

Second Chances, Parallel Paths

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Second Chances, Parallel Paths

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Summary

So if it was all a dream . . . what then?

Or, Val returns to a point a few days before the slaughter of the ancient dragons. Meaning he now has the classic Protagonist Cheat of knowing the future. Except that he also knows that the rest of his people can't (or won't) do much to fend off what's coming even if he tells them about it. So where can he go for help, other than exactly the same place as he went before?

Notes

This ended up being mostly about violence. Except where it's about violent sex. The title is horrible, because it was trying hard not to have one. And I still have no idea why I wrote it, but I'm inflicting it on everyone else anyway. Mercifully, it isn't all that long. Well, by my standards. Happy Holidays, or something.

Prologue (Val)

I thrashed back to consciousness in the dark. Where was I? What had happened? Smells of stone and sand and a faint hint of damp . . . this was a cave?

I could feel grit against my tail. And that was wrong. I'd been unable to manifest my tail ever since I'd become a Mazoku, or at least not without excruciating pain. My wings were out too. And . . . nothing hurt? I couldn't even feel the dull ache that always gathered around the base of my horn, like my body was trying to reject it.

I called on my power, demanding light, and for a heart-stopping moment nothing answered. Then, reluctantly, something gave, and I was able to use my will to form a ball of foxfire.

A cave, yes. But I knew this cave. I'd seen that arrangement of strata before, slanted layers of orange and olive green and near-black. This was . . . I couldn't . . . down among the memories I always blocked, of the *time before* . . .

Then everything snapped into focus, and I found myself making a distressed noise. This was *my* cave, my lair in the mountain above the temple. From the days when my people had been alive, before I'd met Gaav. And I was in my dragon form. Which shouldn't have been possible, unless . . .

I scrambled to my feet and charged out of the room, nearly braining myself against the wall of the corridor. There were some half-a-dozen other private lairs along this section, but they weren't what I was looking for. Instead, I ran along the tunnel and out onto the ledge beyond. I'd misjudged the distances again, but that didn't really matter, because my wings spread out instinctively as I slid off the edge, and I rose into the sky.

The valley was green, the spells that maintained its environment against the mountain cold intact, and there were other ancient dragons all over, sunning themselves on ledges or flying through the sky or fulfilling their obligations to the aerie by doing their one-day-in-three of work. The air around me was warm. I would have thought it was an illusion, except that not even the most elaborate illusion could stop the base of my horn from aching. Gaav had used illusions often while he'd been training me, so I was certain of that.

But that meant . . . none of it had been real? It was all a dream?

That was a terrifying, elating thought. I'd lived hundreds of years of nightmare . . . but only inside my own head. And it wasn't as though there was much about the nightmare that I'd liked, or was going to miss. One thing, maybe, or one person. And he'd been gone before the end. No, this was much better, this sunny day that was slowly beginning to evaporate those dark memories.

I grinned, and tilted my wings for a low pass over the valley. It felt like it had been a long time since I'd last scared a herd of goats, although it was probably just yesterday. Watching them scatter was satisfying, although it got me cursed at by one elderly fellow who had been sunning himself on the valley floor until goats started bouncing off him. Then I sideslipped

left, caught a warm updraft, and let it lift me higher and higher until I could reach the Lookout Ledge, the highest stable footing in the valley.

It was already occupied, but that was okay—there was plenty of space, and anyway, I recognized the other dragon perched there.

"Kirsus!" I folded my wings and landed tidily beside him.

"Hey, Val. What's up?" Kir gave me a grin. We'd been thrown in together often as hatchlings because we were almost exactly the same age, hatched barely a month apart. It was a good thing we got along well.

I shook my head. "I just woke up not ten minutes ago from the worst nightmare in the world. Dead bodies everywhere. Ugh. I was hoping I'd find something interesting out here to take my mind off it."

"Too bad that you just missed the most interesting thing that's happened this century, then."

"Oh?" Listening to him talk was better than thinking about the dark. That nightmare still felt all too real.

"Yeah, a delegation of goldens showed up to talk to the Elders. I don't think that's *ever* happened before."

A chill ran down my spine, and I felt myself hackling. "Goldens? From where? They have a lot of different clans, you know—they're not like us."

"Um. I don't know for sure, but a lot of them were wearing clerical stuff—you know, those jewel things. And one of them was really, really old. Oh, look, I think they're coming out."

There were indeed goldens coming out of the temple, and they didn't look happy. Four youngish ones, and one really old—

Suddenly, I felt like I'd swallowed an ice-coated boulder. Because I knew that elderly golden. He'd figured in my nightmares. The Supreme Elder of the temple of Vrabazard. Murdering bastard.

