"Before we meet this medic, can you tell me what you meant by 'skittish?'" Efron spoke up quietly.

"Hm? Oh–she's just… easily startled. But we can't blame her for that; she's seen how badly predators can hurt electric types like herself," Clay replied.

"So she's an electric dragon? I've never met one before," he admitted. "Wait–am I considered a predator to them? M-Maybe I shouldn't meet her after all–"

"What? Why not?" Gretel asked him worriedly. "A different electric type was the one who stopped your bleeding last night!"

"I understand that, but if *this* particular one is skittish, she might get scared of me as a revealer and attack–"

"I don't know much about the dynamic between electric types and revealers, but the one who helped you even had a revealer with him. Apparently everyone knows about it, too, and she's doing just fine!"

"*What?!* There are other revealers here?!" Efron's blue wings spread in preparation to take flight as his eyes darted to scour the woodlands, his breaths stifled as he tried to control his panic.

"Easy, now," the older male murmured, but the violet juvenile retreated a step from him.

"Only one–and she's just a hatchling," Gretel clarified in an attempt to ease her friend's worries.

"A hatchling? That's even *worse*! It takes at least four *months* for us to control our gemstones; if she's any younger than that, she's bound to reveal whoever goes in range!" Efron exclaimed between breaths.

"She's only a month old; I can't imagine her reveals would be *that* strong…"

"The fact that she's an abandoned female proves otherwise!" Efron cried desperately. "The only time a *female* would be abandoned is if she's so strong that she'd be able to overthrow the alpha's heir…!" He shook his head fiercely. "I–I need to get out of here–" He pounded his wings to fly away, but in his weakened state they did nothing, and he collapsed from the effort.

"I assure you, we're all friends, here," Clay said gently, crouching to meet the injured juvenile at his level. "My friend keeps the hatchling out of danger from others, and that doubles as keeping others out of her range. The medic I mentioned actually saved that hatchling's life when she was abandoned here. And I'll explain your situation beforehand so the medic knows who she'll be treating, okay? Just breathe. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Efron seemed astonished by his words. His green eyes looked to Gretel as if for confirmation of this.

"Clay *did* save our lives," the wind type stated as a matter of fact. "I don't think he'd suddenly set us up to get killed by a skittish medic."

Her friend let out a huff of laughter as if her phrasing it that way made the ridiculousness of the perceived threat more apparent. "...Alright. As long as she won't attack me… we can visit her now."

"Are you sure you don't want to eat first?" the water dragon prompted, flicking his finned tail-tip toward the fish he had brought. Efron shook his head. "Are you well enough to walk? Want me to carry you?"

The violet revealer pushed himself up to stand, and although he managed to, his legs trembled weakly and he leaned against Clay for support. The former once again looked at Gretel, but this time he seemed ashamed by his need for help.

She playfully scowled with mock-offense. "Efron, you almost *died. Thrice!* You really think you're a failure for not recovering in a single night?!"

Her friend tensed, then laughed with what Gretel had come to recognize as embarrassment akin to relief, as he was once again made aware of how ridiculous that notion sounded. "Guess you're right..." He turned to Clay. "I don't think I can make it on my own…"

"I understand. Nothing to be ashamed of. Come on; get on my back and I'll carry you," Clay offered, and Efron hesitantly obliged.

Gretel followed them as the water type led the way along the edge of the slope. Curiosity got the better of her. "Did the medic teach you how to save Efron from drowning?"

Clay blinked with confusion as to why she would ask him that. Then the reason seemed to register and he chuckled with amusement. "Nah. Resuscitation is common knowledge for water dragons; we can't breathe underwater, and our hatchlings need to be taught how to swim. When my youngest was little, she was so headstrong that she didn't even wait for my instructions before charging into the depths! Scared me half to death, but she actually did pretty well on her own. Very bright, that one," he laughed warmly at the memory.

"Your youngest? How many do you have?"

"Only six," he replied, and for a moment Gretel detected a deep sorrow underneath his casual tone. "But lots of grandkids," he quickly added with a genuine smile.

"Six is awfully small for a water dragon pod," Gretel couldn't stop herself from pointing out; she wanted to learn more about him, particularly why the number of hatchlings he fathered was a touchy subject.

Clay opened his mouth as if to answer, then closed it and averted his blue eyes, the corners of his mouth falling to a frown. "I'd rather not talk about it… at least, not right now. We need to focus on getting this young one to the medic, alright?"

Gretel bowed her head apologetically, then glanced up at her friend to see if he knew anything more about water dragons than she did, but Efron met her gaze with an equally clueless shrug.

"Hold tight; we're heading down the slope," Clay warned Efron, who leaned more securely against the back of the water dragon carrying him. The former paused to make sure the juvenile was steady, then glanced down at Gretel as she stopped at his side to eye him expectantly. He gave the younger dragons a somewhat playful, toothy smile. "Alrighty. Down we go!"

Clay trotted down the slope with a purposeful bounce in his step. Efron seemed scared from the motion at first, then couldn't help laughing after realizing the adult's steps were in a safe, predictable rhythm without any risk of falling.

Gretel grinned at the two of them and bounded a few paces ahead where she leapt up and hovered. "'C'mon, slowpokes! Betcha can't beat me to the bottom!"

"Hm. Think we can?" Clay asked the violet revealer.

Efron seemed stunned to be taken into consideration. Then he nodded eagerly. "Hurry–she has a head start already!"

"On it, chief! Going hyper-speed in three–two–*one!*" Clay suddenly sprinted past the wyvern with surprising speed.

Efron burst out laughing from how unexpectedly fast they were going, and it took Gretel a second to close her mouth that had gaped in shock, but she just as quickly recovered and dove through the air to match his pace.

"Faster! Don't let her win!" Efron cried between uncontrollable laughs.

"Yes, sir! Going into overdrive!" Clay reported, then pushed himself further, managing to pass Gretel at the last second before the ground leveled out. Efron cheered victoriously as his friend landed by them a second later.

"Wow, you're pretty quick," she admitted, impressed. *Though, of course, I let them win.*

"Guess I've still got some fight left in these old bones," the older dragon chuckled. Efron was still smiling even though the race was over. Clay turned around to face a thicket at the base of the slope. "Hey, missy; you've got company! Me, and two patients: a seven-month old wind hatchling and a two-year-old revealer."

Gretel and Efron exchanged a curious glance, neither seeing who he was talking to. Then a new female's voice called out in response from behind it: "Bring them in."

"These sprigs might poke you, so brace yourself when we go past them, alright?" Clay warned the juvenile still sitting on his back.

The latter nodded and folded his blue wings in front of himself as a shield until the trio pushed through the foliage and entered a wide grotto beneath the upper woodlands they'd just descended from, held in place by sturdy tree roots that kept the damp, compact soil from burying them.

Inside was a brown-furred electric type dragoness with deep red eyes, claws, mane, and foot-pads. Gretel's eyes were drawn to the latter; she had glimpsed electricity spark from Gavin's yellow-green ones with each time he landed whilst leaping across the prairie to save Efron last evening, and wondered if this stranger's would spark the same way.

The medic immediately took notice of Efron and gasped through her fingers with horror. “Geez! I heard the injured revealer almost drowned yesterday, but he was also *strangled?*”

Efron blinked with confusion, then lifted a clawed hand to his own bruised neck and winced from the touch as if discovering she was right. “Oh…”

“What do you mean, ‘oh’? Do you not remember being choked so hard that your neck has a purple handprint on it?”

“W-What?”

“He doesn't remember,” Gretel spoke up. “That's why we brought him here."

“Hm. Well maybe I can remind him what happened," the medic said. "That print is from a left hand: five digits, with smaller claws that remain a fixed length from the tips, meaning they aren't retractable. By process of elimination, that means another revealer–perhaps seven years old, given how big the hand is–had done that to you."

Efron visibly paled, his green eyes widening and gaining that distant look again. Gretel got more concerned as the silence dragged on for several seconds, her friend beginning to tremble as he seemed to forget to breathe.

“Efron?” she called worriedly.

He came to from her voice; tears streamed down his cheeks when he finally blinked and inhaled, only to immediately begin hyperventilating.

“Efron, it's okay! She's gone! You're safe!”

The electric type placed a four-digit clawed hand on the wyvern’s shoulder. “Let him process it."

Clay crouched so that the panicking juvenile wouldn't fall from his back, but Efron only clung to the older male as if for comfort while he sobbed between quick, unsteady breaths.

Gretel had never seen him so distressed before. She wanted to soothe him, but didn't know how to. Just sitting there, despite it being the only thing she could do, made her feel useless.

“Hey. You did the right thing bringing him here,” the older female assured her. “You seem to have some bruises as well. And scrapes along your torso. I'm assuming the same revealer must have attacked you as well as your friend?”

Gretel gaped at her, remembering how Kendra's harsh kick had sent her skidding across the ground. “Wow. You're good."

“Fortunately, it doesn't look like anything serious. The way you walked in here, you didn't have a limp or show any signs of injury. You should be fine."

“Thanks, but it's not me that I'm worried about…" The purple-striped wind type turned back to her friend, who by now had gotten off of Clay only to collapse and curl up on the ground, still deeply upset.

“You know, strangulation usually means it's personal for the attacker,” she remarked. “If he was choked by someone he was familiar with, I'll bet that betrayal hurt more than the physicality of it all. Just let him vent it out. Come, you two; let's step outside and give him some privacy."

Clay and Gretel followed her out of the grotto. “Will he be okay?” the latter dared herself to ask.

“Physically, he’ll make a full recovery if he keeps his wound clean and doesn't strain himself. As for emotionally? Well, that remains to be seen. Since you mentioned he couldn't remember how he got injured, and given the severity of his injuries, I'm assuming it was very traumatic for him."

“Wait… How did you know how badly his arm was hurt? And who told you he drowned? Was it Clay?”

“Hm? Oh, no. I just heard it through the grapevine. You *could* say a little birdie told me. A specific birdie who did a good job cauterizing the way I'd shown him a month ago."

“Gavin?!”

She laughed. “So you've met!”

“Yeah! Clay introduced me to him. Well, partly; I don't think I told Gavin my name yet." *Wait. Why did Gavin talk to the medic after saving Efron? Solitary dragons don't really talk to others, especially about matters that concern outsiders who aren't a threat. Unless…* “Are you and Gavin mates? Is that why he told you?”

The medic recoiled, almost with disgust. “Heavens, no!”

Gretel blinked, completely caught off guard by that reaction. “What's wrong with the idea of Gavin being your mate?”

“He doesn't swing that way, for one. For another, I don't swing at all–nor do I ever want to."

“Swing?” Gretel’s head tilted with childish innocence. When the fluffy adult seemed embarrassed, the younger female looked to Clay for answers.

“Uhh, I'll tell you when you're older… At least, if you stick around this island for that long,” he mumbled.

“Why wait until I'm older?" Then it clicked. “Oh! Swing, as in mate? So… you mean Gavin doesn't want to mate with females?”

Clay averted his eyes awkwardly.

The medic laughed. “Bingo! You're sharp!”

“And you don't want to mate, *ever?*” Gretel made the connection. “Why not?”

“I just don't like the idea of it, that's all."

The wyvern stared incredulously at her. *I never knew that ‘not mating’ was an option. Now that she mentions it, I don't think I ever want a mate, either.*

“My name’s Wren,” the brown electric type added. “While Gavin’s not my mate, he *is* my friend–and so is Clay. The only two friends I care to have, anyway. If you're on good terms with them, then you're fine by me as well."

“I'm Gretel. Clay mentioned you also saved the hatchling who’s with Gavin when she was first abandoned here, too, right?”

Wren's smile fell and her eyes narrowed somberly. "Yeah. First that hatchling a month ago was clawed in the back and left here to die, and now this one got clawed in the arm and strangled?" she said with a disapproving shake of her head. "Those poor juveniles. To make matters worse, I'll bet their own parents did it to them."

Gretel nodded ever so slightly to confirm that was the case with her friend. She brushed through the thicket to peer inside, checking if he was okay.

Efron had calmed enough to breathe normally again; he was sitting up and hugging his legs to his chest, tears still dripping down from his watered green eyes that were staring ahead at nothing.

She moved to sit by his side. "You remembered everything, huh…?"

He nodded, closing his eyes and burying his face between his knees.

"It's alright… We're safe here. If she ever comes back, I'll roar so loud that she *won't* wake up a second time," she said with a determined smile in an attempt to lighten the mood.

He lifted his head, then laughed slightly. "*If* she even woke up after last time." Gretel couldn't tell if that was meant as a joke, even when he laughed some more; his laughter became somewhat hysterical.

The reality of the situation sank in for the younger dragon. "Efron, I'm sorry…"

"Heh! For what? Stopping my own mother from killing me–all because she found out I survived her *first* attempt?" He laughed some more, tears falling all the while. When he finally got it out of his system, the older juvenile heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry…"

"Sorry…? For what?"

He shrugged.

"Efron, you didn't do anything wrong…"

"My mother sure thought otherwise."

"That doesn't mean she's right…"

"It doesn't *matter* if she's right… When you're the alpha in revealer society, then you're *always* right, because nobody else around you is strong enough to 'prove' you wrong."

Gretel let his words register. Then she recalled what he said about the tangerine hatchling having been abandoned for being powerful enough to challenge the alpha's heir. "So if you *are* strong enough to stand up to the alpha, you get attacked and left alone to die…?"

"Only if you attempt to overthrow them; which is what my mother thought I was doing when I stood up for myself the first time. But if you and the alpha's heir are both female, then you might be targeted by the alpha just for having hatched with a powerful gemstone," he replied, and Gretel noticed that the shift in topic seemed to be a welcome distraction for him.

"I don't understand. What does gender have to do with anything?"

“You don't know…? Revealer societies are matriarchies. Females are the alphas; if the matriarch has a son--like me, except 'well-behaved'--then a powerful unrelated female like the hatchling you mentioned would probably be courted with him and become the next alpha when she's old enough.

“But if the matriarch has a daughter, and is determined for her bloodline to keep reign over their society--which is more common than it should be, given how the strongest actually have the *right* to challenge their rulership--she'll likely do *anything* to prevent her daughter's position from being overtaken by a stronger unrelated female… even if it means harming or exiling an innocent hatchling."

"You mean it was the alpha who harmed this hatchling, and not her parents?"

"Well, yeah. But the parents were probably given an ultimatum afterward: abandon their hatchling, or be killed or exiled along with their hatchling. If her parents valued their life in society, they had no choice but to leave her out here to die."

Gretel’s frown only deepened. “I can’t understand why anyone would choose to live life in a society, if that's what societies are like…"

“Hey, now. Societies aren't always a bad thing,” Clay chuckled half-heartedly as he reentered the grotto, revealing himself to have been eavesdropping. He was followed inside by Wren.

“Then why did you leave yours?” Gretel asked him curiously. All of the other three dragons tensed. The wyvern glanced between them, utterly confused. “What?”

“Gretel, I know you grew up solitary, but… like I said before, societies have a lot of unspoken expectations,” Efron gently reminded his friend. “One of those expectations is to get a read on how someone feels about certain topics, so you know whether or not to bring them up in their presence."

“Uh… what are you talking about? Bring what up?”

“Judging by how Clay reacted when you asked him about how many hatchlings he had, I think his life in society is a sore topic for him… So maybe we shouldn't bring it up around him, okay?”

The juvenile dragoness frowned. “That's so… complicated,” she muttered. “Sorry if I was insensitive… but I didn't think questions were a bad thing for social dragons."

“Questions aren't a bad thing at all,” Wren corrected her. “It's the *type* of questions that matter. That goes for solitary dragons as well, if we're interacting with others for whatever reason."

“I don't get why asking him about his society is a bad thing when that’s the focus of discussion, though. I'm *trying* to socialize that way. I thought *social* dragons would enjoy talking about their societies."

“Look: I get it,” Wren laughed somewhat awkwardly. “Societal rules are hard to understand, and us solitary types have all of the freedom to say what we want because we live alone. But because social dragons live with *others*, they have to learn how not to *upset* others. Right, Clay?”

The other adult didn't seem to have heard anything past what Gretel had asked. He was staring solemnly at the ground.

Gretel instantly felt remorse upon seeing how deeply her thoughtless question had affected him. "Clay, I'm sorry… I won't bring up your society anymore, alright?"

The water type lifted his head to respectfully meet her gaze. "Oh–it's alright, little lady. I've lived a solitary life here on this island for around seven years now, ever since my youngest left with her mate to start her own pod," he admitted with a reassuring smile despite the sadness she detected in his voice. "Truth be told, it's a lot more peaceful to be on your own than it is to live in a society."

I'll bet, Gretel agreed, but didn't risk saying that aloud.

"But as I'm sure you're aware of, there's comfort to be had in friendships. That's why I chose this island to settle on: the inhabitants here *are* solitary, but if you earn their trust, they're the most loyal friends one could ever hope for."

"Really?"

"From my experience with you, Gretel, I'd say so," Efron concurred with a small smile as he wiped the drying tears from his eyes.

Gretel felt somewhat guilty from the compliment. *I'm not much of a friend, given how often I made Efron defensive about revealer hunting methods and their historical tales… Have I really been that insensitive all this time?*

"I appreciate how blunt you are, little lady. You don't sugarcoat your thoughts, and you're not afraid to question things," Clay continued, more optimistically this time. "I respect that."

The wind type perked up. "So you'll tell me why you left your society after all?"

He laughed. "This isn't the time or place for that. Let's focus on making sure your friend recovers, 'kay?"

"Oh, alright," she pouted.

"Now that you've settled down some, would you mind if I took a closer look at that bruise on your neck?" Wren asked Efron. "Your voice sounds strained, which is to be expected, but I want to see the extent of the damage."

The violet revealer hesitated, looking toward his friend with uncertainty. Gretel responded with an encouraging nod and backed away to give the medic room to work. "Alright," he permitted the latter.

The young wind dragoness settled next to Clay by the mouth of the grotto, watching the electric type adult inspect the purplish print on the other juvenile's throat. She could tell Efron felt embarrassed by the quiet vocalizations Wren now instructed him to make.

"Would you rather have me and Clay wait outside for you?" Gretel asked him. *I don't think doing what's necessary for a medic to help is anything to be embarrassed about, but I don't want him to be uncomfortable if he doesn't want me to see him make silly sounds.*

"Y-Yeah, if you're okay with that," Efron admitted.

She smiled reassuringly. "No problem! Come on, Clay. Let's give them space. Maybe we can go get that fish you brought him earlier; he hasn't eaten anything today, after all."

"Good thinkin'," the old water dragon agreed. "Wren, we'll be back in a little bit. We'll excuse ourselves for now."

"Alright, then. I don't think this is anything too concerning; I should have a plan figured out by the time you two return," the fluffy medic dismissed them.

Gretel slipped through the shrubs shielding the entrance and looked back as she waited for Clay to catch up. "Um… Are things okay between you and me?" she asked him when he joined her.

"Hm? Yes, of course. Why wouldn't they be?" he asked with an ever so slight tilt of his head.

She shrugged. "I really didn't mean to upset you earlier. Wind dragons only ever spend time together if we roost in the same area, or if a rescuer lets us recover at their retreat. We're all usually very open about the troubles we face; it helps us find out what we as individuals need to watch out for," Gretel explained. "I never knew social dragons would get upset by talking about their troubles until Wren said so just now." Her hot pink eyes looked shamefully at the muddied soil under her purple-striped paws. "I'm sorry. Really."

"Hey, it's alright. Like Wren said, societal rules *are* hard to understand; even for social dragons," he soothed her. When she still was clearly guilty, he sighed, adding, "My pod–when I had one–treated me well. Talking about my society isn't what had upset me."

Gretel lifted her head to meet his gaze expectantly.

"Sometimes, bad things happen… And even if you did all you could to stop it, that doesn't change the fact that it still happened," he murmured vaguely.

When he didn't elaborate, Gretel decided to mull over his words instead of press him for details, as she'd rather not upset him again. *That's kind of like what happened yesterday between me, Efron, and his mother,* she empathized. *I did all I could to stop Kendra's attack, but Efron is still injured and upset, because stopping her doesn't change the fact that she attacked him in the first place…*

"Now let's move quick-like to the willow tree and grab that fish for your pal," Clay changed the subject.

She grinned halfheartedly from the distraction. "Quick-like? What's the rush?"

"Feel that moisture in the air? It'll definitely rain soon," he answered her as he led the way.

"Really?" Gretel was impressed, trotting to keep up with the larger dragon. *This whole, entire prairie is a wetland; there's a constant moisture in the air. I didn't notice any increase in humidity.* "How can you tell? Are water types sensitive to that?"

"Oh, for sure," he confirmed with an amused laugh. "Even in the wetlands, staying on land too long will dry our scales out. I welcome the extra humidity whenever it rains in this region–which is often enough for me to thrive here."

"Wow. That's really cool," she admitted. "I don't like rain very much because it drags me down when I fly, but if there are other shelters from it here like Wren's grotto, then I think this place is livable for me."

"It might be hard to find a shelter that isn't occupied by an electric type. So be careful when looking for one, okay?"

"Hm. Could I make my own burrow here? Would that work?"

"Uh, I wouldn't recommend that for you. If it rains enough, your burrow will flood, and you wouldn't want to be inside it while that happens."

"Oh..."

"I'm sure Wren would share the grotto with you temporarily. And the willow tree you slept under last night might be good enough shelter for now. You don't need to fully adjust to life here in a single day," he said with a heartening smile.

"True." She couldn't help smiling again, herself. *I don't know what bad things he may have tried to stop from happening to his society, but I hope he's happy enough here; and I hope I can learn to be, too.*

By the time they reached the tree that Efron had left the fish under, it was gone. Gretel sniffed the ground where it had been that morning, and caught the scent of something familiar; she couldn't place it at first, then it registered. *It's the same kind of underlying smell that Gavin and Wren have. I guess it's from electric types in general.*

"Looks like someone else beat us to it," Clay remarked somewhat breathlessly. "Oh well. I'll go hunt some more."

"Really? Are you sure? I mean, you went through all the trouble of hunting for us the first time..." *If he's out of breath just from climbing the slope to reach our tree, I can't imagine hunting a second time so soon would be easy for him.*

"I don't mind it. Honest," he assured her.

She shook her head. "The birds are already on the move to start migrating. There's still time for me to catch some before it rains, right?"

"I reckon you got about an hour. If you're okay with getting rained on while you're out, though, that's your choice."

The wind type giggled. "I've been rained on before. I don't like it, but I'll live!"

"Alright. I'll be on the shore if you need anything, then." Clay waved one of his green-tipped dorsal fins in farewell as they both departed.

Gretel searched the treetops of the cottonwood trees, but frowned to see they were beginning to shed their gold-tinted leaves for the autumn season. Migratory birds wouldn't like to stay for too long in trees with less leaves. She turned to look over the prairie instead and then spotted a pink bird with a long neck standing on one foot. *What's that? Oh, there are more of them all around, too!*

The wind type hatchling silenced herself and quickly dove toward it. Right as she did so, it seemed, the odd bird shuddered before collapsing. Gretel hesitated, perplexed, before a movement caught her eye: a fluffy young electric dragon popped up from between the tall blades of grass, snatched its kill up from the ground, then dragged it back into the grassy depths where he hid again.

Woah. Getting prey before they do might not be easy... But luckily they can't shock targets that aren't in some degree of physical contact with them, right? Electricity needs conductors like the water in the wetlands. She shook her head. *No time to waste; I need to find something before the weather gets bad.*

Not wanting to chance electrocution, Gretel flew away from the prairie, searching the skies above other islands. She traveled a few miles south until she spotted a V-shaped flock of ducks in the distance. She maintained her silence but unsummoned the tailwind; she didn't want it to give them a speed boost too. Instead, she positioned herself a fair distance behind them and then changed the direction of the existing air to move toward herself in a strong enough current from in front of them to disrupt their flight. When that alerted them and they broke formation to flee, it was too late; Gretel had swiftly moved in for the kill during the chaos, latching her jaws onto the nearest one as the rest dispersed.

She fought back her instincts to chomp it down despite the fact that she was still full from the fish Clay had brought her. This is for Efron, she scolded herself with an outward chuckle, then spun one-eighty degrees to head back to the wetlands.

Day 2 (Continued)

The first droplet of ice-cold rain startled her as it landed on top of her muzzle. The purple-striped wyvern glanced up, then flinched as a second one plopped near her eyes. *Oh boy.* Gretel immediately summoned a tailwind to quicken her pace, hoping to beat the storm clouds to her retreat.

To her disdain, the clouds seemed to have originated over it. *I guess I should have known. It wasn't too rainy on Efron's old island, but it was when I had passed by this one when I had first landed there last season,* she realized. That knowledge did little to help her reach it, though; by the time she was above her new home, it was pouring.

Gretel instinctively looked the beach over to find Clay, but was shocked to discover that the familiar old water type wasn't alone there; he was with a younger, pinkish-brown dragoness whose aquatic back-fins were similar in color to his. There was a third water dragon, a more burgundy color, who surfaced from the shore right after she did, followed by eight hatchlings of similar colors to the first two adults, who were presumably their parents. The juveniles swarmed Clay and tackled him down.

Gretel was so intrigued by the situation that she momentarily could ignore the fact that she was drenched by the downpour. She moved her kill between her hind paws and landed undetected underneath the uppermost branches of the closest willow tree. Unfortunately, Clay's voice was drowned out by the burgundy male who was nearer to her.

"Settle down, let's not crowd him," he was telling the hatchlings, who obliged by giving Clay a bit of breathing room despite the latter seeming just as excited as the juveniles.

"Papa, can we play in the puddles while we're here?" the oldest, a yearling, asked.

"Yes, but just keep an eye out for electric types. They're flighty and hard to spot, but if you stumble across one, you're likely to get shocked," he said.

"Oh… Maybe I shouldn't risk it…"

"N-No, it's okay! I'm also keeping watch; I'll make sure you don't get hurt. All I'm saying is that we *all* need to be careful. We can have fun and be careful at the same time, right?"

He brightened. "True! And since the others are smaller than me, I can look out for *them* too. If I see an electric type go near my siblings, I'll blast 'em with water!"

"That's very responsible of you to look out for them," the father praised him, "but we should only attack the electric types if we absolutely have to. This is *their* home, not ours; you wouldn't like it if they swam in our waters and shocked us if we approached them, would you?"

He froze. "When you put it that way, it sounds bad…"

"Hey, now. You have very good intentions here. I'm proud of you for wanting to keep your family safe," he assured him. "But you're too young to bear that responsibility all on your own right now, okay? That's what *I'm* here for." He grinned at the hatchlings. "Go on, you can all have fun in the puddles. But if any of you *do* see an electric type before I do, you need to say so and let *me* take care of it. Understand?"

"Yes, Papa," five of hatchlings agreed before eagerly running off under his watch. The other three didn't seem as interested; they remained bouncing around their mother and Clay.

"Grampa! Grampa, guess what?" the youngest of them said to Clay.

"What?" he played along enthusiastically.

"I've learned to hold my breath for two whole *hours!*" she excitedly boasted.

Clay gasped with genuine astonishment. "Woah. Impressive! That's thirty minutes longer than I could at your age. You're really shaping up to be an elite!"

She beamed with pride from his affirmation.

"W-Well, *I* can hold my breath for *three* hours!" the oldest of the trio said, pushing her way between the youngest and Clay as if to steal his attention.

Clay looked up at the other adult, who stifled a nervous chuckle as she rolled her eyes with a slight shake of her head in response, subtly telling him that it wasn't true.

"You liar!" the middle hatchling chastised his older sister, even though none of them had noticed their mother's reaction. "*I* can hold my breath for three hours. And when we had that contest, you almost drowned after two and a *half!*"

"Sh-Shut up!" the latter whined as if humiliated that her bluff was called.

"Hey, be nice–both of you. I'm sure you all just want to show off how much you've grown since we last visited your grampa," their mother murmured. She turned to the oldest. "Maybe we shouldn't embellish the truth around family, though, okay? Your grampa loves you just the same as he loves your siblings."

The oldest sniffled and looked away guiltily.

"It's okay!" the youngest tried to cheer her sister up. "Holding my breath for so long is really, *really* hard! But I got scared of slowing you all down every time I had to surface for air, so I also *practiced* really really hard! One time I got so dizzy during practice, I almost didn't make it to the surface in time. But you'll get the hang of it, too!"

Everyone froze at that casual revelation. "When was this?" her mother asked, trying her best to hide worry by way of a forcibly neutral tone, but to Gretel it was loud and clear.

"When you let us spend the night with our big unkie's pod. One of my cousins kept complaining about me stopping for air, and everyone agreed with him…"

The adult dragoness couldn't disguise a scowl. "Alright. That's the last time I'll ever leave you and your siblings with *his* pod without me or your papa present."

The youngest shrank. "Sorry… I didn't mean to get them in trouble…"

She shook her head fiercely. "Sweetie, if they bullied you, they *should* get in trouble. Holding your breath for that long is dangerous…! What if you *hadn't* made it to the surface in time?"

The hatchling shrugged, not meeting her gaze. "But they were right; I really *was* slowing them down…"

"No, no; you could *never* slow *anyone* down. Don't ever think that way about yourself. If they're so impatient that they can't wait a minute for you to catch your breath, then that's *their* problem, not yours."

"Yeah! You're the smallest one here, but you're tougher than *all* of us!" her brother said encouragingly.

"You guys, come look at this frog! It's the biggest one I've ever seen!" the yearling called to the trio.

The older sister took that opportunity to escape the conversation, and her brother made sure the youngest was okay before playfully chasing her to join the others.

Gretel gazed down and could see the frog clearly from her distant perch. *Wow, that is pretty big! I wonder if it's safe to eat?*

The pinkish water dragoness's quiet voice drew the wind type's attention back to the two adults. "Don't you miss this?" she asked her father. "How long has it been since you last had a hatchling tell you to check out a frog? Seeing them discover the small joys of the world… It really makes you appreciate the everyday things we've grown to overlook."

"Heh. Hard to forget; I still see that on this island. Wind types who stopped to roost here in late autumn, electric types balancing on their tails for the first time." Clay smiled.

"But they aren't yours," she pointed out.

"They don't have to be."

"They'll attack you even if you try to help them…"

"More often than not, they don't *need* help. That's why their alliance with me is genuine. We respect each other, instead of taking advantage of one another through lies like so many water dragon singles do."

"I don't get why you'd trust a solitary type after that shadow dragon killed Mom… And then there's Gavin–"

"Hey, now; I turned him down."

"That's exactly the problem! I know you go either way, but you refuse to settle with a new mate! Why? I just–don't understand it."

"Nobody can replace your mother. I'd rather spend my final years surrounded by friends than worrying about mates, anyway."

"Alright, Dad. You win," she laughed. "It's your life. I just worry about you, that's all."

"I know."

"C'mon, everyone. Finish your games and let's head back before the rain stops," she called to her pod.

"'Kay, Mama! Will Grampa come back with us this time?" the youngest asked.

Clay laughed. "Naw. This is my home. But you can always visit anytime," he welcomed them.

They said their goodbyes, and by the time they all dove into the ocean out of sight, the rain had let up.

Clay left the shore to lie down in the same mud puddle Gretel had first met him in. Veils slid over his blue eyes, then he sank all the way into it, head and all. Her heart skipped a beat with worry when he didn't resurface; her first instinct was to save him from drowning, but the wind type hatchling only then registered the conversation he'd had with his grandkids a little while ago: water dragons could hold their breath for hours.

He's fine, Gretel soothed herself, then shifted on her perch, only to realize she was still holding the duck she had hunted for Efron. *Oh, I forgot I had it!* She moved the existing air beneath the willow tree upward to slow her descent as she let herself drop from its branch. With an aileron roll on the way down to shake the rainwater off of her–giggling from the fun of it and because she was glad to be dried from the motion–the little wyvern landed lightly in the long grass and cheerfully skipped back to Wren's grotto.

"I'm back!" Gretel announced as she trotted through the shrubs at the entrance without missing a beat.

The medic reactively jolted from her sudden appearance; the crackling sound of electricity scared the striped juvenile even before it caused the older dragoness's long reddish mane to clump into sharp, quill-like spikes making her appear as a larger threat. Her matching-colored eyes were almost feral, trained on Gretel the instant the latter had entered.

Gretel immediately suppressed her survival instincts that were kicking in; Efron was right behind the electric type, seeming just as alarmed by the medic's newfound hostility as his friend was.

Wren blinked and immediately drew in a breath to calm herself, the crackling sound ebbing as her fur and mane fell back to their usual softness and she sat, wrapping her arms and very long tail around herself. "...Sorry about that," she sighed after catching her breath. "You scared me."

Geez! Clay wasn't kidding when he said she was skittish, Gretel silently remarked. *I wouldn't want to see what happens if I upset an electric type who* isn't *friendly like her...* "It's okay; I guess I should have gotten permission to come in like Clay did..."

Wren laughed slightly. "That'd help, thanks."

"See, you just learned another unspoken social rule," Efron spoke up proudly as if to lighten the mood.

"Huh? What rule?" Gretel asked.

"You learned to copy Clay's way of entering, so you wouldn't upset Wren," he pointed out.

"Oh." *I still don't think there's anything wrong with how I entered, though... I like Clay enough, but I don't know anything about Wren. I just want to stay on her good side so she doesn't kill me otherwise.*

"Really, I apologize," Wren said again, her genuine regret more audible now that she was calm. "I should've warned you before you left that I scare easily. I just thought Clay would return with you, since the two of you left together. I wasn't prepared this time, that's all."

Seeing the adult's fur flattened now made Gretel aware of just how small electric dragons were, even as adults. Upright, Wren was only three-and-a-half feet tall, which was six inches taller than Efron–who was big for his age–and the same distance shorter than Gavin.

"He-e-ey, don't beat yourself up," Gretel chuckled in an attempt to ease the tension. She almost felt guilty for being frightened by Wren; the latter had only reacted that way out of fear of Gretel. *I'm still young, but wind dragons do grow up to be as big as Clay, and I've already proven myself able to take down revealers like Kendra, even if she wasn't fully grown. I'm so used to being potential prey at my age, that I forgot wind dragons are also predators…*

"What's that?" Efron asked, pointing a clawed finger at the duck she brought.

"Oh! It's your breakfast. Well, I should say 'lunch,' since it's almost afternoon." Gretel brought it over to him on paws so lightweight that they hardly made a sound even though she wasn't using any abilities. She sat beside him.

"Didn't it only just stop raining?" he asked, concerned. "I thought you were bringing the fish Clay hunted for me this morning… I didn't mean to make you go out to find prey during a downpour like that–"

"It's okay! It didn't rain until I was on my back from hunting it."

"Really? Then where were you while it was raining all this time?"

Gretel could tell he was more-so asking if she found a shelter from the rain, but when she was about to explain how she'd hidden in the willow tree to watch Clay's family visit, she stopped herself, once again reminded of the latter's conversation. She reflected on it for a moment. "Hey, Wren… Do you know anything about shadow dragons?"

The violet revealer tilted his head, confused by the sudden change of topic, but ultimately followed her gaze to the medic as if wanting to know the answer as well.

"Yes, and no," Wren replied. The tufted tip of her tail twitched slightly.

"Uh…" Gretel wanted to ask what she meant, but also didn't want to risk upsetting her again.

"Yes, I know about them," she elaborated, "but, no: I can't tell you if there are any around."

"Uhhhh…" Gretel was even more confused by that vague explanation.

Wren sighed. "I wouldn't worry too much about them, honestly. They're even smaller than we electric dragons are, unless they happen to be an alterant or an elite, neither of which are very common. Your average shadow dragons will likely stay in hiding or camouflaged out of our sights to avoid being hunted, if they do live around here."

"Oh." *Now we're getting somewhere.* "What are alterants?"

"Shadow dragons who specialize in altering their base bodies. Some can even double their size, or give themselves wings to fly, or even gills to breathe underwater." The medic's voice lowered at that last part.

Gretel hesitated. *Was it an alterant who killed Clay's mate…?*

Efron glanced between them, even more puzzled by their sudden somberness. But when his stomach audibly growled, he couldn't help but begin eating the duck.

Wren purposefully cleared her throat. "Anyway, your friend seems to have already recovered a lot, given the extent of his injury," she told the wind type, gesturing to the revealer's bruised neck. To Efron, she added, "I don't think there's anything to worry about. Just make sure you use those sharp fangs of yours to chew your food all the way before swallowing, okay? The swelling right now could cause you to choke if you don't."

He nodded. "Thanks. Can I finish eating before we leave?"

"Yeah, I don't care. But if another patient stops by for me before then, I'd expect you both not to be in the way of that."

"Do you get patients often?" Gretel wondered.

"Only as often as others get hurt to the extent your friend was. Clay might bring others over, though, like he had back when he found the revealer hatchling last month."

"Wait–Clay is the one who found her?" *Then how did she end up with Gavin?*

"Yeah. Unlike most of us here on this island, he actually doesn't prey on small or injured dragons. He brings them to me and begs me to help them. It got to the point where he even asked me to teach him some basic medical stuff so he could help them if I wasn't there."

"Medical stuff?" *Clay told me resuscitation was common knowledge for water types.*

"Yeah. Like how blood-loss can cause more than just death, even if the patient survives it. I also told him what cauterizing was, and about some of the herbs he helps me forage for."

Wow. So me and Efron aren't the only ones Clay saved.

By the time Efron swallowed the last bite and Gretel stood with him to leave, the duo paused when a newcomer's voice sounded from outside: "Wren, can you examine Grace?"

Gretel recognized that blunt, straightforward tone as Gavin's from the few times she had heard him speak. *Who's Grace?*

"I have guests right now. I can ask them to leave first, or you can bring her in regardless," the medic replied.

There was a second of silence. Gretel and Efron exchanged a curious glance. Then the wind type's sharp eyes noticed his yellow-green ones peering in between the sprigs blocking the entryway; upon spotting Efron, they narrowed slightly. Then the turquoise dragon stepped inside, using his long tail in an arc-shape to hold up the foliage so the tangerine hatchling could go through unscathed.

Oh… That *must be Grace,* Gretel realized.

Efron tensed when he saw the other revealer. His green eyes darted for a way out of the grotto that didn't mean having to pass the newcomers, even as Gavin's tail coiled around Grace and gently lifted her over to Wren.

"She escaped while it was raining. The water seems to have made her scales raw after drying," the fluffy male explained to the medic.

"Hm. I should be able to whip something up to help soothe any rashes," Wren said, heading toward the herbs near the back of the grotto away from everyone.

Efron seemed to grow more antsy with each moment spent in the presence of the tiny tangerine dragoness. Every time he made a move for the exit, it seemed, the one-month-old would either look at him or make a move herself, which caused the older revealer to hesitate and double back. The fact that his unease seemed to get Gavin's attention only seemed to increase his anxiety.

"You okay?" Gretel asked her companion worriedly.

"Um… I, uh… I have to go," the blue-winged revealer stammered between nervous breaths. With no other option to pass them, Efron sidled along the dirt wall as if to keep as much distance between himself and the hatchling as possible on his way out.

"Wait," Gavin said before he made it past. When Efron froze, almost bracing himself, the electric dragon continued, "Your coloring."

The younger male blinked, then looked down at his arm as if to check if his injury had reddened.

Gavin exhaled though his nose as if mildly annoyed. "Your *scales'* coloring."