I felt a growl building in my throat. If he was here, I was willing to bet that the nightmare hadn't been just a nightmare. More like a prophecy. A warning from Valwin, even. The goldens were coming for Galveyra, and I had to find some way to stop them.

Ideas flashed through my brain. Take this to the Council of Elders, that was the obvious thing to do . . . but why should they listen to me? I was just one young dragon among dozens. I'd never shown any prophetic talent or aptitude for the priesthood. They'd think my nightmare had just been a nightmare. Hell, they might even accuse me of lying to get attention.

And really, even if I somehow managed to convince them that the threat was real, what could they do? They wouldn't even consider fighting, I knew that. Evacuate the area . . . but the goldens would hunt us down, sooner or later. And Galveyra still had to be safeguarded.

But who else could I reach out to for help? As my mind scrabbled frantically, one name appeared. One person who had figured prominently in that nightmare. He had to have been there for a reason.

I swallowed, hard. I was going to have to betray everything I'd been raised to believe. But something inside me knew that this was the only way.

At least I had a choice of hells this time. I could survive inside the nightmare if this sunny place still existed, even if I was forbidden to visit it.

Or at least, I thought I could.

Chapter 1 (Gaav)

I was staring at the bottom of a beer mug and thinking about the state of affairs in the north when the entire room suddenly went silent, and I sensed something unusual on the astral. Someone who wasn't one of my minions had just entered what I'd *thought* was a secure location, unknown to even that sneaky spying little pet cone of Zelas'.

I looked up slowly on the physical. No point in showing I was worried. Especially when I was surrounded by a pack of dregs like my current selection of followers. They'd sniff out any hint of weakness, and find some way of turning on me. I could only control them as long as they thought I was stronger than they were. Hell, half of them weren't even my spawn.

A figure was making its way up the aisle between my throne and the door. With dark, feathered wings and a feathery-scaly tail sticking out of a human-looking body, not to mention the massive bright shadow he threw on the astral, there was no mistaking him for anything but an ancient dragon, but what the fuck was one of them doing here? And how had he known how to get in?

He stopped about ten feet away from me and dropped to one knee, wings fanning out to either side with unexpected grace. He didn't say anything. Waiting to be acknowledged?

I took my time looking him over. Male. Young. He wasn't wearing a shirt, probably to allow for the wings, and the muscles of his torso looked well-toned. Aqua hair, loose and tumbling down his back until it almost touched the floor. And despite having knelt, he was looking straight at me with fiery golden eyes. That told me a couple of things, even without putting in the effort needed to sort out his emotions from everything else floating around the room: he was a fighter, and while he might respect me, he wasn't at all subservient.

A fighter. The thought of an ancient dragon *fighting* should have been ludicrous, but this one . . . It wasn't just in his eyes, but in the way he held himself, ready and wary but not nervous or overly tense. He'd had some kind of training from somewhere.

"I get the feeling you didn't just stumble in here by accident," I said when I figured I'd let the silence stretch on long enough. "You've got ten minutes to explain what you want." Normally, I wouldn't have given him that much time, but I was curious.

"Thank you, Gaav-sama." So he knew exactly who I was, and where he was. Well, I'd kind of figured. His next words weren't something I'd anticipated, though. "I came here to ask for your help."

My eyebrows involuntarily went straight for my hairline. A dragon asking for *my* help? What the *fuck* was going on here? I might not be pursuing Ruby-Eye's agenda anymore, but I was still a Mazoku and a Dark Lord. Helping dragons wasn't exactly something I was known for.

"With what?" I asked bluntly. "And why the fuck should I do it?"

"I have a bunch of golden dragons that I want dead," the young ancient dragon said, and I felt my eyebrows jump again. Infighting among the forces of "good". It wasn't the first time I'd seen it happen, but it wasn't common, either. "As for repaying you . . . other than the pleasure of a good fight, the only thing I have to offer you is . . . myself. My service. For the rest of my life."

It was the fourth time he'd surprised me so far. Or maybe this counted as two times. Mentioning *the pleasure of a good fight* meant that he knew more about me than I'd suspected. And offering to serve me . . . Did he know just how tempting an offer that was? Ancient dragons were the strongest of their kind, on a par with higher-level Mazoku. Given my circumstances, any strong follower was worth one hell of a lot to me.

And yet . . . how did he know? The dragons in this part of the world shouldn't have any record of what had happened to me. Especially not the ancient dragons, who had sat out the Kouma War in their remote little aerie.