Efron's eyes darted between the adult and the exit. "Uh… What about it…?"

"Your mother… or grandmother… is from the far east, correct?"

The violet juvenile paled slightly.

East? But the plateau island where I saw the revealers was to the west, Gretel thought.

"Green eyes, purple scales, white wings," Gavin specified. "That's the matriarch of the eastern highlands. I'm assuming based on how similar your colors are that you're one of her descendants. Am I wrong?"

"I… Um… I haven't really *met* her, but…" Efron cowered slightly, as if scared the stranger would attack him for either not answering or for giving an answer the electric type disapproved of.

"He was hatched on the island northeast of here," Gretel spoke up for her friend. "Whatever his mother or grandmother did on the island east of that, it has *nothing* to do with him."

Gavin's yellow-green eyes immediately met the wyvern's; the suddenness of it made her shrink. "I am not blaming him for anything. I merely asked if they were related."

Gretel opened her mouth to argue, then realized he was right. *It's… hard to get a read on him. I can't tell if Efron being related to them is a good thing or a bad one. Even Wren is easier to figure out than this…!*

"The matriarch there sounds similar-looking to my mother," Efron finally answered, somewhat defeatedly. "Chances are, you're right. So if you don't want me around, I understand–"

"That isn't it," he said, and his mouth opened slightly wider as if to clarify, but he got distracted when Grace crouched to inspect a feather from Efron's lunch. He quickly picked it out of her hands before she could put it in her mouth.

As Gretel watched him struggle with keeping the skeletal remains of the duck out of her reach, she tried to piece together what he was getting at. *If Efron's mother is from the far east, then…* "What about the plateau island?"

Both males looked to the purple-striped juvenile. "What about it?" Gavin said questioningly.

"Efron, you said your dad wasn't from the same place your mom was, right? So if your mom was from the far eastern island, does that mean he's from the plateau island?"

Her friend seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Now that you mention it, he did say that, once. But why does it matter?" He turned to Gavin. "Why does *any* of this matter?" Efron's ears lowered as his eyes watered. "I've been on Dualrise Island my whole *life* until now. I don't know any revealers anywhere else… If my family did anything at all to hurt you or that hatchling, then I'm sorry; I… I'm sorry…" He choked back a sob and wiped the tears before they could fall.

"Forgive me; I didn't mean to upset you," Gavin said more quietly. "I only asked because the eastern highlands is where this little one is from. That print on your neck is likely from a revealer's hand as well; I assumed you escaped from there before you could end up like her."

Gretel gaped in astonishment at the maned male. *He gathered all of that just from Efron's appearance? Wait–Efron's grandmother is probably as bad as his mother, if she's the one who kicked out an innocent hatchling…*

Efron drew in a shaky breath, then his gemstone glowed and he calmed enough to stand straighter. He gazed with newfound empathy at the hatchling he had been so terrified of only moments ago. "You're right… about me escaping. Just not from my grandmother, or her island." There was a long moment before he faced Gavin. "I guess… you're right about me not being so different from this hatchling, either," he realized. After a beat, he chuckled. "Wow. Revealers must look pretty bad to all of you, huh…?"

"Efron, I don't think that at all," Gretel assured him sternly. "The societies are bad, maybe. But you and Auden seemed okay to me. You never mentioned much about your father, though."

"Well… Like Clay said, societies *aren't* all bad… It's only *my* family, it seems." The two-year-old revealer chuckled a second time, almost hysterically as his eyes welled up again. Then he stopped himself with another conceal.

Gretel felt her heart sink with pity. *I never really had any family. I can't imagine how it'd feel if I did–only for my mom to attempt killing me twice, and my grandma to exile an innocent newborn. I'm lucky I don't have any connections to my family; whatever they might have done is not my problem.*

"S-Sorry… I've just… dealt with a lot," Efron sighed, sliding his back down the wall to sit hugging his knees to his chest, his Z-shaped tail wrapping around himself.

"I don't know much about revealers," Gavin stated, "but believe me: if I considered you as much a threat as your grandmother, you wouldn't be alive right now."

Efron and Gretel both recoiled at that. "Are you saying you'd *kill him?!*" she demanded.

Gavin's head tilted ever so slightly. "Are you saying you would blame me if I did, in that instance?"

"But he *isn't* bad!"

"And I haven't killed him," he pointed out.

"That's enough," Wren said, coming back with a leaf that carried an odd-smelling poultice in her hand. "I've had my fill of company for today. So unless any of you have any sudden emergencies, please leave now."

"Fine be me. Come one, Efron," the young wind type snorted indignantly, making sure her friend left safely before she did.

"Wait," Gavin called to them from the entrance. "We got off-topic. My point was that you're clearly not as violent as your ancestors; thus, I was wondering if you could tell me what revealer hatchlings need to survive."

The two of them hesitated upon seeing the turquoise-furred dragon had already applied the poultice to Grace, whom he was currently carrying in his arms as he stepped out.

"Please…" he went on, slightly quieter. "I want to do right by her."

Efron glanced at his friend indecisively. Gretel wanted answers; to ask Gavin directly why a revealer hatchling mattered so much to him. But she knew better than to risk upsetting anyone, so she suppressed her desire to prolong this interaction.

Then that sudden impulse overcame the wind dragon. "Why do you care so much about her?" Just as quickly she covered her mouth with regret. *I didn't mean to say that! Why did I say that?!* As if in answer, the tangerine revealer's red eyes looked innocently up at the wyvern. *Oh, right… Reveals.*

Gavin didn't seem fazed at all. "Because she saved me."

"…This tiny thing? How could she possibly have saved you?"

"Gretel, be nice," Efron interjected softly.

The fluffy adult didn't answer. He instead turned to face Efron. "Your friend knows where my den is. If you're willing to give me advice, you're welcome to." Without giving the older revealer a chance to form a coherent answer, Gavin secured his hold on Grace and then bounded swiftly up the slope, out of sight.

Efron once again looked at Gretel with uncertainty. "An electric type… with a revealer hatchling. You mentioned him before; you said he was Clay's friend who stopped me from bleeding out, right?"

She frowned. "Yeah. But I don't get what Clay sees in him; he's… scary."

"I was scared of him at first, too," her friend admitted, "but did you see Grace? She was completely at ease around him… Happy, even. Given the trauma she must have endured from her exile, even if she was newly hatched at the time, well… keeping her that content would be very difficult, even in the case of biological parents. But to be a totally different dragon type makes it even harder to earn trust like that."

"Really? How would it be harder?"

"You and I both struggled to understand his intentions when he asked me about my heritage," the violet revealer reminded her.

"Huh. True…"

"Different dragon types express themselves in different ways, and that makes it hard to identify potential threats. Hatchlings as young as Grace rely on body language more than verbalizations; the fact that doesn't feel threatened at all by that electric type raising her is a testament to how much he's earned her trust."

I never thought that deeply about it… But of course Efron would be keen on these things; he and the hatchling are both social dragons who've experienced bad treatment in the past. "So what do you plan to do?"

"He brought her to the medic to treat her raw scales, and he stopped her from eating the feathers and bones from the duck you brought me," Efron recalled. "Him asking me for advice on how to raise revealers seems genuine. So… I think I *should* help him."

The little wind dragoness shrugged in response. "It's your choice if you want to help them. I have no idea what his deal was, or what Clay sees in him, but he *did* cauterize your wound last night. As for Grace, well… none of this is her fault. She deserves to be treated well, and if you can give advice to her caretaker on how to do that, then I agree with your choice."

Her companion smiled slightly. "Thanks. Speaking of Clay, where did he go?"

Gretel blinked, then cast her sights over to the mud puddle she had seen Clay disappear into half an hour ago. When a large frog hopped near it in an attempt to eat a burrowing worm, webbed hands suddenly reached out of the mud to clutch the amphibian, dragging it under in such a swift motion that the juvenile wind dragoness barely registered what had happened despite clearly seeing it.

"Oh," Efron uttered the sound, astonished. "That answers that." Gretel laughed, and his green eyes focused on her again. "Well, I do plan to help that electric type with Grace. But, um… could you come with me?"

His friend gazed up at him. "Of course! Maybe we'll get more answers about how she 'saved' him, too."

"Just remember to keep your guard up around Grace, though. Like I said, revealer hatchlings lack control over their gemstones until they're four months old. You can't predict when Grace might reveal you until then."

"Right. Well, I'm ready to visit them whenever you are."

"Okay. Let's go now, then." Efron crouched and pinched some mud up from the footprint Gavin had left, then sniffed it. His smile dropped and he lifted his head toward the slope, marching up to the top of it where the next prints were. "Wow. Electric types are hard to track; they leap so far that they might as well be flying. They don't leave a scent until they land, and they land so far apart that there is no scent-trail."

Gretel's hot pink eyes shone with fascination. "Really? Wow. I don't think I've ever even tried to track someone by scent… Unless the wind carries their scent to me."

"Huh? How does that work? Wouldn't the wind dissolve it?"

"Wha-a-at? No! Well, maybe if the scent is scattered around by unpredictable winds, we wouldn't be able to track it. But smells are actually *tangible*. They don't *ever* just 'dissolve,' they just get spread around to the point where we can't detect them anymore."

Now it was Efron's turn to be fascinated. "I had no idea."

She giggled. "Air moves a lot like water does. Wind is like water currents; smells are like mist. When water 'dissolves' it doesn't disappear, it just scatters into fine mist that condenses into the clouds in the sky; when those misty-clouds get *too* dense, they rain the water back down!"

"True. I learned about the water cycle when I asked my grampa once. But what does that have to do with smells?"

"Like I said, scents and gasses work the same way; they're just already a 'mist' or gas in the air. After a while it also spreads out; sometimes it first condenses into clouds too high-up for anyone but wind dragons to notice, unless it's colored like smoke or smog is. But *when* it spreads out, or when it 'rains' back down, then usually the ocean, algae, and–to a lesser degree–trees, will convert it into breathable air."

"That… makes sense," he realized. "It's just hard to compare water to air because we can see and feel water. I can't see or feel air unless there's wind."

Gretel's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

He tensed nervously. "Uh, yeah?"

"What about the gas from a fire dragon?"

"I've never been around a fire dragon. But my grampa also mentioned that their 'methane gas' is invisible and doesn't have a scent."

The wind dragoness could only gape incomprehensibly. "What about my sonic attack? Did you see *that*?"

"Uhh… I saw the dust and debris getting swirled around…"

Gretel sat down, struggling to process this. "So you're telling me that only wind types can sense air and gas? All this time, you didn't notice *any* winds I've summoned?"

Efron shrank. "L-Like I said, I *did* see the debris kicked up from it, and I did feel the winds when you helped me fly… I even felt the vibration from your voice."

The juvenile wyvern could only stare incredulously at him.

"It's just… like… the air right now? It's still. If it weren't so chilly, I wouldn't even notice it," he clarified.

She shook her head. "But you still *breathe*, even if it isn't chilly! Don't you notice if what you're breathing is changed? Like, with that footprint just now!"

"Smelling and breathing are different…"

Gretel's jaws parted even wider with shock. "But breathing and smelling, and even breathing and tasting, are the same thing!"

"*What?!* No they aren't! You can't smell things unless they're close to your nose; you can't taste things unless you lick them with your tongue…"

"But what you breathe passes through your nose, or over your tongue if you breathe through your mouth…!"

The violet revealer just stared at the wind type, completely at a loss for words as the realization of their varying sensory-ranges became evident to both of them.

I can't believe other dragon types aren't sensitive to these things…! This entire time, I'm detecting things that none of them can? "I… I think I need a moment," she laughed nervously.

When Gretel finally composed herself, she showed Efron the way to Gavin's den, hesitating at the mouth of it. *I know Efron thinks he's trustworthy, but I still don't know what to expect from Gavin… If this is some ambush where he tries to hurt Efron, I need to be there to intervene.*

"H-Hello?" her companion called in from outside. "It's me; I brought my friend too."

Efron's using the same method Clay did to avoid startling Wren, she recognized. *I don't think Gavin is as skittish as her; but then again, Efron has no way of knowing that. I guess it's better safe than sorry.*

"Come in. Watch your step," the turquoise electric type's voice echoed from deep within.

Efron moved to enter, but his companion stopped him. "Me first. I don't know what steps we need to watch for, but it's dark and *apparently* my sight and senses are better for dark areas," she explained. "Wait for me; I'll let you know how to navigate it."

The green-eyed revealer nodded, retreating a few paces to let Gretel enter the den first. The mouth of it was pretty small, but she was young enough that she could walk right in without crouching. The ground was level at first, but there was a shallow trench carved into the soil that went in a straight line forward. Curious, she followed it until the little wind dragoness could feel the shift in air pressure ahead: the falling of chilly air at such a pace that suggested a gradual downward slope. That wasn't out of the ordinary, but what did intrigue her was the rising of warmth from somewhere below.

She paused at the base before a new grotto, smaller than wren's but big enough to house multiple dragons. Gretel peered in to see a reddish light in the center. *A fire?* She drew in a breath and finally left the darkness of the tunnel to step into the illuminated area. Gavin was dangling the tufted tip of his long tail over Grace, who was giggling and reaching for it.

The shallow trench veered off-center in the new space; it split into two, the same short width but noticeably deeper, and ran along the dirt walls instead of the center. Gretel followed it in place with her hot pink eyes, seeing it led to a pile of rocks stacked against the back wall. She could feel a small leakage of air seep in from between them. *They're blocking an exit?*

"Where's Efron?" Gavin's voice snapped her out of it.

Gretel froze. His tone was as matter-of-fact as always, and her instincts interpreted the question as a demand for her to bring the older revealer in. *I don't have to do what you want, and neither does Efron! You're lucky he gave you the benefit of the doubt!* she wanted to say, but stopped herself, turning her attention to Grace.

The hatchling's red eyes trained on Gretel the same way they had on Efron back when the latter had tried to avoid her. They seemed curious, but there was an eerie calmness to her that Grace hadn't had while playing just moments ago. The purple-striped wyvern studied her in the dim light of the fire in the center of the grotto that was also contained in a hole circled by rocks.

Grace's expression was somehow familiar. Then it registered: it was the same unnatural calmness that Efron had shown when he had confronted his abusive mother. The wind dragon tensed. *Wait–that sudden shift from playfulness to calmness... She's using a conceal! Is that even possible at her age?! Is she... scared of me? Was she scared of Efron, too?* Her heart sank.

"Well? Is he only here to wait for you, or will he be coming in?" Gavin asked somewhat expectantly, calling Gretel out of her thoughts a second time.

She turned to him, not caring about the den structure anymore. There were more important questions she needed to ask before determining if it was safe for Efron to enter; Gavin's answer could wait until she had hers. "Does she use conceals often?"

"Conceals?" Gavin repeated, suddenly in a more serious, lower pitch. "What is a conceal?"

Gretel froze. *He really* doesn't *know much about revealer dragons...* "I'm confused. You could tell Efron's heritage just by matching his colors to the far eastern matriarch, and you *know* that she was in fact a matriarch in the first place. But you don't know what conceals are?"

Gavin's yellow-green eyes narrowed slightly, and the wind type couldn't tell if he was offended or annoyed. "Efron's grandmother was the one who left Grace on this island. I knew she was the matriarch because she had declared it in an obvious power-trip before slashing Grace's back and flying away to the east."

Oh...

"I mentioned earlier that my knowledge of revealers is lacking. That is why I requested Efron's help. If neither of you are here to offer that help, then I'll ask you both just once to leave."

Gretel tensed. *Just once? What does he plan to do if I don't?*

"Well?" the electric type pressed, and static visibly sharpened his otherwise soft fur as he cracked the knuckles of his clawed hand just by forcibly flexing it.

She gulped, her heartbeat quickening from the threat of the motion. The wyvern wanted to confront him, but was scared of provoking him further. *What the heck is his problem?!*

"What the heck is your problem?!" Gretel blurted out, then covered her mouth with the wing of her forearm. She once again looked at Grace, realizing the hatchling had revealed her even though the tangerine dragon remained still and calmly staring.

Gavin seemed mildly surprised by the outburst. He stopped the flow of electricity from his hand and lowered it. "I could ask you the same thing. You ventured into my home, haven't answered my question about Efron–who I only invited here to help me learn about revealers–and now you stand there and judge me for not knowing what a conceal is. If a conceal is an ability that revealers have, then that is something included in what advice I was asking him to give me."

Gretel was once again thrown by just how deadpan his tone was; if it weren't for the agitated twitching of his tail, she had no indicators of what he was feeling. *When he puts things into that perspective, I really* am *the bad guy here…* "S-Sorry," she muttered. "I'll bring him in."

She retrieved Efron from outside, guiding him safely into the grotto. Grace was kicking a pebble around with an amused grin that once again fell into a neutral frown as she looked at the newcomers.

"H-Hi, there," Efron greeted her with rather forced optimism. The younger revealer only continued to stare at him, but her red ears did perk up with a hint of curiosity. He rubbed the back of his green ones nervously before facing Gavin. "Um… Do you still want advice?"

"Yes, if you're willing to give it," the turquoise dragon answered.

"Alright. Well, let's start with what you do know, so I can correct or expand on it."

Gavin's long tail swept into a wide semi-circle around himself; it was one of the few universal body languages dragons shared, indicating respect.

Gavin's tail is really the only expressive part of his entire body. Maybe that's what I should use to read him, since his tone of voice is so lacking in emotion.

"Let's get the harder questions out of the way first," the electric type said. "What abilities do revealer dragons have?"

"Well, reveals, for one. Then there's our wings, our gemstones, and, um…" Efron hesitated.

"Conceals?"

He tensed. "Who told you about those?"

"I did…" Gretel admitted guiltily. "I noticed Grace was using them, so I asked Gavin about it, but he didn't know what they were."

"She was using conceals…? This young?" Efron's voice was suddenly meek. He gazed sympathetically at the one-month-old who was sitting by the firepit now, though she remained watching the strangers. Her red eyes looked intently at whomever was speaking, despite having little understanding of what was said.

"Are conceals a bad thing?" Gavin pressed quietly. "I'm assuming they're an ability that revealer dragons have, alongside reveals, but both you and your friend are avoiding that topic."

The violet two-year-old sighed. "We revealers don't like letting the world know our weaknesses. But since it's just us here, I'll let you know that reveals aren't just threats toward other dragon types. Reveals can affect other revealers, too. That's very likely why Grace was exiled; hatchlings don't have any control of their abilities until four months old."

"So conceals are abilities that protect revealer dragons against reveals?"

"Yeah. But it's not as simple as that…"

Gavin's eyes narrowed slightly.

Gretel couldn't tell if he was thoughtful or annoyed by this news. Then she remembered his body language was different from hers; the wyvern looked at his tail instead, seeing it was still, but had closed the wide gap around him into a full circle. *He's actually sad?*

"From what I understand, reveals will make others act on impulses," Gavin continued. "Am I wrong?"

"You're right, but again, there's more to it than that," Efron explained, the tip of his Z-shaped tail twitching nervously. "If it's an impulse that *isn't* suppressed, the reveal won't have an effect. If it's an impulse suppressed because it's undesired, then the reveal won't have an effect. If it's a desire that's suppressed, then that's the only time a reveal can work. And even then, if the one suppressing it has good enough self-control, the reveal will fail."

"Interesting. How would suppressing a desire work differently from suppressing something undesired?"

Efron opened his mouth to answer, then blinked, puzzled. His pale green eyes squinted at the ground as if trying to come up with a response.

"I can answer that," Gretel chimed in. "I pretty much rely on my instincts to keep me alive most of the time. When I was fighting a revealer yesterday, my instincts kept telling me to flee, but I didn't *want* to, so I suppressed my instincts. Their reveal didn't make me flee, even though I suppressed my instincts to, all because I didn't have any *desire* to flee."

"I see," Gavin replied. He turned back to Efron. "By that logic, conceals can suppress desires too deeply for reveals to affect them?"

"Yes, but… not just desires," the violet revealer dragon admitted. "Just like Gretel had suppressed her undesired instincts to flee, a revealer can suppress their own undesired instincts or emotions, too, by using conceals. If you're skilled enough, you can even suppress bad memories to avoid being reminded of them… But a conceal is only temporary, regardless of what it's used for."

The turquoise adult visibly tensed. He immediately shifted his focus to Grace. The hatchling met his gaze and tilted her head slightly with curious confusion.

Gretel once again checked his tail, seeing it was still aside from the tufted tip, which was quivering slightly. *He's upset…?*

Grace seemed to notice it too. The tangerine revealer got up and let herself fall against his flank, where she hugged him.

Gavin tensed up even more from that, scarcely breathing.

I can tell from his breaths that he's worried about her, and maybe even guilty that she's the one trying to comfort him after he just learned she's been suppressing her own fears all this time…

"I-I'm sorry… Grace is still so little. It's hard to even imagine that she'd be consciously suppressing anything at her age," Efron murmured.

"Maybe it's repression," Gavin said, regaining his composure and giving Grace a gentle pat on the head as if to assure her that he was okay.

"Uh, what's the difference between suppression and repression?" Gretel asked.

"Well, both are affected by reveals," her companion answered, "but suppression is conscious choice; repression is not." He looked away slightly. "What happened with my mom yesterday… I hadn't suppressed that. I didn't conceal it, either. I had actually *repressed* the whole event without even knowing."

The purple-striped wyvern winced sympathetically.

"Let's talk about basic needs, now," the turquoise dragon said as if to change the topic. "Diet. Revealers can eat meat and plants, correct? Do they require both?"

"Yes, we can eat both. But we don't need plants to survive. We *do* need meat, though."

"Noted. Now, rainwater dries revealers' scales out, yes? Twice, when she had played in the water, Grace had developed rashes after drying. Is it from the water alone, or an underlying reason?"

Efron nodded. "Yeah, it's water in general. Revealers usually live in dry environments. A bit of humidity won't hurt us, but if we're drenched or swimming for too long, then that can damage our scales."

"I see."

Is that why Grace was abandoned in the wetlands here? To make sure she'd die? Gretel frowned. *That's so messed up…*

"Now what about flight?" Gavin gestured to the tangerine hatching's orange wings. "Water- and electric-type dragons do not have wings. I do not know how to teach her to fly, nor at what age revealers learn to."

"Our wings aren't natural," Efron said. "They kind of go through their own evolution during the first two years of our lives in order to be strong enough to fly with."

"Hm. If their wings aren't natural, then that could only mean revealers have gained the respect of a chrono dragon."

"Chrono dragon?" Gretel echoed. "You mean, the mythical twelfth dragon type?"

The maned male glanced at the juvenile wind dragoness. "Yes. Rumor has it they can not only foresee true futures, but they can also see alternate timelines that are true futures in their respective realities. It's said that they may be able to even copy genetic traits–like wings–from a dragon species in one timeline, and give them to that same species in a branching timeline."

She gaped at him. "That *can't* be true...! So much power for an entire species of dragon to have? That's insanity!"

Gavin gave a single-shouldered shrug of indifference. "Whether you believe in it or not, that's the mythology of chrono dragons."

"It's not a myth," Efron muttered almost indignantly. "Revealers are living *proof* that it's real."

"Efron..." Gretel stopped herself from arguing; she didn't want to upset him further.

He shook his head. "But I agree that it *is* too much power to have. And, honestly, I think chrono dragons giving us natural gemstones was a mistake."

That got Gavin's attention. "How would natural gemstones be a mistake? Obtained gemstones are beneficial."

"Natural gemstones *can* be beneficial, but only when we're old enough to figure out how to utilize them." Efron met the other male's gaze. "You've seen it yourself, haven't you? The way Grace uses her reveals at random. That wouldn't happen at all if her gemstones weren't natural."

Gavin gave a quiet, considerate hum in response. "Is there any way to stop her from unknowingly drawing from hers?"

Efron shook his head. "No, and that's exactly why I feel it was a curse more than a gift to have permanent gemstones as hatchlings. The amount of chaos stirred up from the unpredictability of it all... from someone too young to even be aware that they're the cause of it. To punish a hatchling for something they have no control over is just... unfair..."

Gavin gave a somber, knowing nod of agreement. "I assume conceals were developed as a defense against uncontrollable reveals like that."

"Yes, exactly. But if the one revealing is stronger than the one concealing, then the stronger one will win. The same can be said about reveals needing to be stronger than the one suppressing a desire in order to work. If the one suppressing it has stronger willpower, they'll overpower the reveal."

"I noticed that," the electric type admitted, and for once Gretel could detect a bitterness in his quiet tone. "So many will blame Grace for revealing them, but if they only learned better self-control, her reveals wouldn't be an issue."

Huh. He has a point... Gretel silently agreed.

"And not only that, but it's their own fault for suppressing their desires instead of being honest."

There's that bitterness again. Maybe he's not as emotionless as I first thought.

"Honesty isn't always the best policy, though," Efron pointed out. "Sometimes the truth can hurt. Sometimes others can be in denial of the truth. It's... not really our place to judge them..."

Gavin blinked with a hint of astonishment, as if that wasn't a perspective he'd heard before. Then his eyes narrowed again.

Gretel looked to his tail, trying to determine if he was upset again, but it remained still. *So he's just mulling it over right now...* When the silence dragged on for several seconds, she spoke up. "Uh, you said that Grace saved you. Did her reveals have anything to do with that?"

Her voice snapped him out of his thoughts. "Yeah."

The wind type eyed him expectantly, but when he didn't elaborate, she let out an impatient huff.

Efron placed a clawed hand on her shoulder as if to calm her down. Then he turned to Gavin. "Is that everything you wanted to know about revealers?"

"For now, yes," he replied. "If something else comes up, may I ask you about it?"

"Of course."

Gretel made sure Efron was leaving first before giving one last look at Gavin and Grace. The tangerine hatchling yawned and began to doze off while still hugging the electric dragon, who gently scooped her up in his tail, where she nestled comfortably against his turquoise fur.

I guess he isn't all bad, Gretel silently remarked. The firelight was dimming, allowing the cold to creep in from outside the den. Just as she was turning to follow her companion out, she hesitated to see the electric type pluck a strand of his mane out and toss it into the fire pit; instantly the flame reignited with a brief spark.

"Woah." The word had escaped Gretel's mouth before she could stop herself. "Electricity can do a lot of the same things fire can, huh?"

Gavin lay down on his belly, Grace sleeping soundly in the curve of his tail. He didn't even glance her way when he replied, "I find electricity to be more useful than fire."

"Yet you're depending on fire for warmth right now."

"Yes: fire that I started with electricity."

"You can *start* fires that way? How?"

"Friction."

She tilted her head. "What does friction have to do with electricity?"

"Electricity *is* friction. Too much friction causes heat. Heated friction creates a spark. Sparks cause fire."

"But the hair you threw in it just now was still..."

Gavin finally faced her, and she cowered to see he was glaring. "Electric dragons' fur and manes naturally hold static. It takes conscious effort not to shock anyone who makes physical contact with us."

"What?! But Grace is literally asleep in your fur right now!"

"And I am making a conscious effort not to shock her."

"Seriously? What if you fall asleep with her in contact with you like that?! You wouldn't be conscious to control it!"

"I don't sleep."

Gretel's jaw dropped. "*Everyone* needs to sleep...!"

"And Grace needs to be safe."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I really don't understand you."

"That's not my problem."

The striped juvenile scowled. "I'm *trying* to understand you."

"Nobody asked you to."

She felt herself growl with frustration. *Ugh, this conversation is going nowhere! But I guess I should have expected as much.* "Whatever. I'm outta here." With that, Gretel joined Efron outside and the two of them headed for their willow tree.

In the evening sunlight, her keen eyes finally noticed that Efron's scales had the same glistening look as Grace from the poultice Wren had used on her raw scales.

"You okay?" Efron asked when he noticed her staring.

I should be asking you *that!* She breathed. "Yeah." *He had almost drowned in the ocean last night, and he did mention that water can damage revealers' scales…* Gretel cast her gaze to the sky. *Clay said it rains often here. Will Efron be okay?*

When they reached the shelter of the branches, Gretel stopped at the sight of a frog lying by the trunk. The smell of its blood made her stomach growl.

The violet revealer inspected it curiously. "Isn't that the same frog we saw Clay catch?"

"Oh! You're right!" she remembered. "What's it doing here?"

"Do you think he left it here for us?"

"Huh. You're probably right. He brought us prey this morning, after all. Are you hungry? We can split it."

"Sure. But you can eat your half first."

"Okay." Gretel obliged him, not realizing how hungry she had gotten. Then she nudged the remaining half to her friend. As Efron began eating his share, the other juvenile couldn't stop her mind from reflecting on everything she had learned. "Hey, Efron… About your dad…"

The young revealer froze mid-bite, not meeting her gaze.

"You never really talked about him… I've seen him with your mom a few times when I was flying, but that's really it."

He said nothing, his pale green eyes narrowing at the ground.

"And until yesterday, you never mentioned that your mom was the alpha, either."

Silence.

"Is there a reason you didn't want to tell me?"

"Because they aren't my parents anymore, okay?" Efron finally said with an exasperated sigh. "They disowned me; at least, my mother did… But my dad didn't do anything about it. He defended me at first, but when she threatened to demote him from beta, he stopped." He rested back against the tree trunk, his Z-shaped tail unfurled to wrap around himself.

"Oh…"

"Having his rank was more important to him than protecting me," he muttered. "In a way, he was just like my mom. They were both the siblings of the heirs to their respective societies. Since they couldn't compete with the heirs, they both branched off to rule a different territory. My mom took over Dualrise Island, and my dad came across her there. The rest is history."

"Wait. You're telling me that both of your grandmothers are alphas?"

"Matriarchs, yeah."

"What about your mother's father? Why did he leave with her?"

"Unlike my mom, Gramps actually cared about others. He wanted to make sure his kids–my mom and uncle–were okay. He had already lost his place as beta when he broke up with his mate, too, so he had nothing to lose by leaving."

"He broke up with the matriarch of the eastern highlands, then?"

"Yeah. Apparently the same matriarch who exiled Grace." He fell silent for a moment. Then he turned to his friend. "I didn't know she ruled the eastern highlands, though. I never knew where my mom's family came from."

Gretel hummed. "But your dad *did* mention he was from the plateau island?"

"Yeah. Just once, when I was little. Why…? What's so important about it?"

"N-Nothing!" she lied. *I don't want Efron to know that I visited there before. If he finds out I'm purposely keeping him from rejoining a revealer society, he might get cross with me. But it's for his own good…!*

Then she once again caught sight of the glistening coating over his raw scales. *But if his condition gets bad from the water on the wet prairie here, we might not have a choice except to move to a drier island… and the plateau one is the closest that's safe.*

Chapter 8

Day 1

A week later, the bruising and swelling around Efron's neck had ebbed to normal. During that week, rain sprinkled down now and then, but nothing as bad as the downpour that Clay's family had visited him in. That was, until now.

Each heavy drop from the overcast evening sky was quickly followed by two more. Luckily, Clay had warned them ahead of time, so Gretel and Efron were already in the shelter of Wren's grotto to stay dry. The fluffy dragoness didn't seem to mind the company as much, as long as they weren't disruptive.

Gretel managed to control herself well enough not to sing along with the percussion of raindrops, but even with her tail wrapped respectfully around her paws as she sat gazing out, she couldn't stop the arrow-shaped tip of it from flicking rhythmically as a makeshift metronome.

"You can go outside if you want to," her companion said, obviously taking notice of her restlessness.

"Yeah, but I also want to make sure you're safe and your scales stay dry," the wyvern replied.

"I'll be fine here with Wren until the rain stops."

Gretel frowned. *That's another reason I don't want him alone here. The way she almost attacked me just for entering her grotto was terrifying, even though she hadn't meant any harm. If Efron spooks her, would she attack him, too?*

Before she could think of another excuse, he walked over to her side by the mouth of the grotto. "I'm not helpless, you know," he murmured after a beat, his green eyes focused on the heavy shower outside.

She scoffed assuredly. "I know that! I trust you." Consciously keeping her volume too low for the electric type to hear, she added, "I just… don't trust *her.* She's unpredictable."

The violet revealer blinked, turning to look at her with mild surprise. "What makes you think that? From the checkups and times I've spent here, I've noticed Wren sticks to her routines almost obsessively."

"But don't you get worried she might randomly turn on you, like last week when I scared her just by walking in?"

He shook his head. "Clay predicted that; he made it clear from the start that she's skittish, and he demonstrated how to avoid startling her."

Gretel gaped at him. "Huh… I guess you're right… But we just don't know what *else* she might be afraid of."

"Clay didn't *mention* anything else, and neither had Wren, so I wouldn't worry about that."

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. *I do trust Clay. Efron's right: if there are any other things that startle her, one of those two would've said so.* "…Alright," the juvenile wind type agreed. "I don't like being holed up, so I'm gonna move to our willow tree, okay?"

"Go for it."

The purple-striped dragoness smiled, then let her instincts guide her out to the open, where she struggled at first against the onslaught of rain to take flight up the slope and to land on the willow tree's branch. Since she no longer had to walk on eggshells in Wren's home, Gretel leaned towards the strong winds and picked up on the patterns of the droplets plopping into the deepening puddles around her. Then she happily improvised a song to it.

The young siren didn't hold back, letting herself be heard over the storm by anyone who may be flying through it. This was her retreat, after all; the electric types didn't seem bothered enough by Gretel's songs to attempt stopping her. She enjoyed singing in the rain because it was an excuse to be louder than casual situations called for. It was almost a chance for the little wind type to showcase her abilities and test the limits of them.

Eventually the storm passed, and Gretel admired the stars in the now-clear skies from her perch.

I like it here. It's getting colder, but that's only because of how far north we are. If I have to retreat to the island Chryssa mentioned down south for the winter, then sobeit. Then she hesitated. *No… Efron can't travel that far, can he? And the only islands between here and there to roost on are full of hostile dragons like the seers who almost broke my back.*

Gretel shuddered at the memory. Then she hopped off the branch and twirled to dry off as she glided back down to check on Efron. Surprisingly, her friend was already at the base of the slope. "What are you doing outside? It's still flooded," she said.

"Apparently Wren is 'grounding' someone and it's dangerous to be inside if something goes wrong during that," he answered.

Curious, Gretel peered through the shrubs of the entrance and saw that same young electric dragon that had caught the pink bird last week. Despite having been in the downpour, his red fur still looked mostly dry. *Too dry,* she silently remarked. *It's pointy, like Wren's had been when I scared her.*

"Ready?" Wren asked the juvenile electric type, and when he nodded, she hooked her elbow with his. "Go ahead. Let it all out."

The red dragon closed his eyes as if bracing himself, then bright sparks of static emitted from the contact between the two. As his fur began to soften, Wren's sharpened, until the sparks faded and he let go of her. The medic's fur then flattened to normal as well.

"Alrighty, you should be good to go," she dismissed him.

He nodded and turned to leave. Gretel still wasn't used to just how quickly electric dragons moved; she didn't have time to get out of his way. Both juveniles unintentionally met eye-to-eye outside when he paused at the last second to avoid colliding with her.

Then both of them simultaneously dodged in opposite directions, neither letting the other out of sight. Through her peripherals, she saw Efron widen his own stance and study the other male's body language… not that there was much emotion within it to read: aside from how unnaturally-controlled the latter's breathing was, as well as how his sky-blue mane electrically clumped into quill-like spikes sticking out to make him seem wider, there were no indicators of what he intended to do should Gretel make any sudden movements.

The instant she noticed that the tufted tip of his long tail was quivering as Gavin's had when upset, the young stranger suddenly sniffled and his breath came out in shaky, uneven puffs. "Why are you after me?!" he cried out, the genuine desperation in his tone catching her completely off guard. "Don't make me hurt you! Because I *will*–if you don't let me go!"

Gretel was even more perplexed when he seemed just as surprised by his outburst of emotion as she was, but the wyvern was too riled up to ponder why. She lashed her tail. "I could tell you the same thing!"

The electric type froze before relaxing slightly, her words confirming that she didn't plan on attacking unless he did. Then he finally looked away from her, shifting his focus to Efron instead. "Another…? Why?"

'Why' what? Gretel wanted to ask, but before she even opened her mouth, the red-furred dragon turned and fled. "What on earth just happened?"

"I revealed him," Efron admitted.

"What?!"

"I didn't have a choice… You two were at an impasse. I know you: you're not one to fight for no reason. But I could see he was more afraid than hostile, himself," the violet dragon explained. "But neither of you knew that about each other. If I *hadn't* revealed that he had no desire to fight, well… things could've ended badly for both of you."

Gretel calmed herself and stared at her friend, astonished. *All of this time, reveals have been made out to be this terrifying thing that only hurts others… I never considered they could be used to* prevent *fights.* "Thanks… I owe you one," she chuckled.

Efron followed Gretel to their willow tree and hesitated to see that the ground beneath it was soaked, even if less so than the area around it.

Gretel noticed and felt somewhat guilty. *I can survive here, but Efron can't unless we have better shelter from the rain…* She shook the thought away. *We'll worry about that tomorrow. For now, maybe I can do something about it temporarily.* "Stay back," she told the older juvenile, who obliged her. Then she flapped her winged forearms just once at the damp grounds to summon a gust at it. *Maybe I can dry it out.*

Her companion watched with fascination as dark brown mud lightened to dirt. The wind dragoness could tell it was only surface level, though, and the humid air made the drying process agonizingly slow.

"Uh, I think it's dry enough now," Efron remarked after a few minutes, during which time his friend seemed to grow more frustrated at the pace of the progress.

Gretel didn't notice he spoke at first; her focus was entirely on making sure there was no chance he'd sink into the mud underneath the layer she had dried. The moisture from the soil behind her was slowly creeping to erase her patch too. She growled to herself, slowly increasing her force.

"Gretel?" he tried again, slightly louder.

The concern in his voice caught her attention. She finally stopped and caught her breath. "S-Sorry… This is harder than I thought…"

"That's nature for ya," he chuckled half-heartedly. "I think it's good enough, though. Really." When she didn't reply, he added, "Are you okay…?"

She heaved a defeated sigh. "I mean… As long as you're comfortable, then…"

"It's perfect," he assured her. To prove it, he lay down on the dry patch of dirt and settled neatly into it. "See?"

Gretel eyed the dry patch dubiously. It held, but the surrounding water would no doubt remoisturize it by morning, and waking up to find him stuck in the mud wasn't something she was willing to risk. *But how can I stop it?* Wind dragons were naturally so lightweight that sinking wasn't an issue they ever faced. Her mind briefly flashed back to when Efron had plummeted into the ocean and her buoyancy prevented her from diving after him.

Wait…. Buoyancy! "Hang tight, I'll be right back!" she declared before riding a summoned tailwind over the wetlands. *Plants can float, so if I can find enough of them, maybe they can act like a raft–or at least a comfy nest–to keep Efron above the mud and water!*

Gretel let her keen eyes scan the area for traces of suitable materials. Lots of the deeper puddles and ponds had these tall plants tipped with a brown, oval flower growing around them. She landed by the nearest and prodded the odd-shaped flower with her paw, amused when the plant swayed from the touch. She impulsively batted it each time it rocked toward her again, giggling to herself. Then she paused. *What am I doing? Focus!*

She plucked the flower in her mouth, then immediately spat it out when it both absorbed her saliva and began to fall apart. She imagined it wouldn't be so brittle if it weren't the chilly autumn air, especially since it was currently nighttime. Plants in general tasted foul to her, but the texture of the inside of this one made it worse as the feeling–almost like feathers–lingered on her tongue. To Gretel's surprise, when it landed in the water beneath her paws, she saw it had fluffy seeds inside that were floating away.