I studied him again, this time reaching out on the astral to taste his emotions. He'd notice, even if he couldn't pinpoint exactly what I was doing, but I *wanted* him noticing.

Determination. Worry. That was at the surface. Coiled lower down I found *fear* and *rage* and *hatred* . . . but none of it was aimed at me. And . . . what was that? *Longing* and . . . subtle flavour . . . *nostalgia*? Those *were* aimed at me. What the fucking fuck? The more attention I paid to this dragon, the less sense he seemed to make.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Val."

Well, that was short enough to be convenient to call in an emergency. "Come here."

Val obediently rose to his feet and began to walk forward with a crisp stride. He climbed the three steps below my throne and stopped within arm's reach—mine, not his.

I grabbed him by the neck. He didn't try to dodge, just watching me with those burning golden eyes.

"What if I told you I think you're a liar?" I asked with a smirk. "*None* of what you've said explains how you knew where to find this place, much less how you managed to get inside."

"Everything I've said so far is true," Val said. "You never asked about the 'how' part. And it's complicated."

I snorted. "It's always complicated. Simplify it."

"Someone dropped a prophetic dream covering several centuries of time into my head. The location of this place was included."

"'Someone' who?"

"I have no idea. The possibilities I might be able to justify are Valwin, Vrabazard, the Lord of Nightmares . . . or you, Gaav-sama."

"*Me?*" Now, how the fuck was I supposed to take that?

Val shrugged. "You figured prominently in that dream. If it was a dream."

I put some pressure on his throat. A warning. I expected him to start thrashing. Instead, he stood and took it, although his hands balled into fists, and I felt his throat work as he swallowed. He never took his eyes off my face.

Fine. *Let's push things a bit.* "You carry yourself like you know how to fight, but ancient dragons don't. Who trained you?"

"You did. In the dream."

He didn't taste like deception. He didn't taste crazy, either.

"I'll open my memory to you, if you like."

Now, that just about floored me. Sure, I could go rummaging around in someone's head if I really wanted to—I was powerful enough to be considered a god, after all—but there was no way I could make the process pleasant for the person on the receiving end. Val would be able to feel me doing it, and it would hurt. Weak-willed people could be driven crazy that way. Which is why most Mazoku don't do it. It amounts to turning a perfectly good mortal into spoiled food.

"And yes, I know I'll end up feeling like a cored apple if I let you do that," Val added. "But my people's lives are at stake."

I thought about it for a bit. My silence didn't make him antsy either.

He thought he knew me. Everything I'd done so far had pretty clearly been within his expectations. And I didn't know how to break that certainty of his. Doing something out of character would just have made me feel fucking stupid.

"If I trained you, then you know how to fight," I said, with a lazy smirk.

"Yes."

"Prove it." Fighting styles were better than fingerprints, as far as I was concerned. Any fighter worth their salt both has a distinct style of their own, and bears marks of their teachers' styles. If I fought this young dragon, I'd know if he carried my imprint. If he did, that was another point in favour of that preposterous story of his. I mean, I knew *I* hadn't sent him any fucking dream, and it didn't make sense for Valwin or Vrabazard to send him one with me in it. As for the Golden One . . . Well, She's always kept Her own counsel. Just because I couldn't see why She'd want to give me a dragon didn't mean that *She* wouldn't be able to come up with a reason.

"Certainly. You'll have to loan me a weapon, though, unless you want to go at it bare-handed."

"We'll find you something." If nothing else, this dragon had balls the size of a dimos' head. I was starting to like him.

I stood up and punched us through folded space to the practice arena I sometimes used to train the lesser Mazoku. The abrupt translocation didn't seem to bother him either. I let go of his neck and gestured toward the racks of weapons at one end of the room.

He strode over and circled the lot once, moving neither fast nor slowly. I expected him to go for the double rack of swords, or maybe the axes, but he ignored them both after his first glance and turned to the rack of spears. There he picked up a couple and tested them for length and balance, making it clear that he knew what he was doing. Someone who's never held a spear before usually thinks it's only a tool for stabbing, but Val took practice *swings*, not practice pokes, spinning the shafts and sending the spearheads humming through the air.

In the end, he settled on a double-ended lance, picking it up with an odd little smile on his face and handling it as though he'd been using one all his life. Then he turned to face me.

"I'm ready, Gaav-sama," he said.

I drew my sword—which hadn't been there a few seconds ago. Another test. Val didn't seem to see the weapon's sudden presence as anything unusual, though. Instead, he planted his feet and shifted his grip on the lance slightly. It was a balanced stance, ready to attack or defend.