Is this the 'catkin' that Gavin used to clean and bandage Efron's wound? she wondered. *No, it looks too different from the stem-thing he had. The seeds look thicker on this one, too. Maybe I'll ask Clay about it tomorrow.* The striped white wyvern moved to pick it back up from the water, but by that point the brown part had crumbled and the fluffy seeds inside drifted away in the water. *Could be more helpful for what I need, since they didn't sink or dissolve*.

Gretel picked a new one, then reared on her hind legs and gave it a squeeze between her front paws. She stifled a surprised squeal when the fluff suddenly plumed out from the pressure.

"Hm." She put some of it in the mud nearby. The seeds clung to the surface, but when she pressed her paw down on it testingly, of course the mud swallowed it.

Twigs or sticks could keep it afloat in the mud when Efron lays on it, Gretel decided. She plucked as many of the brown flowers as she could, carrying them between her hind paws and flying back up to her friend.

As she feared, Efron had sank very minimally in the short time she was gone; the water from the rain puddles had spread. "Hold on to these while I go get some sticks," Gretel instructed him.

Efron obediently held the brown plants, but glanced between them and her, utterly confused.

"No time to explain," she laughed. "Just trust me."

He rested the pile on his lap, then gave her a thumbs-up in response. The wind type then summoned a tailwind and rode it through the woodland. She chose longer sticks and twigs, hoping she could stack them in a way that they'd make a solid structure. As Gretel neared the southern outskirts in her search, she hesitated upon hearing a familiar voice. Curiosity got the better of her and she neared it to eavesdrop, finding the sound had come from Gavin's den. *His wasn't the voice I heard just now, though. I'm pretty sure it belonged to–*

"Clay," Gavin's voice became audible as the wind type silently landed near the mouth of his home. "I appreciate it, but I'm fine."

"No, you're not," the older dragon sighed. "When was the last time you slept?"

There was a brief silence.

"Just let me take her off your hands for the night. Get some sleep. I'll keep her safe until you wake up," Clay continued.

"But safety for her and for you are very different," the electric type stated. "She cannot stay in water, yet you cannot stay away from it. Keeping her safe would mean your scales will dry out."

"You think I mind a little dryness for one night if it means helping you and Grace? That's trivial compared to sacrificing your sleep for days on end."

Another bout of silence.

"I knew you'd see reason," the water type chuckled. "Come on, Gracie," he added with exaggerated enthusiasm in his tone.

Gretel heard the tiny revealer let out a faint whine.

"It's okay," Gavin spoke more softly. His volume increased to normal when he said, "I'll let you two stay here without me. I'm overcharged; if she gets too close while I sleep, I'm bound to shock her."

"Where will you sleep, then?" Clay replied.

"Maybe Wren will have me. If not, I'll stay outside. It doesn't matter."

There was another sigh. "I worry about you sometimes. It's one thing to keep Grace safe, but it's another when you're hurting yourself in the process."

"I'm not hurt."

"Not mentally. But physically? You can hardly stay awake at this point."

"She's worth it."

"...I know. But you don't have to raise her alone," Clay murmured, "that's all."

"...Thanks."

Gretel swiftly fluttered to a tree branch and peered down from it, watching as Gavin hesitantly left his own den. She was about to move on, but paused when she noticed that his usual emotionless demeanor subtly changed the farther he went. He seemed more cautious, turning to look toward very little sound, his tail straight back for balance as he loped onward through the trees until he went down the slope out of her sight.

Gretel finished her collection of sticks and went back to Efron. Since he had hands, she mostly just told him what needed to be done so that he could build the raft and nest instead of her.

Afterward, he settled on top of it, his green eyes shining with delight. "Wow, this is comfy!"

"*And* dry!" she added.

He smiled genuinely. "Thanks, Gretel."

She felt warmed from the appreciation. "I'll be above you if you need me, okay?" He nodded and rested his head down. The wind type directed the existing air skyward and let it carry her to a branch just before the treetop. "Goodnight!"

"'Night."

Chapter 9

Day 2

Gretel woke up bright and early. She immediately leapt down from the tree branch and landed lightly on the ground to check on Efron, smiling to herself to see he appeared completely at peace to the point of snoring softly. The wind type silenced an amused giggle, then paused when her stomach rumbled. Not wanting to leave her friend alone for too long, she decided to search the wetlands for prey rather than travel this time. It wasn't long before she spotted one of those pink birds pecking near the beach, where Clay was notably absent.

Oh yeah... he's staying with Grace while Gavin catches up on sleep somewhere else to avoid shocking her. I wonder where Gavin went? Did he stay with Wren last night, or stay outside somewhere? Those were only options he gave to Clay, anyway. She shook her head dismissively. *Focus! Food.*

Gretel hovered silently above the bird. If it noticed her, it didn't seem to care. When her stomach rumbled a second time, hunger drove her to impulsively swoop down at it.

Her potential prey spread its pink wings and fluttered out of her way, almost unbothered.

The juvenile dragon stared incredulously at it. Then she huffed and summoned a tail wind to boost her speed, charging at it head-on so that her wind would only push it backward with intent to unbalance it.

It spun around to ride her wind and flee, but during the time it took to both turn and take flight, Gretel swiftly caught it by its long neck and bit down to finish it off. She once again fought back her impulse to eat it right then and there; instead, she took it to Efron, leaving it in his sight range for when he awoke.

Her hunger made her impatient as she sought out prey for herself this time. There were more of those pink birds, but they either fled or were killed first by an electric type. Gretel briefly recalled the red-furred hatchling from yesterday. *I wonder how he's doing?* Then she snapped herself out of her thoughts. *Focus! Fo-cus! Fo-o-o-od!*

The white-and-purple wyvern landed in the tall grass and squinted her sharp, hot-pink eyes, hoping to find a rodent or anything else less visible than the birds. Something else caught her attention instead: familiar turquoise fur.

No way… Gavin?! So he slept outside, after all… She silenced herself and got closer. He was completely unconscious, deathly still aside from his breathing. Gretel remembered what he had mentioned about electric dragons' fur naturally holding static that would shock anything that contacted them unless they consciously contained it, and her impulsive curiosity got the better of her; she left to grab a thin fallen tree branch from the woodlands, then returned to Gavin with it in her mouth. She debated with herself whether or not to poke him with it. On one hand, how hilarious would his reaction be? On the other, how dangerous would the shock be? But on both counts, Gretel wanted answers.

Remembering how he'd shocked her during their first encounter, she took the precaution of lifting herself off the wet ground by directing the still air beneath her skyward to avoid it. Without further delay, she poked the sleeping dragon with the tip of the branch… instantly regretting it.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye: a shockwave of electricity forming a rapidly-expanding dome around him that she narrowly dodged, the smell of charring wood as the tip of the branch she dropped caught on fire–which extinguished when it landed in the water–and Gavin waking up from it all; he immediately got upright in a crouching position, ready to attack, his yellow-green eyes trained on Gretel.

For once, they weren't so expressionless, but the mild annoyance she'd come to expect from him was replaced with a clear mixture of anger and distrust. Static still visibly crackled in his sharpened fur, particularly at the point of contact with the water.

Unlike Wren, he was in complete control of himself now that was awake, despite his breathing giving a subtle hint at anxiety.

"What do you want," he hissed, not even attempting to mask his agitation now.

Gretel shrank. "I, uh…" *I don't have an excuse, really… I just wanted to see his reaction. I guess I got it now.* She chuckled nervously at her own stupidity. "Sorry."

He stood up and glared down at the juvenile wind dragon. "Do you know the dangers of waking an electric type?"

"Uhh…"

"You're lucky I took out my static hunting prey last night, or you would have been struck dead from that little poke just now."

She gulped and retreated a pace from him. *I've never seen him this upset before…*

He took a step toward her, conducting static to his clawed hand as he cracked its knuckles just by harshly flexing his fingers. "Leave."

"I'm sorry," she whimpered genuinely. "I'm an idiot, okay? I've never had the chance to be around other dragon types before… I've barely ever been around my own kind. I didn't think waking an electric dragon with a wooden stick would be dangerous at all… But I guess it was mostly the water, huh?"

"You think electricity is the only danger from us?" He took another step toward her, making a point to stomp clean through the burnt branch with his long, clawed foot. "Anyone but me would have struck you dead on *purpose*, just because you're being a nuisance."

Gretel couldn't help feeling stung by his hostility. "*You* wouldn't hurt me on purpose, though… right? I considered us allies, since you've helped me with Efron before…"

"I couldn't care *less* about alliances."

"What about Grace?"

"I'm indebted to her."

"And Wren?"

"She helps Grace."

"And *Clay*?"

He hesitated.

"I'm stupid for waking you, and I'm sorry for that… but I'm not as stupid as you think," she went on defensively, tail lashing. "I've been observing Clay, and you, without either of you knowing I'm even there…! I know you once asked him to be your mat--"

Static surged through Gavin's pelt, but Gretel noticed he stopped it short of reaching the water. "That's enough," he interrupted. "You picked the worst time to mess with me; Grace isn't here to save you."

"Grace…? How would she save me--"

"Leave. *Now*."

When she didn't, too stubborn to obey him, he let out a frustrated growl and then bounded away from her. *I* knew *he wouldn't hurt me on purpose! He isn't as coldhearted as he wants me to believe*.

Gretel glanced down at the branch in the water, reflecting on everything Gavin had said. *How could Grace save anyone? She's just a hatchling.* Then it hit her: a *revealer* hatchling.

Her mind jumped back to her encounter with the red-furred dragon from the previous day, and how Efron had used a reveal to prevent him from fighting with her. *Did Grace do something similar for Gavin, without even realizing it?*

The wyvern winced when her stomach cramped with hunger, pulling her out of her thoughts. She refocused on the hunt, scenting the air; something besides the branch in the water underfoot smelled burned. Gretel tracked it to see a big frog floating still in the water not too far from where Gavin had been sleeping.

She froze. *That must have been from the shockwave I caused by waking Gavin just now…*

The reality of the situation set in as Gretel stared at the deceased amphibian, her appetite fading upon realizing how close she had come to suffering the same fate as it. And even worse, the shock had been involuntary on Gavin's part; he could have killed her before he even woke up, all because she knowingly provoked him.

The young wind dragoness sniffled guiltily. *What's wrong with me? Why did I do that to him...? And the frog... A-And Clay...* Gretel shook her head. *I'm gonna go apologize. I doubt Gavin will forgive me, but at least he'll know I regret it and that I won't do something like that again.*

She traveled on foot through the tall grass of the wetlands and up the slope to the woodland, heading for Gavin's den to do just that. Once again she heard the familiar voices from inside, but she felt guilty for eavesdropping after she had admitted to it, so instead she stopped outside of it and called in. "Gavin?"

The voices fell silent. Just as Gretel was about to call a second time, she was interrupted by Clay stepping out to meet her. "Hey, Gretel."

The wind type tensed. *He usually calls me 'little lady.' And that disappointment in his tone... It's worse than if he'd just scold me...* "Clay, I was really, really mean to Gavin. And I did mention you, too..."

The brown water dragon nodded ever so slightly, sitting down. "So you've been... 'observing' us?"

"Y-Yeah," she admitted. "But that isn't the problem. I *should* have kept what I learned to myself. And I should have heeded what Gavin had told me about shocking anyone who touches electric dragons when they're not conscious..."

He exhaled through his nose. "I appreciate your honesty. I think Gavin might just need some space from you. He's sensitive, you know?"

"Yeah..." she agreed instinctively. Then his words registered. "Wait. 'Sensitive?' *Gavin?!* He could've fooled *me!*"

Clay shrugged. "Like I said, Gavin and I go way back. He wasn't always so outwardly cold like this. Deep down, he still isn't."

Gretel leaned forward, invested. "Really? What was he like?"

"Just three years ago, when he was four years old, he was a lot like Wren... times a hundred."

"...No way. He was more skittish than her?!" She could only stare at him in disbelief, and he chuckled. "But he seems so in control of himself, even when I made him mad!"

"Hard to believe, I know," he replied. "But... he hated himself for it."

She froze. "What?"

Clay nodded. "He did everything he could to change, to be braver, to be in control of his emotions and powers. It's just easier said than done–especially when you're alone."

Gretel sat down, herself. "So what happened? How did he manage to change?"

"He got far on his own, to his credit. But the final push wasn't due to him, but instead, due to Grace."

"...What?"

"Just a month ago, Grace's reveals let him act on his desire for bravery that fear had made him suppress. That fear was the only thing that held him back from his true potential, honestly… so with her help, he managed to train himself to be the way he is now, even when she isn't revealing him."

"Wow," was all she could muster to say.

"Yeah. Ever since then, he dedicated his life to 'repaying that debt' to Grace, even though she's too young to know why."

Gretel cast her gaze into the den, barely making out the silhouette of the turquoise electric dragon as he let the tangerine revealer hatchling snuggle happily into his fur. His yellow-green eyes were watching the wind type and Clay, but remained as hard as ever for Gretel to get a read on. "So where do *you* fit in?" she wondered, facing the water dragon again.

"Me?"

"Yeah. I overheard what you and your daughter said: that you 'go either way' and you 'turned him down.'"

Clay tensed slightly, then laughed. "It's rude to eavesdrop on others, y'know."

She tilted her head. "It wasn't 'eavesdropping;' it was 'observing.' This island is my retreat, so I need to know about whoever lives here, who I can trust, and who to avoid."

"Hm. Fair enough. But there are other ways to accomplish that."

"Like what?"

"Like… talking, the way you and I are talking right now."

Gretel frowned. "You really think a little wind dragon like me can just waltz up and talk to other dragon types like Wren without getting killed?! Don't make me laugh! She *already* almost attacked me for doing that!"

Clay blinked, surprised. He opened his mouth as if to defend his friend, but Gretel didn't give him the chance.

"It's not just electric dragons," she clarified defensively, standing and backing away from Clay to show him just how much larger he was than herself. "Water dragons are, like, untouchable predators. You wouldn't know a *thing* about getting preyed on! Nobody but you guys can go underwater long enough to hunt!"

Clay's eyes darkened even though his body language remained still and calm. "I don't appreciate your tone, missy."

She hesitated.

"Nobody in this world is safe from tragedies. You wanted to know about me and Gavin? It's true, we had a thing for a while about a year ago. But it never got serious, because I couldn't forgive myself if I got with someone after the love of my life was hunted down."

Gretel had never seen him look so intense. "She was hunted--not just killed? How? She was a water dragoness, right?"

"Yes. An elite shadow dragon had been stalking our pod for a long time, and none of us were the wiser until it was too late. They camouflage, you know. And they can morph parts of their body to adjust to any environment. It was a perfectly normal day in one moment--but in the next? I was almost blinded by the water turning red before I even knew what caused it; I fought him off trying to save her, to make sure he couldn't target our hatchlings, too, but by that point the damage had been done. I barely survived... but my mate wasn't so lucky."

I had no idea shadow types were so dangerous... She swallowed uncomfortably.

"I raised our young by myself since then; my firstborn helped out when he was old enough. Then they all eventually grew up and started families of their own. So that's why I'm here on this island now: there's nothing for me left in the ocean."

Gretel drew in breath, then couldn't stop herself from moving in to embrace him with her winged forelimb. He didn't pull away, but she did after a time. "I'm sorry you had to go through that… It must have been awful…"

He didn't answer, somewhat distraught.

"But your life is different from mine. You had that bad experience, and it *is* bad… As for me? That experience is my *entire life*. Everywhere I go, someone wants me dead. Light dragons, water dragons, seers, revealers... Electric types I thought were friendly--like Wren… And who knows–maybe a shadow dragon is just waiting to hunt me, too. I have to know who someone is before I can risk 'just talking to them.'"

Clay was silent for a moment, then nodded his understanding. "It's alright, little lady. This is probably the first place you've been able to call a retreat, I reckon. I promise you that nobody here would pick a fight with you unless they're provoked. All I meant was that 'observing' others without their knowledge could provoke them when they find out, especially if you hold personal matters over their heads like you did with Gavin. He has the patience and self-discipline not to harm you; anyone else would have."

"Including you...?"

"Nah. I've learned to pick my battles. But I can't say the same for everyone else."

"...Gavin?" Gretel projected her voice just loud enough to be heard from outside of his den. "I really am sorry for waking you up so rudely… and for what I said about Clay. We've already established that I'm an idiot for that," she tittered nervously. "So, um… are we good?"

"I don't care," the turquoise dragon said monotonously.

The wind type reactively exhaled through her nose, suppressing frustration at his impassivity. "You don't care… about what? Me waking you, or my apology?"

"Neither."

"Then *what* don't you care about?"

Now it was his turn to be agitated–one of the few emotions he never disguised. "I just told you: *neither.* I don't care that you woke me, since you're contrite. But I also don't care that you apologized; your words are meaningless without actions to support them."

Gretel recoiled, offended at first that he still thought so lowly of her despite acknowledging her contrition. But as his words registered, she realized he was right. *I shouldn't blame him for not trusting me… I've seen the good in him when it came to how he helped Efron and Grace, and how Clay and Wren consider him their friend. But he hasn't seen* anything *good from me at all yet…*

"Like I said," Clay spoke up to the striped juvenile, "I think Gavin just needs some space from you for a while. You'd best be on your way, now, little lady."

"Oh… Right. Well, I'll see you later, then," she replied, and the brown water dragon nodded reassuringly enough to calm her down as she glided away to her willow tree on the other end of the woodland.

As Gretel neared it, she heard Efron's familiar voice singing for the first time since he'd been strangled. The pitch was almost perfect, but his unnaturally forceful breaths were clear indications that he was distressed, even though the melody was a happy one. She let herself drop from the sky to land lightly by his side. "Is your throat okay? Don't strain by singing until it is."

The violet revealer jumped from her sudden appearance. "W-What? No, my throat's been fine… I… I was just… practicing…" He averted his eyes almost shamefully. "Did I really sound *that* bad–to make you think I was in pain…?"

"Bad?! Not at all!" the siren corrected him sternly. "Your pitch was better than it's ever been!"

He hesitantly met her gaze, ears raising ever so slightly with hope. "Really…? Then why did you ask if I was hurt?"

"You were breathing harder than usual, that's all. You sounded more frustrated than hurt or anything."

Efron blinked, somewhat astonished, then nodded. "…Yeah. I was really pushing myself to stay on pitch this time… It's a challenge."

She sat down tilted her head. "Pushing yourself is good, but you were *kinda* pushing *too* hard."

Her friend tensed. "You mean I'm a tryhard…?"

"*What?!* No way! I *meant* you're being too hard on yourself. Remember: the point of singing is for expression. Your melody is an important tone indicator, but the *way* you're singing is just as important. You can't sing a happy song in earnest if you're *that* frustrated from the process of singing it."

The older juvenile seemed thoughtful at that. "Guess I should try for an angry song instead?" he joked halfheartedly.

She laughed. "I think what you actually need is a break. Then you can get back to it when you're feeling better."

He let his smile fall to his usual, somewhat anxious frown. "You're right… but I feel like if I don't keep pushing, I'll never be good enough for our duet."

"Wait… is *that* what this is about?!"

"Uh… Yeah…?"

"Efron, we've been over this," she murmured sympathetically. "It's not about being perfect. You're already good enough. The only thing that matters is that you put your heart into it." When he didn't answer right away, she added, "Just now, your pitch was pretty much perfect. But you were obviously feeling bad in order to maintain that perfect pitch, and it showed."

Efron opened his mouth as if to defend himself, closed it while he reconsidered, then finally faced her again. "But I was trying my best…"

"To the point where you're not *feeling* your best," she pointed out. "I don't want you to force yourself to do something that's stressing you out."