He was grinning rather more widely now than he had been when he picked up the lance. I tasted his emotions and found a subtle flavour: anticipation. He was expecting to enjoy this. And I was starting to think that I might, too.

I aimed a lazy cut at his head, and wasn't surprised when he blocked it, then countered low, slashing at my knees with the lance's secondary blade. I dodged to the left and aimed a significantly less lazy thrust at his shoulder. He jumped back, shifted his grip, and used the greater reach of the lance to take another swing at me.

There was a *clang!* as our weapons met again, and I pushed, straining against him for a moment. Val shifted his feet, trying to get me to push too hard and overbalance, but I knew better.

His weakness, against me if no one else, was likely to be in a short-range contest of pure strength. He was agile and dragon-strong and his longer weapon would normally have given him an advantage, but I was just as fast, with longer arms and more muscle. Get him in a corps-a-corps, and I should be able to overpower him easily.

That wouldn't have been any fun, though. So instead, I upped the tempo, making quick darting strikes high-low-left-right-low . . . Val parried each one, but also ended up taking half a step back.

Fair enough. Let's see what he would do if I left him an opening. Just a little one, the first time, a spot low on my left not covered as I swung. Would he spot the gap? If he did, would he take advantage of it, or would he know it was a trap and not take the risk?

Well, he did spot it, I was sure of that from the way his eyes narrowed . . . but he didn't take it. Instead, he swung left and high as hard as he could, trying to push my sword out of line. If I'd been a mortal, he might well have succeeded. Since I wasn't that stupid, I disengaged and stepped back.

Val gave me a feral grin and drove forward, using his wings to aid his charge and upping the speed another notch by his own choice. He knew how to use the lance's backswing to come around for a second attack, too. I turned every blow, but he came much closer than I'd expected a couple of times.

Well, then. I boosted a speed another notch, to the point where most mortals would only have been able to see my actions as a blur, and bludgeoned him with attacks for a solid minute. I made glancing contact with the flat of my sword at one point, and he was forced to back up several steps, but I did him no real damage. He was breathing hard, but also still grinning, and when I let up for half a second, he launched straight into an attack. Fucking crazy dragon.

So he did have the basics . . . but no Mazoku fights using only the basics. Not even me, and I'm considered almost ridiculously straightforward by the standards of Ruby-Eye's children.

The next time he came at me, I flicked my hand and sent him tumbling. Or tried to. Dragons weren't without power themselves, and Val seemed to have a knack for using his fluidly. He stabilized himself and got both feet back on the ground.

But I had a lot more tricks than that.

My next attack came at him from both the physical and the astral, and this time he wasn't able to dodge completely. A whip of red fire left a line across his upper left arm, and I pinked the outside of his thigh with my sword. He almost got his tail around my ankle, though. He really was pretty good, and his moves . . . well, I might have trained him. His patterns, to the extent he had any, had a familiar basis, but it would have been easier to tell for certain that they were based on mine if he'd been using a sword.

I smirked. "Playtime's over," I said, and launched myself at him with my full Mazoku speed. He still managed to parry three of my strikes (one with his tail) before I found a good enough opening to slam my fist into the side of his head and send him reeling back. I knocked the lance from his hands, and it clattered across the floor and slid into a corner. Then my blade was at his throat.

"You're good enough to be useful, anyway," I said. Good enough to beat most mid-level Mazoku even with the disadvantage in speed.

"Thank you, Gaav-sama." It had only been a few minutes, but he'd worked up a fair sweat. Poor physical conditioning. Well, enough exercise would cure that.

"Put that away." I gestured at the practice lance. It was good enough for testing him, but if I kept him I'd get him a better weapon. Was I going to keep him? He still might represent a trap. I could see Zelas picking up an egg somewhere, then taking the necessary centuries to raise and train and shape the creature that hatched from it. She understood mortals well enough to be able to pull that off. She was also subtle enough that she might want to trick me out into the open even though she knew where I was hiding.

But . . . Well. I *liked* this crazy, cocky little dragon, with his burning eyes and vicious grin. Still, there were pieces missing from his story.

"Why do you think killing a bunch of golden dragons is going to save your people?"

Val's hand checked in mid-motion for half a second as he was returning the lance to the rack. "What do you know about us?"

A lot, actually, but I wasn't entirely sure which pieces mattered here. "You're pacifists—although if you're a typical ancient, your clan is doing a piss-poor job at that. During the Shinma War, your ancestors decided that participating in the fighting would destabilize the world too much and isolated themselves in a mountain valley at the ass-end of nowhere, which is how they managed to survive when Ceiphied and Ruby-Eye collaborated to blow the Sleeping Dragon Continent to shit." The ancient dragons were rumoured to have one of the Darkstar Weapons, but I'd never bothered to check up on that. To get the full mileage out of one of those, you need a source of holy power *and* a source of dark power *and* a neutral mediator, and it's just a pain in the ass to get all of those together. Without all three, though, the Darkstar Weapons are just slightly better than the average magic sword. "You're the first one of your kind I've run into in a couple of thousand years," I added.

"Well, there's a very senior priest of the Firelord among the goldens who's heard that we're sitting on a weapon that could upset the balance between the Dragon Gods and the Dark Lords. He wants to see it used according to his directions." Val scowled. "The Elders won't give it to him, of course, so he's going to take it, and try his best not to leave any witnesses behind. If you believe my dream."

The story hung together, but I couldn't help but feel there was something missing. Still . . . "You realize that you're going to have to open whatever protections your clan has around their valley to let me and my followers in." I *could* tear apart whatever they had, but exerting enough force to break through a barrier that a bunch of dragons had been carefully tending for centuries would attract unwanted attention.

"I know. That isn't a problem. I know where some of the ward emplacements are located. I should only need to mess up one."

"And one other thing," I said, watching him carefully. "You're of no use to me if you can fight, but not kill."

There was that razor-edged grin again. "And you want to be sure you'll be getting your money's worth before committing to the transaction. Fair enough. What do you want me to do?"

Chapter 2 (Gaav)

Val pulled back from the edge of the roof. "Okay, I've got him. Any particular preference about *how* I kill him, or should I just jump down and cut his throat?"

I shrugged. "Whatever you like. I don't have anything really *personal* against him—he's just in the way."

Which was part of the test, of course. I'd just about come right out and told him that the middle-aged man planting tulip bulbs in the garden below us—fucking weird hobby in my opinion, but then what did I know about that kind of shit?—was, if not *innocent* exactly, also not guilty of anything deserving execution. That I wanted him to kill someone who hadn't done anything particularly wrong.

I'd expected him to renege, or to go off on some spiel about right and wrong. But once again, I'd underestimated him.

"What I meant was, is it okay if I get seen? Do you want it too look like an accident? Does it matter if people find out you were involved?"

His expression and the flavour of his emotions told me that these were genuine questions, not attempts to stall.

I shrugged. "Without any obvious links back to me would be better, but it doesn't need to look like an accident, or be hidden in any way. He's got plenty of enemies other than me."

"Right. Slit throat it is, then." He muttered something under his breath, and fog began to form over the garden. At the same time, his right arm and hand scaled over, and talons sprouted from his fingertips. "I'll be right back," he added, and jumped down.

I extended my senses to watch him through the fog—I couldn't exactly *see* him that way, but it was good enough to get some idea of what he was doing. Stalking forward as the middle-aged man grumbled something about the sudden shift in the weather. Val put his hand over the stranger's mouth and drew a claw across his throat, then continued to hold him during his death struggles so that he couldn't make too much noise and attract the attention of the household. When the body stopped thrashing, he laid in on the ground beside the tulip bulbs and leapt back to the roof.

He stood in front of me with his arm and shoulder painted with blood, and drawled, "Mission accomplished, Gaav-sama. Hope you don't mind if I take a bath after this."

This dragon kept confounding my expectations. Normally it takes months or years of training to get a mortal to be willing to kill other mortals while not under the influence of an emotional frenzy—a fucking nuisance when you're trying to put an army together. Val, however, already had the callous cold-bloodedness of an experienced assassin. Normally, for a sane mortal, that took a long time and a lot of kills to develop. But he still didn't taste crazy. There was a wispy hint of regret in him, but there had never been any hesitation.

Either he really had been trained by me, or someone had trained him up on purpose to mess with my head. I couldn't see any other possibility anymore. And if there was any chance he was telling the truth . . . then I wanted to keep him. He was just too perfect to let go.

I yanked him through a fold in space, back to my current base, without saying anything to warn him, but that didn't seem to bother Val any more than killing a stranger had. He glanced around to figure out where we had landed (which was a hallway rather than the main throne room), nodded to himself, and took a couple of steps toward the bath. One more little piece of evidence in favour of his "prophetic dream"—he knew exactly where he was and how this place was laid out. No spy could have told him, because I didn't allow even my minions into the area I'd created to tend the needs of the disgusting mortal body Ragraia had saddled me with.

"Wait," I said, and he immediately stopped and turned to face me. Alert, watchful, and waiting for orders. And slightly irritated. It didn't show on his face, but I could taste it. He was respectful, but not fearful, despite knowing who and what I was. It was . . . refreshing. Mazoku are always afraid of those stronger than them. Even me, although I've had a lot of practice hiding it.