He shrank slightly. "But singing in general *doesn't* stress me out… And I really *do* want to be perfect when we duet together, so it's something that we can both enjoy…"

"Aw… I get it. I'm just saying that your happiness and well-being is more important than being perfect, that's all. And as long as you're enjoying it, then it already *is* perfect."

He was quiet for a moment. "You mean that…?"

"Of course! You can prove it with a reveal, if you want!"

He sniffled and wiped his watering eyes, then laughed. "No need. I trust you."

At least someone *does*…

Suddenly, a rumbling sound startled both of them; it took a second for Gretel to register that her empty stomach had been the source of it.

Efron glanced between his friend the remains of the breakfast she had brought him, his pale green eyes narrowing slightly as helpful tried to make sense of the situation. "You didn't eat?"

The wyvern heaved a sigh. "Not yet. I was *going* to, but then I stumbled across Gavin, and then… I got… distracted."

"Gavin?" The revealer's ears perked up. "Was Grace with him? I mean–was her reveal what distracted you?"

"No… and that was the problem, apparently." When the older dragon's head tilted, Gretel continued halfheartedly, "I don't need reveals to make me do dumb things. I'm obviously plenty dumb on my own, haha."

"W-What?!" The absolute shock in his voice caught her by surprise. "You're one of the smartest I've ever met! The way you know how air moves and stuff, for instance."

The younger dragon shook her head. "*Every* wind type knows how air moves; we can *sense* it move. If we didn't, our abilities to manipulate wind would be useless."

"S-Sure, but… what makes you different is how much you try to learn about new things. Like… when you had me experiment with my reveals on you. I don't think any revealer in the *world* has ever thought about what happens if we reveal a 'hidden lie' before! Honestly, I don't know how you even came up with that."

Gretel reflected on that for a moment. "Does that really make me smart…?"

"I'd say so. Why?"

"Because reveals don't have a chance of killing me–unlike electricity."

"Electricity…? What does that have to do with–" Efron froze, piecing the situation together. "Wait. No way… You mean–you made Gavin *shock* you?!"

The little wind-type braced herself, but nodded. "More or less. It was an accident on his part; I woke him up with a prod."

"Wh-Why did you–"

"Same reason I made you reveal me back then: I wanted to see what would happen."

His mouth gaped as he struggled to form a coherent response.

"See? I *told* you I was dumb," she laughed. "Well, I *knew* there would be electricity involved–like, duh. That's why I used a stick to wake him up, to find out how dangerous it was. But I didn't factor in the water we were both standing in… And… I didn't factor in Gavin being *mad* at me for it…"

There was silence for a moment as Efron squinted at the ground, processing everything. "Gretel, you're not stupid… You're just… solitary."

She recoiled, mildly offended. "What?! Being solitary doesn't mean being stupid! Gavin's solitary, too! Being solitary just means being independent. What does that have to do with this?"

"Dragons interacting outside of a hunt is *socializing*. Proper socialization means getting permission from someone before you do something to them. That's the difference between what you did to him, versus what we did with my reveals. Because when you do something you don't know isn't permitted, then… things like *that* happen, where someone ends up getting hurt…"

Gretel paused. *There's that word again… I needed permission to enter Wren's grotto; I needed permission to ask about Clay's troubled past… And now I need permission to put myself at risk of their powers? Who decides these things?!* "I should be allowed to do what I want to myself. If I wanted to risk getting shocked, how is that hurting Gavin?"

Efron exhaled through his nose. "Because it's not just yourself that's involved here… When you had asked me to use my reveals on you, I knew what I was getting into when I *chose* to go along with it," he pointed out. "If you just randomly prodded Gavin while he was sleeping, then he wouldn't know anything about your motivations. He wouldn't even know you were the one who woke him. When he hurt you, that wasn't his choice; you didn't give him a choice in *any* of that."

Gretel tried to wrap her mind around this. The concept of taking the choice away from someone was foreign to her. "But Gavin chose how to react *afterward*. And he chose not to forgive me…"

"'Afterward' isn't a choice; it's a consequence. Err… Imagine if Gavin had been prey. If you had hunted him, but he escaped with wounds, then being wounded wouldn't be his choice–you'd have *caused* that to be the consequence of hunting him."

Phrasing it that way, every past interaction she'd had with others since retreating to this island finally clicked for her. "Woah…"

Efron chuckled slightly at his friend's bewildered expression. "Yeah. So… again, you're not stupid. You're just learning how to be social. Okay?"

Gretel blinked and looked up at him, completely forgetting that that had been the point of the conversation. "I guess so…" she reluctantly agreed.

"Alright. Well… let's get you something to eat now."

As if on cue, her stomach growled again, and for the first time since seeing the electrocuted frog, her appetite had returned.

Efron scanned the area for prey while Gretel cast her gaze to the sky, scenting the air. Even though most of the birds were migrating, the wyvern was itching to let out the energy she had pent up from her encounter with Gavin and the subsequent aftermath.

I hate myself for wronging him… but I hate that he didn't forgive me for it either. What am I supposed to do now? Just leave things unresolved like this? With a frustrated growl, she launched herself up with her winged arms spread and summoned a wind to ride on. *I don't care how far the prey is, I just need to get out of here for a while.*

To her surprise, Efron–after a brief stumble–managed to take flight and catch the same wind, following her. "Hey–wait up!" he called. When she obliged, he continued, "I was wondering… if you could teach me how to hunt in the air?"

"Uh… This isn't the best time of year to try that," the siren informed him. "All the birds are headed south. I don't know if you can fly that far…"

"Oh…" The disappointment in his utterance of the word caught her by surprise.

"What?"

He recoiled slightly, his wingbeats unsteady for a moment before he managed to correct himself. "N-Nothing! It's okay; go ahead. I'll… just wait here for you to get back, then."

Before she could respond, he descended to land and sat on the makeshift nest under their willow tree. Even from here, her sharp eyes could see the claw of his finger drawing absently in the muddy soil beside him.

What's his deal? I didn't think hunting in the air would be so important to him… A cramp in her side snapped Gretel out of her thoughts, reminding her how hungry she was. Without further delay, she flew south, traveling miles before finding a flock of gulls. The white-and-purple dragoness narrowed her hot pink eyes with determination as she positioned herself to strike one.

An abrupt gust of air from behind distracted her; she glanced back to see a dark gray wind dragon with green stripes at a lower altitude had caused it. Before Gretel could gather her thoughts, a new wind from the east blew in tandem with the first's. It was a green wind type, presumably related to him. Then a third wind from a higher altitude in the west was added to the mix, from an orange one.

What are they doing? The way their winds are colliding, they'll cause a twister... and I'll get caught in the middle of it! With no choice but to abandon her potential prey, the white-and-purple wyvern maneuvered through their combined powers just as the twister formed.

As the birds were sucked into it, the three males dove in after them for the hunt.

Hey, that isn't fair! They'll eat all of the prey at this rate! But I can't just rush in like they did; they're the ones in control.... I can't override the winds of three dragons on my own....! Then she remembered how she had avoided the raindrops during the storm on her first journey to Dualrise Island. *I don't have to contain their winds... I just have to focus on myself.* With that in mind, Gretel tracked one of the birds swirling around, created a vortex of her own with herself in the eye of it, then charged in.

The twister began to push the young dragoness in a spiral, but she managed to gain control of herself with her wingbeats in combination with her vortex shielding her. Her hot pink eyes never lost sight of the bird; when it was hurling toward her, she lunged forward and felt her fangs sink into its feathers in a successful catch.

"Hey! Paws off our prey!" one of the three roared. The twister petered out to reveal it was the orange dragon, whose yellow eyes were glaring maliciously at her.

"Atlan, what's the problem?" the gray one demanded. He and his relative joined Atlan to see what was happening.

"Woah, how did *she* get one?" the green wind type said, astonished.

"It doesn't matter *how* she got it, Orrin; it's *ours*!" Atlan snarled. "Kieran, do something!"

The gray one gave an interested hum, then led the other two in a slow glide around Gretel, much like vultures circling a corpse. She eyed them warily. They weren't much older than her–yearlings, at the oldest–but she was outnumbered, and their movements seemed in sync with each other. Escape wouldn't be easy."

"What should we do with her, brother?" Orrin wondered.

"That depends. Did we eat our fill, you two?" Kieran replied.

"I'm still hungry," Atlan snarled.

"Then that settles it." His green eyes focused on Gretel again. "We'll give you one chance to drop that prey and leave. If you don't, well, things could get ugly for you… Which would be a shame, since you're kinda cute."

The young dragoness almost cringed. *Is he trying to win me over so I'll give him the bird? He isn't doing a very good job!*

"Well? Drop it, already!" Atlan growled.

Gretel snorted and rebelliously chomped on the seagull, showing she had no plans to obey them.

"She's not listening to us," Orrin said to his brother.

"Then we'll *make* her," Kieran hissed. "Come on!"

The three charged at Gretel in unison. She took note of their trajectories, then summoned a skyward wind to propel her above them. The trio rode the wind in pursuit, but from her higher altitude, she unsummoned it and sent a gust down at all three of them, hurling the males toward the ocean. She took that moment they spent recovering to flee with the bird.

Unfortunately they were right behind her, and catching up fast. It was hard to breathe with the prey in her mouth; she had to either swallow it or drop it in order to get enough oxygen to outrun them.

All of the sudden, her frustrations that had been building throughout the course of the day boiled over. Gretel stopped dead in her tracks and spun around to face them, deliberately swallowing 'their' prey.

They all paused, dumbfounded.

"You want it? You'll have to gut me for it," she dared them. "Go ahead. I'm waiting!"

The other wind dragons exchanged a bewildered look. "She's insane," Orrin exclaimed.

"Or she's confident she can take us," Kieran muttered.

"No way she can win against all of us," Atlan denied it. "Let's take her invitation and gut her!"

"Heh. Forget it." The gray wind-type addressed Gretel now. "Hey, cutie. You did good hunting in our twister. And I admire how brave you are to hold your ground when you're outnumbered. What say you join us?"

Gretel glowered at them. "Me? Join a *raid* party? Pfft. I'd rather be *gutted*."

"Come now, don't be like that. We're not just a raid party; we're a family. Right, guys?"

"I'm not related to any of you," Atlan grumbled.

Kieran rolled his dark green eyes. "Well?" he pressed her.

"You'd only get in my way," Gretel sneered.

He laughed heartily. "Wow."

"Can we kill her yet?!" Atlan persisted.

"Nah. Let her go. Maybe she'll change her mind about joining us next time." To Gretel, he added, "See ya!" before leading the rest south.

Gretel watched them leave before finally dropping her facade. Her hunger had been quelled but now her stomach was as upset as she was. *They really could've killed me just now...*

She shook her head. *It doesn't matter. It's over with. It's over. No need to be upset–it's over.* The little wyvern breathed, pushed her emotions back, then headed north to her retreat.

The purple-striped wind type eventually landed on the wet prairie isle and took her spot next to Efron. His initial joy upon her return quickly morphed to concern. "Everything okay?" he asked.

Gretel shrugged indifferently, plopping down with her front paws crossed and resting her chin atop them. "Yeah. It's whatever."

His pale green eyes narrowed sympathetically. Then he held up a frog. "Did you eat? Because I hunted for you while you out, just in case–"

"Yeah, I ate."

The violet revealer hesitated in response to her clear dismissal. "What's the matter?"

"N-Nothing," she stammered somewhat desperately. "I'm fine. I had a run in with a few raiders and then I got away. I ate, I'm safe, I'm fine. Just tired, okay?"

Efron eyed her skeptically but didn't press her for details. He looked down at the frog. "Well, if you don't want this, then maybe I'll give it to Grace."

Gretel lifted her head at that. A rush of emotions surged through her too quickly to process: intrigue, bitterness, and a hint of excitement. "Can I come with?"

"Uh, if you want to. Sure."

The two crossed the sparse woodland until they reached Gavin's grotto. Efron announced their presence and after the electric type's invite, he moved to step in.

"Wait," the wyvern stopped him. "Do you think you can reveal him for me?"

Efron tensed, pausing to give her his full attention. "What? Why?"

"I just... want to be sure that he's actually sore at me..." she confessed.

"...And what if he *is*? Are you prepared to face that?"

She considered it. "It wouldn't make a difference, would it? He's sore at me either way..."

He sighed heavily. "Gretel, I don't like revealing others unless I have to... I don't want to lose Gavin's trust."

You mean, like I *did?* She glared at the ground, that bitterness beginning to overpower her intrigue. "Fine. Then go in without me."

"Wait. Was that the only reason you wanted to come with me here?"

"W-Well, yeah. Kind of. I just... don't know what else to do." Then it hit her. "Oh! You can reveal me instead! Right in front of him! Then he'll *know* I'm sorry!"

Efron tried to gauge if she were serious. "...If that's what you want, then fine. I'll do it."

The two went inside the narrow entryway and descended underground, where Gavin and Grace resided in the more spacious area where the ground leveled out.

The tangerine revealer hatchling looked up at the newcomers, her red eyes wide with curiosity, while Gavin simply watched the two expectantly.

Gretel exchanged a glance with Efron, having doubts about her plan. Her friend waited patiently for her to give him a sign. When it was clear she wasn't ready, he stepped forward and offered the frog. "Hey. I caught this for Gretel, but she already ate, so I was wondering if you or Grace would want it," he explained.

The turquoise adult looked between them. Gretel anxiously shifted her gaze to his tail, hoping to get a read on him, but it was still. Then Grace excitedly patted the electric type with one hand, pointing with the other, exclaiming, "Frog!"

The visitors both jumped, but Gavin didn't seem fazed. "Yes. A frog," he replied, and Gretel was thrown by how gently encouraging his tone was compared to his body language. "Do you want to eat the frog?"

Grace nodded eagerly. She rushed toward it, but Gavin caught her, and she immediately stopped to focus on him. "Scared?"

"Yes. Never go to others. Wait for them to go to you."

The hatchling seemed thoughtful for a moment. Then she happily let herself fall to a seat beside him.

Efron took that as his cue and paced himself as he approached the other revealer, who cowered shyly at first until he kneeled to her level and extended the prey to her. "Here you go, Grace."

Her eyes shifted from the frog, to Efron, then Gavin. After the latter's slight nod, Grace grabbed it in both hands with a delighted chirp and nibbled on it.

"Gavin, I…" Gretel began, but her sentence trailed off. *I don't know where to start, or what to say… I already apologized, but that was before I even knew the extent of what I'd done to him… What can I do to make him see that I understand this time?*

She looked helplessly at the older revealer. He nodded in response.

The urge to spill everything overcame her, and she didn't fight it. "Gavin, I can't take being hated like this–" The wind type stopped herself. *Why did I say that?! That isn't what I'm feeling! Is it…? N-No! It can't be–* "I really didn't think you would hold a grudge against me. I didn't think friendships–or whatever it is we had–could be lost so easily. Efron's the only one I've had, and he *never* gets mad at me like that…" She covered her mouth. *Shut up! Stop talking! None of that is right!*

Efron retreated a step from her, mildly surprised. "Uh, should I stop?"

Gretel nodded vigorously, and just as quickly as it had appeared, the urge ebbed. She sighed. "S-Sorry. I didn't mean that… I mean, I…" She stopped before she could dig herself into a deeper hole than she was already in.

Gavin stared at the wind type as deadpan as always. Not even his tail betrayed an emotion. Grace continued to nibble on the frog, watching everyone in turn with her red ears perked.

Gretel replayed everything she'd revealed. "I guess… I *did* mean it…" she finally admitted to herself. She sat down with defeat. *How pathetic am I?*

"You're hardly six months older than Grace," the turquoise dragon finally spoke as a matter of fact. "Don't get hung up on relationships. You don't need them. Some will be lost. Some will rekindle. But you can't force someone to like you… and thus you can't be bothered if they don't."

Gretel gaped at him; his words cut deep. She wanted to argue. She wanted the reassurance that time could heal anything–that her friendship with Efron couldn't be lost–*something*. But all she could do was sit there and stare, speechless.

"Frog?" Grace suddenly spoke up cheerfully, holding the remaining half of it out to Gavin. He gently patted her head and accepted it. She beamed.

"Well, uh, thanks… for letting us in," Efron said awkwardly. "Gretel, should we get going?"

The young wyvern scarcely heard him. When his words eventually registered, she finally let out the breath she'd unwittingly been holding, then turned to leave with her friend close behind her. She slowed to a stop outside. *What's wrong with me…? Why do I care so much about losing someone?*

"You alright…?" the older juvenile murmured.

Gretel was too deep in her own head to hear him. *I never used to care about it. But then again... I never had anyone there for me before. What changed?* The events of the past three months felt like a blur.

"Hey… He didn't seem mad, at least," he continued in an attempt to lighten the mood.

It started with Efron… It was meant to be temporary. I'd help him out, then we'd go our separate ways. So how did it come to this?

"I don't think I heard Grace speak before," Efron opted to change the subject.

Gretel finally faced him. "Why don't you ever get mad at me?"

He jumped. "W-W-What?"

She huffed and faced him fully to stare challengingly into his eyes. "Do you just conceal it all the time? Like when I pressed you about using reveals to hunt?"

His ears flattened and his eyes darted for an escape. "W-Well, I… I don't… uh…"

The juvenile dragoness shook her head dismissively. "Never mind. Sorry. Just forget it." She didn't wait for him to reply; instead, she took flight and landed atop a tree, where she curled herself around the trunk to lie comfortably on the branches and closed her eyes tightly. *I truly am pathetic… I can't blame Efron for making me soft. I should've known better than to let someone in like I did with him. It's my own fault.*

She breathed, then looked up at the evening sky. *The question is, what do I do now? I should just leave and go on with my life, the way I'd planned to from the start. I'll find a new retreat and nobody will be around to hurt me.*

But the thought pained her as soon as it had crossed her mind–especially when she found herself staring down at Efron. *No… He still needs me to take care of him,* Gretel convinced herself. *I won't leave him until I know he's okay.*

The blue-spotted revealer met her gaze, and they both tensed. Then he looked away for a moment. She could see his teeth clench his hands ball into fists as if he were bracing himself. Then he stared back up at the wyvern and started flying toward her.

Gretel didn't have time to get her thoughts in order before he was hovering in front of her. She could hear how nervous he was from his shaky breaths. "Efron, what are you…?"

"If you don't want to be friends anymore, I get it," he blurted out. She felt her heart skip a beat with panic, but he didn't give her an opportunity to respond. "But I stand by everything I've said to you. I don't think you're bad or stupid or anything."

"Efron…"

"To answer your question: I *do* get mad sometimes. *Everyone* does…! But I feel like being mad is not worth losing you over."

She frowned. "You think I'd abandon you if you get mad at me? Pfft. That's ridiculous!"

He averted his eyes for a moment somewhat guiltily. "D-Don't get me wrong...! It's not being mad at *you* that I have an issue with... It's being mad in general. Frustration is okay, but anger... It..." He swallowed uncomfortably. "It scares me..."

Gretel softened. She remembered the encounter she'd had with his mother: Kendra was quite clearly happy to rampage at every chance to. *Just like I keep coming back to feeling rejected...* "Strong emotions can be addictive, huh...?"

He nodded ever so slightly and his wingbeats slowed to descend. Gretel hopped off the branch and landed beside him under the cottonwood tree she'd been in. The autumn leaves shivered in the breeze, as if anticipating their turn to fall.

"I think we need to take a lesson from the trees," she laughed halfheartedly.

"Huh...?"

"A tree knows when to let go of things once they become hurtful. And... it knows when it's time to regrow those same things when they're helpful again."

"You mean its leaves...?"

"Yeah." She sighed. "I wish I had that instinct. I wish I didn't keep circling back to things that only hurt me..."

"Heh... Me, too." He leaned his back against the trunk and hummed absently to himself.