"We might as well formally cement the agreement now," I said, and loosened my hold on my power a little, letting a hint of my true self show through from the astral. "You probably know what it means to make a deal with a Mazoku. You're not fucking stupid, as far as I can tell."

Val smiled crookedly. "You'll hold to the letter of whatever promises you make, and cement them with magic. I shouldn't expect you to go beyond the letter, or for your words to bind any of your minions unless you want them to. Since this is a contract of servitude on my part, you're probably going to want to mark me, as well. Just don't do it in a way I can't hide, or I might not be able to get back into the aerie to let you in."

"Smart little dragon. Give me your hands."

He held them out. The right one still had scales and talons and was sticky with blood, and both were a bit long for the size of his human body, but sinewy and strong. I draped my wings over his shoulders without pulling them fully out of the astral, trapping us both in a sort of semitransparent cocoon.

"These are the terms of the contract," I said. "You will serve me, Val of the ancient dragons, and in return, I will assist you in destroying those you presently consider your enemies." I had to phrase that carefully—we hadn't discussed my obligations regarding any enemies he might acquire in the future. "Do you accept?"

"Yes, Gaav-sama."

I reached out with my power. His dragon power reacted violently to the touch of something so opposed to it, but he controlled it, visibly gritting his teeth as he damped down the reflexive rejection. His breath hissed through those gritted teeth as I laid the lightest shadow of red deep inside his astral form. His spirit would form a protective layer around it eventually, but in the meanwhile, it was going to ache.

"There," I said. "It should be well-enough hidden that it won't be found without a close inspection on the astral." Dragons did have some astral sensitivity, but they'd need to concentrate to do that kind of detailed inspection, and I doubted they'd bother. Why would they? They didn't know about any of this.

I let go of his hands and burned the blood residue off mine with a flick of power. Val was breathing hard, and even sweatier than he had been after our sparring match.

"Now I *really* need a bath," he said wryly.

"Go, then. You obviously know where it is."

The great hall had mostly cleared by the time I got back. There were a few small knots of lesser Mazoku huddled together in the far corners, and Raltaak was right where I'd left him, sipping slowly at his beer and fiddling with some kind of papers. My Priest wasn't the greatest fighter I'd ever spawned, but I'd put everything I knew about managing resources into him, making him the ultimate quartermaster. It's a role that anyone who's never tried to run an army underestimates the importance of.

He looked up at me as I sat down and propped my chin on my elbow. "Gaav-sama, may I ask . . . are you keeping that dragon? And are we going to have to feed it?" He tasted more perplexed than anything. And a little irritated, probably because he'd just realized that he didn't know what dragons ate.

I snorted. "Yes, I'm keeping the dragon. Don't worry about feeding him—a mature dragon eats less than an adult human. They draw most of their nourishment from the astral." Although technically they ate positive feelings, which meant that I might have to do some fancy energy transformations if Val was going to stay here for long periods.

Did I want him staying here for long periods? I was going to have to think about how I was going to use him, once I'd upheld my end of our bargain. Mazoku are like an army, almost: we belong to a rigid, self-reinforcing hierarchy based on power levels and who spawned whom. Val . . . didn't seem like a rigid-structure type to me. He'd take *my* orders, if he knew what was good for him, but I couldn't see him taking anyone else's. Or being much of a commander himself. He'd be better as an independent agent. Or maybe watching my back, when I needed someone for that.

. . . When the fuck had I started to trust him that much?

It was those eyes, burning like gold fire. And the knowledge that he was just as much of an outcast as me. An ancient dragon who knew how to fight. A Mazoku with a mortal soul. Neither of us fitting into the places the universe designated for us. Val's people hadn't disowned him yet, but it was just a matter of time. Especially now that he'd made a bargain with me.

He could still be a fake sent by Zelas. Maybe. But I very much wanted him not to be.

"Gaav-sama?"

When had he gotten out of the bath? And why the fuck hadn't I noticed him approaching me? But here he was, right in front of me, aqua hair sticking damply to his bare shoulders. He'd withdrawn his wings and tail, and if not for those burning golden eyes, he would have looked perfectly human.

"What?" I growled, irritated at myself—if he'd been Zelas' slimy cone rather than a stray dragon, I might have been in quite a bit of trouble right now. My senses were getting dull, and I didn't like it. I was going to have to spend some time doing those fucking tedious perception exercises again, or I was going to turn into a human or something.

"I'm going to return to the aerie now, but I don't know how to get word back to you when the goldens show up."