Gretel couldn't help listening. His tone was melancholic–uncertain–but somewhat hopeful. She answered a few of his uncertain phrases with questions of her own, as if asking if it's really all that bad--to which his tone remained unsure. Then she clung to that initial hope and changed the course of the song by leading with it, matching his key and volume.

He paused with intrigue, listening to her part. Then he continued his song in response, almost like a question of how to be hopeful.

But she was already prepared for that question and harmonized with it, determined not to let the hope be tainted by uncertainty.

He once again paused and let her take the lead this time, their timings swapped but their roles the same.

Then the siren changed the direction to an explanation. His tone continued to question it throughout, but eventually he ended up echoing her melody, so she switched to a supportive one in the background to encourage him.

Efron repeated that melody a second time, as if to cement that hope in his mind. Gretel added a higher harmony on top, boosting the feeling by reassuring it.

It was nice. For the first time in forever, she didn't have to worry about phrasing or identifying any of her troubles; she could express them and morph them into something better through song.

The chilly wind finally freed the tree of the trembling leaves, swirling around the dragons before settling on the ground as the song came to an end.

Chapter 10

A week went by in the blink of an eye. Gretel had been slightly hesitant to hunt beyond the prairie since her encounter with the trio of raiders, but that gave her the opportunity to get used to the location.

Efron had taken a liking to the raft-like nest she had taught him to make, and to combat the frequent downpours, he was inspired by it to try his hand at building a leaf-hut–a kind of shelter his grandfather had told him about as a hatchling.

With the gash on his arm still healing, he had to request Clay's help, and Gretel worked with the water type under Efron's instruction to line tree branches together in the shape of a triangular prism. They finished it by coating the exterior with bark and leaves.

It was far from perfect, but Gretel had never seen the revealer dragon more at peace than when he hummed with her to the beat of the rain while they sheltered inside it; ever since their duet, he had grown a lot more secure when it came to singing with her.

Aside from singing, and visiting Grace–which Gretel had been reluctant to do after her last encounter with Gavin ended disastrously on her end–there wasn't too much else for Efron to pass the time with, given the risk of reopening his wound. That's why he and Gretel chose an easy game of hide-and-seek this evening.

There weren't too many good hiding spots she hadn't used before, so Gretel chose to do the unexpected this time by simply ducking in the tall grass of the wetland while Efron counted.

The little wyvern magically compressed the air around herself to mute her giggles as she watched her friend search for her. Her keen eyes followed his movements; he was gradually getting nearer, but was still approximately thirty yards away. Per his usual tactics, the young violet revealer switched between crouching to inspect the damp soil for scents or footprints, hovering to look in the warm-colored treetops, and fanning his blue wings out to feel any disturbance in the air the juvenile wind dragoness may have caused.

Gretel was still shocked by the reminder of how weak his senses were compared to her own. But Efron did have a few tricks up his sleeve–like concealing his antsiness to hide his usual tells whenever she was the seeker. And, of course, revealing her own tells whenever he was seeking. Case in point: the more she tried to resist the desire to change her hiding spot the closer he got, the more his reveal made that desire irresistible.

I can't move now, or he'll see me! she thought. *Stay focused! Control myself!*

Nearer and nearer did her playmate get, treading carefully in a zigzag pattern to check each direction on his way. The effect of the revealer dragon's power only intensified for her as she fell closer in its range. It took everything she had to keep from fleeing.

…That is, until something else caught her eye, distracting her from the game entirely: a dark patch in the mud maybe ten yards to the left of him. *A shadow…?*

Everything looked normal around it, though she could have sworn it wasn't there earlier. Her desire to change hiding spots vanished, replaced wholly by curiosity. She studied the shadow for a little while, memorizing its position to the sun so that she could pinpoint anything in the environment that could be in the right place to cast it.

When Gretel couldn't find anything, she double checked the position the shadow was in, only to discover it was gone.

…What? Am I seeing things? The white-and-purple hatchling's hot pink eyes scoured the ground until she found it again–closer to Efron. Her heart skipped a beat and she leapt up. "Efron, *run!*"

Efron was startled by his friend's sudden warning, though he heeded it right away by taking flight, at the exact same moment that the figure casting the shadow began to take shape: scales of a wingless dragon, about twice as long as Efron was tall, shifted in color from the various earthy tones of the wetland into a deep-green with dark stripes, low in stature much like a lizard, though its head spouted two sets of ears and its back legs seemed to magically elongate as it launched itself up in pursuit of its prey.

Thankfully Efron could fly higher than the predator's leap… for the moment.

To the wyvern's horror, wings sprouted from the stranger's back that allowed its pursuit of her friend. *What the–?!* Her mind raced to match the abilities she was witnessing to information of other dragon types that Clay and Wren had shared with her. *It's a shadow dragon!*

Efron dared to glance over his shoulder and panicked at the sight of the predator flying after him. Even with Gretel's lessons, his knowledge of flight didn't compare to the shadow dragon's obvious experience; it was gaining on him.

"Oh, no you don't!" Gretel summoned a strong gale to knock his pursuer off-course, then spread the purple-striped wings from her forelimbs to ride on that same gale to reach the shadow type while it struggled to right itself.

"A siren?!" The shadow dragon–female, by her voice–froze to stare at the wind type with her dark green eyes widening in terror, both sets of ears pinning back.

Gretel almost hesitated. *Huh? What's she so afraid of?*

The stranger quickly snapped out of her daze and changed course, diving toward the earth. Gretel traced her line of sight and gasped–Efron was down there, helplessly trying to catch his breath; flight must have taken a toll on him.

No! I can't let her hurt him! Her hot pink eyes locked on the attacker as she dove after her; everything else went out of focus. The seven-month-old dragoness knew she was too small to physically overpower the adult. In an act of desperation, she let out a shrill roar instead, amplifying her voice via air pressure with hopes of at least disorienting her foe.

The sound did a lot more than that.

The shadow dragon's wide mouth parted to release a pained cry, her lizard-like hands covering her ears. Her wings instantly retracted, causing her to crash-land not too far from Efron, who could only cower in response.

For a heartbeat, Gretel was stunned by how easy the take-down was. She almost pitied the other dragoness for being affected almost to the same extent as Kendra had been, despite Gretel using significantly less power this time. Still, the shadow type was already getting up, and that renewed Gretel's drive to stop her. The wyvern conjured up a tailwind and dove after her, determined not to give the predator another chance to hurt her friend.

Her attack was cut short at the last second when a large brown figure suddenly jumped between Gretel and her target. *Clay?!*

She dispersed the wind, but had too much momentum to veer far enough to avoid collision in time; the little wyvern smacked right into the old water type's large back-fin, and he tanked the hit.

As she ricocheted to the muddy ground, Gretel spotted the shadow dragon making a break for the tall grass. The wind type hastily lunged ather–only for a webbed hand to catch her ankle.

Gretel struggled wildly, letting out a frustrated roar when the green dragon's scales shifted colors to camouflage once more, leaving only that same shadow she had found of it in the first place moving swiftly into the tall blades of grass–which subtly parted around its invisible body–and then there was nothing left to indicate its presence.

"Easy," Clay murmured, letting her go only when she fell lax with defeat. "It's alright. It's over."

Gretel rounded on the water type. "*Grrr…*! Why did you stop me?! Efron was almost *killed* just now–we can't let her run loose to finish the job!"

"Calm down… Shadow dragons are highly sensitive to noise. Your voice did a number on her, so she won't be a threat for a good while."

"'...Do you *know* her? Who *is* she?!"

"I *don't* know her," Clay corrected the juvenile sternly, "but I *do* know that shadow dragons don't just willingly decide to come out for the hunt this early."

"Ugh! So?! What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

"...It's my fault," Efron spoke up quietly. "I lured her out..."

"*What?!* No–don't blame yourself for this–"

"He's telling the truth," Clay interrupted. "I reckon he revealed her on accident."

"No...! But..." Gretel shook her head, refusing to let her friend take the fall for this. "She *attacked* him!"

"I know... I saw the whole thing. She was likely lying low nearby, suppressing her hunger until nightfall. The reveal must've made her act on that hunger early--with Efron just so happening to be the nearest prey."

The young wyvern gave an indignant growl, but couldn't deny the evidence indicating he was right.

Efron averted his gaze. "I'm sorry... I should have been more careful..."

"Ah, don't beat yourself up for it," Clay said reassuringly. "This isn't the *first* time a reveal drew a shadow dragon out of hiding."

That got both of the juveniles' attention. "Huh...? You mean, Grace...?" she asked.

"Sadly, yes. The little hatchling's reveals make her a target to all *sorts* of predators. Luckily she has Gavin to send them packing after a few volts."

Efron was silent for a moment, then lifted his head to stare somberly at the duo's grotto atop the slope. His clawed hand reached across his ventral scales to hold his arm–which was now scabbed over where his mother had slashed him.

I wonder if Efron had similar troubles when he was Grace's age...? Gretel couldn't stand seeing the sadness in his pale green eyes. "So much for our game, huh?" she laughed, hoping to lighten the mood by changing the subject.

"Oh... Yeah," he mumbled, not meeting her gaze. "S-Sorry... Guess I ruined it, huh...?"

She winced. *Great, I made him worse...* The wind-type hastily assumed a play-bow. "Forget about it! We can find games that *don't* use reveals next time!"

Her friend acknowledged her with a hum, but said nothing.

She eased herself down to a seat, trying to get a read on him. *What can I do to cheer him up after all of that...?*

"...Are you two okay?" Clay broke the silence. "The shadow dragon didn't hurt you, did she? I can walk you over to Wren if you need me to."

"I'm fine," Gretel answered honestly. She turned expectantly to her friend.

He didn't appear to have heard either of them, instead gazing absently at nothing in particular–but Gretel noticed his hand squeezing tighter around his arm to the point of trembling, the short claws of it almost digging into his own scales.

Before Gretel could call to him again, she caught sight of the gemstone on his tail glowing faintly for a second, and he visibly relaxed, straightened up, and let go, releasing a breath he had been holding a little too long.

A conceal...? The corners of her mouth turned down with concern. *The attack must have bothered him more than he's letting on...*

Gretel had nearly been hunted more times than she could count in her short life thus far. It was easy for her to forget just how scary it could be for someone less experienced with it. "Efron...? You alright?"

He blinked, then faced her with a small, tired smile. "Yeah."

"Are you sure...?" *I've never seen Efron so close to hurting himself like that... And even after his conceal, he still looks sad...*

He chuckled softly. "I'm sure. I'm just... sleepy." As if to prove it, he yawned. "I'm gonna head back to the hut. 'Night."

What now...? Gretel looked up at Clay pleadingly for the answer.

The elderly dragon gave a slight shrug. "Let him rest. It'll do him some good."

"...Okay." *I hope you're right...*

Not knowing what to do with herself, she simply followed her friend and joined him in the leaf-hut. He instantly lied down on his side, staring out over the cliff at the sky. Gretel settled down beside him, as best she could with how restless she still was from the fight.

They watched the sunset in silence for what felt like forever. Gretel could tell something was still eating at him, but she had no clue how to address it. She considered opening up to him about her first encounter with a predator, though she found it surprisingly hard to recall any specifics, just bits and pieces of the memory–some of them she recognized as scenes from later fights she had almost forgotten about. *Huh... A lot of my early life is a blur.*

Efron let out a shaky breath, and Gretel immediately refocused on him worriedly. "Efron?" she pressed.

"...I miss my family," he murmured.

She jumped, completely blindsided by the topic. "Huh?"

He didn't elaborate; instead, he curled up with his back to her, arms crossed over the pouch on his belly in a self-embrace.

Gretel could only gape at him, speechless. *I can relate to being upset over predators–but missing your family? What can I possibly say? I've never relied on family… so I've never dealt with losing any. I have no idea what he's going through…*

Her face scrunched up as she tried to think of how to help. She must have been pondering for longer than she realized; night had fallen by now, and she could hear Efron snoring faintly in his sleep.

Then she suddenly remembered: *Clay! He should know what to do! After all, he told me his mate was killed–and by a shadow dragon, no less! And since his pod has grown up and left, he doesn't have his family around either! If* anyone *knows what it's like to miss family, it's Clay!*

Without a second thought, Gretel rushed outside to find the water type. She first glanced toward where she had left him–and when he wasn't there, she checked the mud puddle by the shore he usually hid in. "Clay?" She patted the ground a couple times and waited.

No response.

Is he sleeping? No–that would have woken him if he was. So if he's not here, then… could he be with Wren? Gretel glided down to the shrouded entrance of the medic's home. "Wren, it's Gretel! Is Clay there?" she called from outside.

"No," came the electric dragoness's curt answer.

"Um… Do you know where he *is*?"

"Probably sleeping… like I'm trying to, if you'd be so kind as to *let* me."

"Oh. Sorry." Gretel heaved a sigh. *Well… that means the only other place he could be is–* She couldn't bring herself to think it–but, alas, she had to. *Alright–suck it up! This is for Efron! He's more important than a little embarrassment!*

The white-and-purple juvenile spread her striped wings and swooped up the slope, drifting easily on the chilly breeze until she reached the grotto near the edge of the cliff. Landing outside, she listened to gauge what she might be interrupting.

There was a faint, rhythmic *clacking* sound, followed by the laughter of a hatchling ringing out from the depths. Gretel was so captivated by the beat that she almost forgot why she was there. She snapped herself out of it. "Gavin…?"

There was a brief pause. "Gretel?" Clay's voice responded, crushing her sliver of hope that he hadn't been there after all. "Come on in."

She tilted her head. *Why the invite? Shouldn't it be up to Gavin if I'm allowed in or not?* "Uh… okay…" She warily trotted down the tunnel and into the wider space where the elderly dragon resided.

Clay was sitting across from Grace with a bunch of different seashells on the floor between them. The rhythmic sound must have come from the water dragon tapping the shells in his hands together for the hatchling's entertainment.

Gretel looked around and instantly relaxed to find the turquoise electric dragon wasn't there. *This must be another night where Clay babysits Grace so Gavin can sleep without shocking her.*

The tiny, tangerine-colored revealer grabbed a few shells and *clacked* them together, too, with some semblance of rhythm between giggles.

Gretel chuckled with amusement.

"Everything okay, little lady?" Clay asked.

"Um… I think Efron can use your help," the striped juvenile answered, crossing the space to his side. "He really misses his family, and I don't know what to do about it."

"That's fair. You grew up solitary, after all."

"Exactly! Since you're a social dragon type, just like Efron, and both of you aren't with your families anymore, I was hoping you would know what to do for him."

"Hm. Is visiting them an option?"

"No!" Her sudden shout startled Grace; the wyvern covered her mouth with the wing of her forearm. "S-Sorry. But no-o-o-o-o, haha."

"That… sounds a bit complicated."

"It is. I really don't understand it, to be honest. His parents didn't treat him much better than Grace's treated her. If I were him, I'd be *glad* they aren't around anymore."

Clay let out a somber sigh. "I'm sure Efron wishes he could feel that way, too. It's not so easy, though. For social dragons, our families aren't just our parents; they're the societies we live in."

"Societies…?"

"Yep. A place we fit in and belong, where everyone has a role to play in looking after each other."

Gretel hummed. "I never thought about it that way," she admitted. *The only glimpses I've seen into revealer societies have all made a bad impression on me…* "But I still don't understand why having *us* here for him doesn't count as a society…? Efron and I look after each other–he even said I'm like a sister to him, once. And he seems to like you, Gavin, and Grace well enough."

"You two are definitely like a family, I'll grant you that. But societies are so much bigger than four or five members. And… as bad as this might sound, it can be a struggle to live among dragons that aren't the same type as you, even if you all care about each other."

Gretel's first instinct was to argue that last point–although, upon looking back on her past misunderstandings with Efron regarding his conceals, she had to admit Clay had a point. "True… We have different ways of showing we care, and different body language, different powers, stuff like that. Like, I never knew how much revealers used their powers in everyday situations to show 'respect.' When Efron first did it around me, I thought it was because he didn't trust me. Took a long time to even bring it up to him because of that."

"You get it. And the struggles don't end with miscommunication. You see how much sleep Gavin sacrifices to avoid shocking Grace, for instance. He can fight his solitary nature by raising a hatchling, but he can't fight the electrical charge in his fur while he's sleeping, y'know? Physically, we can only adapt to each other's needs so much."

"Ehh… I hear you, but I don't take issue with struggling here and there if it means Efron's okay. Besides, being a different type has advantages too! Like, if I were a revealer, I wouldn't have been able to take down the shadow dragon so easily when she attacked Efron!"

"You're absolutely right about the advantages--and about a revealer your age not being able to take down the shadow dragon. But in, say, a revealer dragon society, it wouldn't be the revealers your age that would have to fight; that shadow dragon would have probably been revealed on purpose and turned into a snack by the *adults* who watch over their home."

Gretel remembered seeing Efron's thirteen-foot-tall grandfather and winced as she imagined him tossing the green shadow dragon into his mouth like a berry. *It's easy to forget that fully grown revealers are* huge*… and full-sized societies are made up of them… and that Efron's home 'society' was only small because it was in the beginning stages….*

"Efron is only a couple years old, right? It's clear you two care about each other like a family. I'm just saying that he's a fish out of water here. He likely misses his family because he's used to relying on the adults of his kind to fend off common predators like that shadow dragon earlier." Clay turned his gaze down to Grace, who by now had settled on his lap to doze off. "He has you, sure. Just like Grace has Gavin and me. But unlike us, a whole society of their own kind wouldn't struggle at all with keeping youngsters like them safe."

"Well… their societies *didn't* keep them safe," Gretel said bitterly. "They were thrown out and left for dead. That's how they both wound up here to begin with."

"Not all leaders of societies are that cruel," Clay murmured. "There are bad folk everywhere you turn--both in and outside societies. You just gotta weigh the risks of both lifestyles, and choose what's best for yourselves."

Gretel mulled over Clay's words as she padded out of the grotto. *It can't be that bad for social dragons to live outside societies, can it…?* The little white wyvern directed the humid air beneath her toward the night sky and spread the folded, purple-striped wings of her forelimbs to let it lift her up to the treetop above Efron's leaf-hut. A memory hit her, out of the blue:

"…Sorry. You never did confirm it was Galen, so maybe I'm just jumping to conclusions," Auden sighed, referring to his cousin who was now Efron. "Even if he did survive his injuries after Gramps took him away, I doubt he'd last too long out here alone, so it doesn't make a difference, I guess; he's dead either way."

"Huh? Why wouldn't he survive?" Gretel asked.

"Revealers never fare well on their own," he answered her, "especially when they're young, like Galen was."

"But if they know how to hunt, shouldn't they be okay?" she pressed.

"Maybe physically. But social dragons aren't meant to be alone; isolation can hurt them just as much as hunger–maybe even worse."

The four-month-old wind type's hot pink eyes studied the ground as she took this in, remembering Efron's sorrowful melody the first time she had heard him sing.

Gretel snapped back to the present. *That was three months ago…* She felt a pit in her stomach. *Efron was disowned long before then, too…* She cast her hot pink eyes to the west, where they trained on the silhouette of the plateau-island that Efron's father had been born on. *I went there that night… and it rubbed me the wrong way, seeing that the little green revealer on it with her sister was taught to conceal her sadness. That's the only reason I didn't want Efron to move there.*

But her conversation with Clay just minutes ago recontextualized that scene. *I'm not a revealer… and when I had finally confronted Efron for using conceals like that whenever I upset him, he said it was a cultural way of being respectful. Was I wrong to guess her conceal was bad, too? Was that 'miscommunication' on my end?*

Gretel flinched when a single, cold raindrop splat on the tip of her snout. *Bleh! Does it* ever *stop raining here?!*

She jumped down and slipped into the hut, trying unsuccessfully to dodge the following droplets on her way. She instinctively checked on Efron, who was still snoring quietly, undisturbed by the wind type's silent entrance. Gretel tensed upon spotting another dry patch on his violet scales–a kind of water damage.