"I'll keep an eye on you," I told him—with a spark of my power planted in him, there was no way some lame-ass dragon ward was going to keep me from being able to do that. Besides, I'd been bored a lot lately.

There was a slight hesitation before he said, "All right. I think it should be about two or three more days—I don't remember exactly. It was a very long dream."

After he left, I wandered back into the bath—one disadvantage of not allowing anyone back there was that I had to do all of the cleaning myself. With magic, of course. There isn't a force in this universe that could make me scrub a fucking floor.

Val hadn't made that much of a mess, thankfully. The floor was dry, and there was no visible blood residue in the deep, marble-lined pool. There was a towel lying in a lump on the stone bench that ran along one wall, though. When I flicked it to dust, it left behind a faint scent of dragon musk.

I was going to have to prepare some kind of living space for him in my territory, too. Might as well put it back here somewhere. My entire headquarters was a pocket dimension I'd created a long time ago, with only the entrance tied to a specific place in the physical, so there was plenty of room. And we could share the bath, as we'd clearly done in that dream of his.

I snorted and shook my head, then went back out into the hallway to consider where I should put the door.

An hour later, I'd created three human-sized rooms and a dragon-sized cave, which would hopefully be enough. And I'd checked on Val three or four times. From what I'd seen, he was getting chewed out for leaving the aerie without permission, but no one knew where he'd gone.

I spent the next couple of days checking on him every fifteen or twenty minutes. For the most part, there didn't seem to be a lot happening, but I found myself watching him for longer and longer periods as he moved around the aerie, interacting with the other dragons. Saying good-bye, judging from the conversations I bothered to listen in on, although subtly enough that only Val and I were likely to figure out what was going on.

It was weird, just watching a mortal go about his life. I mean, most Mazoku end up observing a lot of mortals, but except for one or two eccentrics, we normally do it with a purpose, looking for weaknesses we can use to advance an agenda. I couldn't remember ever having only watched without trying to analyze before.

I didn't know how mortals could stand living such boring lives. When my consciousness had first resurfaced inside a mortal body after Ragraia had imprisoned me, the only reason I hadn't gone on a three-day rampage was that cracking open my prison had caused an explosion that pretty much leveled the entire area and caused the human I'd been stuck inside to be driven out of his fucking excuse for a mind. He'd had a girlfriend, I think, and she'd died in the mess, but I don't know for sure. I try to avoid probing those memories. They make me feel weird and uncomfortable. Like I'm living inside someone else's skin.

But I think that explosion is the main reason I never caught Dear Old Dad's peculiar brand of insanity. When a piece of him woke up inside Lei Magnus, he wasn't the same as I remembered him, and I don't mean he'd suddenly decided he liked eating orcs more than humans or something. I mean his personality had shifted, and I'm pretty sure it's because he didn't manage to tear his prison open by himself from the inside. He had to wait for his host to help him. So he ended up merging with his host, instead of shoving Lei Magnus to the back of his mind and forgetting about him.

Although if I'm honest, I can't say that spending a couple of centuries as a prisoner didn't change me. It pissed me off to a degree I hadn't previously believed possible, and I went downright incandescent when I found out that none of the others had even *tried* to find me. We spent *thousands* of fucking years looking for what was left of Ruby-Eye, dedicating all our resources to it (never mind that we came up empty until Phibby tripped over Lei Magnus), but me? I wasn't important enough for the others to send out a single brass demon.

That was when I decided that Ruby-Eye and all my brothers and sisters could go fuck themselves. I wasn't going to go crawling back to them like a fucking whipped puppy and ask to join up again. Instead, I was going to kick their asses. It helped that I'd never cared much about the Mazoku agenda anyway. So long as there's a good fight in store, I don't give a flying fuck about the reasons for it. Thing is, though, without a world to fight in, there wouldn't be much for me to do. I don't want to *rule* anything, the way so many people seem to think—I just want to make sure the world sticks around.

. . . Why had I spent the last ten minutes sitting on my throne staring into space and thinking about this shit, anyway? I turned my attention back to the scrying pane floating in front of me.

Val was sunning himself on a ledge with a good vantage point, high above the aerie. He was alone, and—judging from the way he held his wings—worried. Unsurprisingly.

There was some kind of disturbance on the valley floor. Val rose to his feet, and I could see his scales hackling as he stuck his head out for a better look.

I just zoomed my viewpoint a couple of hundred feet down, and . . . yeah, golden dragons. Having some kind of argument with a bunch of ancients.

The dried-up old stick of a priest who seemed to be in charge gestured with his foretalons, and his followers instantly mounted a coordinated attack against the ancients who were blocking their path. Screams and shouts and blood everywhere.