If I'm getting sick of the rain, when it doesn't hurt me at all, then I can't imagine how hard it is on him... It's easy to overlook, since he never complains about it. She frowned. *He didn't complain about missing his family before, either...*

A clap of thunder disrupted her thoughts; she reflexively compressed the air around herself, muting her startled squeal.

Efron jolted awake from the sound too, instantly rolling upright with his green ears flattened and his matching-colored eyes darting as if to pinpoint the lightning that had caused it.

"It's okay," she assured him.

It took a few seconds before he warily lowered himself to lie flat again. "...Yeah." He sighed, then crossed his arms and rested his head on them as if to go back to sleep, but his eyes were shut a little too tightly, and she could tell from his breathing that he was still awake.

"Hey, Efron...?"

"Hm...?"

"Um..." *I can't believe I'm going to ask this... But if* I *don't take action,* he *won't.* "...Would you want to go on a flight with me tomorrow...?"

He shrugged with one shoulder. "If I can. It's hard to fly for that long..."

"That's why you could use the practice! Don't worry–I'll help carry you with my wind!"

The young revealer turned his head just enough to meet her gaze with his own, somewhat skeptical, one. He opened his mouth as if to ask something, but his voice failed him and he faced away from her.

"...What?"

"You're right. I need the practice," he murmured. With an abrupt tonal shift to genuine optimism, he added, "Besides, it'll be fun."

Another conceal...? But I didn't see his gemstone flash– She froze. *Right... he only needs the gemstones to extend how long his conceals and reveals last, not to use them in general...* That only dampened her mood more than the rain did the air. *Not only does he never complain, but he probably uses conceals way more than he uses his gemstones to extend them... and without the glint of his gems, I'd have no way to tell...*

"'Night, Gretel." He shifted his weight to settle down more comfortably, and not long after, his change in breathing proved to her he had fallen back to sleep.

"Rise and shi-ine!" Gretel sang as she prodded her sleeping friend's back.

"Huh–wha…?" Efron rolled over to face her, propping himself up on the elbow of one arm and using his free hand to rub the bleariness from his eyes so he could make out the little wyvern silhouetted in the early morning light spilling into the leaf-hut.

"I caught breakfast!" She nudged a fat bird over to the other dragon, then bounced excitedly in place.

The young revealer blinked with mild surprise, but accepted it. "Thanks…!" He took a moment to admire her kill; all of its pink feathers had been plucked for him already–meticulously. He paused. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Hunting, obviously," she laughed dismissively.

"…The sun is barely up… Did you sleep at *all*…?"

"Who cares? I had more important things to do. Now *eat up*–"

"*I* care. Did you even hunt for yourself?"

She rolled her hot pink eyes with mock annoyance. "Of *course* I did. And I got a good few hours of sleep. After all, we both need all our strength for our flight today!"

"Oh, right. I almost forgot about it." Efron dug into the bird, his green eyes shifting between it and his friend, who kept peering outside the hut at the western sky. "Why the rush?"

"Rush? Uh…" She hesitated for the briefest moment before turning to face him with a playful scowl. "The better question is: why aren't *you* in a rush?"

"…Huh?"

"Aren't you sick of being on this stuffy little island all the time, too? Don't you want to spread those wings of yours and get some fresh air?"

"Oh. Uh… I guess so."

The little wind dragoness snorted. "You 'guess' so? Come on–you *know* so!" She paused. "Don't you?"

He chuckled half-heartedly. "I don't mind it either way, really. But I *could* use a break from the constant rain… And it'll be fun spending time with you."

"*That's* the spirit!"

Efron swallowed the last bite, then joined her. "I'm guessing you already planned our route?"

"Heh! Yep! Just you wait; you're gonna love it!"

The other juvenile eyed his friend skeptically. "…What exactly are you up to…?"

"Huh? N-Nothing! I already told you, we both need the fresh air–"

"Gretel, you know I'm not big on surprises… s-so if there's something I should know about–"

She softened. "Rela-a-ax! I said it was a flight, and that's all it is! I'm not a *liar!* Go ahead and reveal me if you want."

"R-Right. I trust you. Sorry…"

The young dragoness hesitated once more, this time with guilt. She sighed. *I shouldn't be coy if it risks losing his trust…* "W-Well, actually… there *is* this place I was hoping we could scope out on the way. I want your opinion on it."

His green ears perked up slightly with interest. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's pretty far, so we're not gonna *visit* it or anything. But I can also *see* really far, so I'll just tell you what I'm seeing and you can explain it to me!"

He tilted his head. "Explain it? What makes you think *I* would know anything about it?"

She sucked in a breath through her teeth. "Because… it's a revealer society," she confessed. "The plateau island your dad was born on."

The young revealer dragon tensed.

"…Look. I just want to learn about it, okay? I want *you* to learn about it, too, since you've never been there before. It could be a lot different from how you were raised on Dualrise Island, you know? Aren't you curious?"

There was a beat of silence while he considered it. "…You said we won't get close to it…?"

She brightened hopefully. "Right! I can see, like, two miles away! No other dragon type can notice us from that far!"

"…Alright. Sounds safe enough." The violet revealer stretched his blue wings. "In that case, I'm ready when you are."

Gretel beamed. "Let's go!" She half-trotted, half-glided to the edge of the cliff, where she stood with her head raised and eyes closed, feeling the natural breeze. "We got a northeast wind right now. Not perfect, but it's mostly on our side."

"That means it'll push us south some, right?"

"Yep," she confirmed. "It'll be good practice, though. If it gets too hard, I can always turn it into a tailwind for us."

"Mhm. Well… here goes nothing." Efron spread his wings and jumped over the ledge, hovering unsteadily for a beat until balanced himself and looked down at his friend.

Gretel hopped up to his level easily. "This way," she directed him by tossing her head toward the distant island. "Go ahead of me so I can help if you need it. I'll be right behind ya."

"Oh, okay." He took a nervous breath, then dove slightly to shift into a horizontal posture more suitable to gliding than the upright one he's been hovering in. Once he gained enough momentum with the help of gravity aiding his dive, he swooped back up to regain the height he lost, flapping his wings a few times to maintain it, then eased into a steady glide to conserve energy.

The wind type watched him with pride; he did take her flying lessons to heart. She didn't need to do any of that since her body was lighter than his, so she caught up a second later, although she stayed a single pace behind him to his right just to keep watch.

"Feels like forever since I've flown this high," he remarked. "I forgot how crisp the air is up here."

"That's what I've been saying!" Gretel agreed. "The air is heavy with rain over the wet prairie. Makes it hard to breathe sometimes, y'know? But this"--she did an aileron roll–"is perfect!"

He chuckled with amusement at her enthusiasm. "You make those tricks look easy."

The younger dragon shrugged without breaking pace. "They *are* easy–for me."

"...Are there any that I might be able to pull off?"

"Maybe when your wings are more developed. They're still kinda shorter on you than mine are on me. They're bigger than when we first met, though!"

"Y-Yeah. Adult revealers have way bigger wings on them than juveniles. Mine will get that big eventually."

"And when they do, you'll be more practiced with flying and tricks than any other revealer your age! I bet you *already* are, too!"

"Hehe. Thanks to you."

She grinned. "*You* put in the work to learn!"

He returned her smile somewhat bashfully.

"At this rate it'll be a while before we get close enough to the island for me to see it well. Are you ready for a tailwind?"

The violet dragon nodded. "I'm getting a little tired of fighting the air current north, so that'll help."

"I gotcha." Gretel changed the existing air-direction to propel them forward.

Efron had already prepared himself to rebalance, but he was still caught off-guard by the sheer boost in speed, and couldn't help laughing. "It's like I'm floating...!"

"Ahaha, welcome to *my* world!"

In his excitement, he angled his wings back to catch the wind more, flapping them to fly ahead of–and higher than–her. Gretel watched him curiously; her eyes widened when he tilted on axis, the new angle causing him to be swept sideways. She almost summoned a draft of wind to catch him, but stopped herself when she realized it was intentional; he continued sideways in a wide spiral until he was upright again on the axis he had started on, and they both whooped.

"That was a barrel roll!" she chimed excitedly.

"It was? Heh! I was trying to copy your little spin from earlier. I played it a bit safe, though, haha."

"You did great! I can't believe you even tried it at all!"

He laughed. "Me neither!"

Before they knew it, they were a couple miles from the plateau island, and Gretel let the wind peter out. They both hovered in a brief silence as they took in the sight.

The ocean waves crashed against the cliff that made up all sides of the island. On the surface of it was a forest painted shades of orange by the autumn season. The southern tip was barren of trees and sloped up into an overhang. In the middle of the forest was a huge stone pillar with a flat top, about half the size of the island itself. Gretel could make out the shapes of some large dragons on it.

Efron turned to his friend. "Can you see anyone…?"

She squinted. At this distance, her keen eyes were more adept at spotting movement rather than details. Thankfully their colors were a big enough contrast with the stone's. "I see… the biggest revealer there is… a silvery color. With deep blue spots and wings."

"What are they doing?"

"They aren't moving, so… sleeping, maybe?"

He hummed. "We're still really far… Will getting closer help you see better…?"

"Yes, but I thought you didn't *want* to get closer?"

"Uhh…"

"How about this: you stay here, and I go ahead a little."

"N-No, it's alright! I'll go with you. Just enough to see better, okay?"

"Um… if you *say* so." The duo traveled forth just under a quarter-mile. That made all the difference for her. "The silver one isn't sleeping," she corrected herself. "They're standing. And the other revealers are standing in front of them."

Efron's ears angled forward even though neither of them could hear anything from this distance. "The silver one must be the matriarch… giving orders to the others. It's still early, so it's not a surprise."

Gretel scanned the crowd. "They're starting to move–in all different directions. I don't think I can keep tabs on everyone… Oh–the pink one has juveniles following her! They're so much smaller than her… It's hard to see what colors they are. I think they could be around your age, Efron, since they can fly to follow Pinkie, there, down to the forest. There must be… five…? No–six juveniles with her."

"She must be a mentor…" Efron mumbled. "My aunt would fill that role for my cousin and I when we were little. My mo–err, I mean… *Kendra* decided she wasn't good enough at teaching me, though…."

Gretel refocused her eyes on her friend, unsure how to help upon seeing him once again grip his scarred arm. "Do you wanna go back to the prairie…?"

He snapped out of it and shook his head, letting go. "N-No–not yet. What about the other ones the silver adult was talking to?"

"Oh! Let's see… there's a blue one–a male? He looks kinda like you. Same gemstone placement, too, from what I can see of the shine on them."

"…My father's blue. He could be a relative… What's he doing?"

"He's… moving beside the silver one. They're… nuzzling?"

"Huh…?"

"Hard to tell from here. It didn't last. I thought it was a bite at first, but it was too slow and neither of them jerked in pain or anything. They're standing together now, so it couldn't have been."

He gave a thoughtful hum.

"He's pointing now. The one he's pointing at is like a reddish color, kind of slouching. Could be an elder, I'm guessing. Mr. Elder is going where Mr. Blue is pointing, and… it's a hole in the rock?"

"Probably leading to the nesting site. Since hatchlings can't fly, they're safely tucked in a big hole or fissure, where retirees watch over them while their parents are on duty."

"Retirees?"

"The elder you saw might be too old or injured to perform duties, like my grandpa was. So he's retired from them."

"Ah. In that case, the hatchlings' parents must be among the rest of the ones who left when Pinkie did."

Efron chuckled. "Just a heads up, don't get caught calling dragons by their colors like that. You might make 'em mad, haha."

"Heh! Sor-ry."

"Anything else you wanna know about?"

"Hm…" Gretel shifted her gaze to the forest. Her distant search was interrupted by a nearby change in the air-current–too sudden to be natural. She shook her head and looked around wildly, her heart pounding.

"Gretel? What's wrong?"

"Hide…!"

"What…? Where…?!" They were above the middle of the ocean with the nearest land being the revealer society.

"Hey, cutie!" a young male's voice piped out loudly from behind them. Gretel recognized it and was instantly filled with frustration. There were three wind dragons swiftly approaching them: the raid party that had once threatened her unsuccessfully into giving them her prey.

"'Cutie'…?" Efron echoed, confused. "Are they friends of yours?"

"Ick! Don't make me hurl," she spat.

"It's no wonder you didn't wanna join our little trio: wind dragons ain't your type, eh? You prefer revealers, ehh?" the leader of them–a dark gray-and-green wyvern named Kieran–continued mockingly.

Efron hugged himself nervously as the three juvenile wind dragons circled the duo.

"What do you *want?"* Gretel snarled. "In case you haven't noticed, the birds are all flying *south*. I don't have any prey for you to steal this time."

"And that's exactly why we're here," Kieran explained. "Why move south for food, when revealers have a stockpile of prey just *waiting* for us to nab?"

"Y-You… You're going to steal from them…?" Efron managed to speak.

"Aww, why so scared?" the orange one–Atlan–joined in. "We ain't gonna hurt you or your family down there–if you don't interfere, that is. Right, Kieran?"

"Pfft. You really think that shivering pipsqueak would *try* to stop us?" Kieran replied. "He's good at flying for a revealer, but one gust from us will send him *plummeting*."

"I don't know. It's odd that he isn't fighting with little pearls there," the third–Orrin–remarked, referring to Gretel. "Why is she just staying there with him instead of plummeting him herself?"

"Huh. Good question." Kieran paused his circling to face the wind dragoness directly. "Well, cutie? Why aren't you? Unless…" He laughed. "Don't tell me–you really *do* like him?!"

"*What?!*" Gretel cringed so hard she almost fell. "No way! I don't 'like' *anyone!*"

"Yeah, right! I can see it on your cute little face. He's more than a friend to you," he snorted. More jokingly, he added, "Besides, why else would you turn me down if you weren't already taken?"

"Why, you stupid, arrogant–"

"Gretel, it's okay… Maybe we can talk them out of this…?" Efron said quietly.

"*What?!*"

"They're wasting time engaging with us, so clearly they value what you have to say, right…?"

"Grr…. I have *nothing* to say to these jerks!"

"Please, try… for me…?"

She hesitated. "W-What am I supposed to say? They didn't listen *last* time I told them to back off…"

"Hm…"

"Look at them, mumbling to themselves," Atlan grumbled. "I don't care if they *are* a couple. I'm hungry! Let's raid the island already!"

"W-Wait!" Efron cried.

"Oh, the shivering wimp has a spine after all," Kieran chuckled. "Let's hear him out."

"My family… on the island… is expecting raiders," he lied. "They saw *her*"--he flicked his clawed thumb toward Gretel–"and sent *me* to stop her."

Gretel frowned. *He's bad at lying…*

"Yeah, right!" Kieran huffed. "They sent a scared little juvenile like you?"

"Y-Yes…" the revealer said, "because I'm a son… I'm disposable…"

The audible honesty in that sentence made her wince. It also seemed to make Kieran think twice.

"They're all watching me right now… watching *us*… There's no way you'll get close without them catching you."

"Hmph. I'm still not buying it," the gray wyvern muttered. "They really sent a sniveling brat over a mile-and-a-half away? They wouldn't even notice Cutie here from *this* far. Besides, you two are flying too close to be strangers. The way you're together is reminiscent of siblings, really."

Gretel gulped. *It's no good… They figured us out…!*

"Ugh, forget it… I'm too hungry for this," Orrin complained. "Let's just go somewhere else–"

"No need. He's clearly bluffing," Kieran interrupted. "And if he's not, then he wouldn't have any trouble going 'home', now would he, boys?" He flashed his party a toothy grin.

"Heh. Yeah! Go on home!" Atlan sneered, flapping his wings to send a gust at the young revealer to blow him toward the island.

Efron tensed up and was destabilized by it, barely able to right himself.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Gretel shrieked at them, but her volume and pitch had no effect on her own kind since they blocked her sound with the same power that enabled her to project it.

"What's the matter, cutie? You don't want your little friend to go home?" Kieran taunted her.

"Yeah! The poor little social dragon needs his society!" Orrin said, joining Atlan in the gust attack but from a second angle.

Gretel snarled and got between them and her friend, deflecting their attacks until her head began to hurt. *I shouldn't have used up so much of my energy to travel this far… There's too many of them to face on my own, even if I had my full strength…!*

The raid party didn't let up. They laughed and joked with each other as they herded the duo closer to the island.

"I-I don't know if my wings can keep me airborne much longer," Efron warned her breathlessly.

At this point they were a quarter-mile from the cliff. Gretel shut her eyes tight. "Fine. They want us on the island? Then that's where we'll go! Come on–ride on their gusts!"

"W-What?!"

"We don't have a choice! They're just toying with us; they won't *actually* get close enough for the revealers there to attack them!"

"B-But the revealers might attack *us*–"

"We're getting attacked either way–and I can't fend them off forever!"

His pale green eyes darted from her to the raiders, then squeezed shut as he turned his back to them and headed for the forest.

Gretel hesitated to follow. She wanted to, if only to make sure he was safe, but as much as she hated to admit it to herself, she was scared of what the adult revealers were capable of doing to her.

"Huh. Maybe he *wasn't* bluffing," Kieran reconsidered, watching Efron disappear in the treetops. The trio stopped their pursuit. "But that still doesn't explain *you*, cutie. What on earth were you doing with him?"

Gretel glowered at him, too busy catching her breath to think of a retort.

"Let it go, Kieran," Orrin muttered. "My stomach's growling. Let's hit the volcano isle instead, before the fire dragons wake up."

"Yeah–let's get outta here. If she wants to wind up as a revealer's snack, let her," Atlan agreed.

"Hmph. There's still no convincing you to join us, is there, cutie?" Kieran said, with disappointment that she couldn't tell apart from a joke. When she still didn't respond, he sighed. "Fine. To the volcano, then."

With that, the three of them went south.

Gretel continued to hover alone for several seconds, trying to get herself together. Then she spun around to face where her friend had gone. With the last of her energy, she compressed the air around herself to mute her panting and wing-beats as she swooped down to find him.

She landed in the treetop that Efron had vanished in, her hot pink eyes scouring the forest floor, scenting the air for him with each inhalation. The smell of revealers was overwhelming. She could hear a group of them on the move far to her left. Every instinct she had told her to stay still so they wouldn't detect her, to rest until she recovered enough power to fly Efron back to the prairie.

But even on the verge of passing out, she couldn't just sit there while her friend was potentially in danger.

Gretel steadied her breathing enough to home in on Efron's scent and silently tracked it forward. *There he is!*

From the looks of it, he had crash-landed on the ground and was out cold from the impact, with only his heavy breathing indicating he was alive.

Just as the little wyvern was about to jump down and hide him, the bushes rustled and a familiar dark green revealer just a few months older than him rushed onto the scene from the right. Gretel remembered her as the older sister from the wyvern's first visit to the island. The green dragoness immediately pointed at Efron and called out, "Carys! Carys, I found him!"

Carys? Who's that?

As if in answer, the same pink revealer dragon from before caught up to her. She was as old as Kendra; a similar height as well. The stranger gasped with horror and hurried to Efron's side, proceeding to prop the unconscious juvenile up in her arms.

"No wonder the lookout team's reveals didn't bring him out... He's dead, isn't he...?" said another voice Gretel knew: a lighter green revealer, the younger sister of the one who found Efron.

"No, Alina. He's bruised, but alive," Carys said. "Verena found him before those wind types could change that."

"What will we do with him?" Verena asked worriedly.

"That's for Her Magnificence to decide," Carys said. She tucked Efron into her pouch. "Come, now. Let's bring him to her."

Gretel watched helplessly as the pink revealer took flight toward the top of the plateau with her friend and the other juveniles in tow.