I stood up.

"Gather the troops," I told Raltaak.

It was showtime.

Chapter 3 (Gaav)

It took Val a little more than five minutes to reach the nearest ward emplacement and break it, starting from the moment of the first attack. His talons were bloody from ripping up the engraved rock by the time I judged space was stable enough in the area for my weaker followers to make it through.

Not that I brought everyone. Fuck, I could have killed all of the golden dragons by myself . . . but maybe not without taking out a few ancient dragons in the process. And that wouldn't endear me to my new follower. So I'd had Raltaak pick out a couple of dozen of the most level-headed troops we had, and hauled them along. That meant that space was a little tight when we popped into the cave that had contained the ex-ward, though, with twenty-seven Mazoku and an adult dragon in his native form.

"There's no time to dick around," I said. "Let's go. And remember, the *golden* dragons are our only targets. Leave the ancient dragons alone." I didn't need to explain why to them—not because all the Mazoku I'd brought were smart enough to figure it out on their own, but because they didn't need to know. Let them imagine I was trying to drive a wedge between the two species or whatever the fuck they wanted, so long as they obeyed orders.

"There are two areas we absolutely need to keep the goldens out of," Val added. "The temple should be easy to spot even for someone who's never seen it before, but I'll have to point out the hatchery once we're outside."

I grunted understanding. "Raltaak, you'll take fourteen and head to the hatchery entrance. Don't go inside unless it looks like some of the goldens got past you, though. The rest of us will go to the temple. That includes you, Val." The temple was where the most powerful dragons would be, the ones who could wipe out my weaker followers. That meant it was better that I go there in person.

"Yes, Gaav-sama," the dragon responded instantly. He ducked out of the cave without waiting for anything more, and led us out into the valley.

The valley floor had been green and grassy half an hour ago, but it was blood-spattered and turning to mud now. There were a lot of dead goats, and a couple of dead dragons, and a lot of goldens tearing into ancients who still weren't willing to fight back no matter how much damage was being done to them.

Val growled, but he kept his head. "The entrance to the hatchery is on a wide ledge halfway up that peak," he said, gesturing. "There's a statue of two hatchlings playing together in a niche beside the cave opening."

Raltaak nodded, and looked at me.

"Go," I told him. He went, and most of the lesser Mazoku vanished with him. Of the ones he'd left behind, I knew three—Kanzel, Mazenda, and Seigram, whom I'd recently poached from Zelas. The others hadn't distinguished themselves to me, although I recognized the one

whose physical projection looked like an ugly mask with arms and legs as the idiot who used subordinate projections to cheat at card games.

I considered the scene in the valley for a moment. Val's tail lashed, and he ground his teeth. Right on the edge of an explosion, I judged, but still trusting me.

"Kanzel, Mazenda," I said. "Each of you take four of these idiots—" I gestured at the minor Mazoku whose names I didn't remember. "—and pick someone to attack. Maximum chaos and confusion. Val and I and Seigram will go straight up the center." Mostly because I didn't entirely trust either of them yet and wanted them where I could watch them.

"Yes, Gaav-sama." The two mid-ranked Mazoku spoke nearly in unison, and picked their followers by pointing. Giant-mask went with Mazenda.

Once they were gone, I stretched quickly into my true form, since it's easier to fight dragons when you're built on the same massive scale they are.

"Keep up," I warned Seigram and Val. Then I plunged forward. Straight into a group of three goldens who were poking holes in an ancient with spears. It was almost comical, since ancient dragons are quite a bit larger than goldens, but the stupid fucker was curled up in a little knot on the ground and not even trying to fight back.

I grabbed one of the goldens by the back of the neck and bit down, severing his spinal cord, and at the same time grabbed another one's spear and stuck it through his chest. I'm not sure they even felt it before dropping dead.

Val knocked the third golden over and disemboweled him with his rear talons. Seigram hadn't even had the chance to attack anything.

We made another short rush forward to the next grouping. I'd half-expected Val to lag behind and try to help the injured ancient, but once again he wasn't that stupid—he recognized that the other ancients' best chance of survival was linked to our ability to get rid of the goldens as quickly as possible. *I really should stop underestimating him.*

I broke a golden's spine just by charging into him, and breathed in the face of another.

"*Mazoku!*" A thin scream finally went up. "*There are Mazoku here!*"

Seigram needed three blasts to take out that particular dragon. I watched him with one head while using another to lift a particularly small golden up by the nape and shake him to death. And with my third set of eyes, I was watching Val, who so far hadn't screwed up once. It probably helped that the goldens were being dainty little pricks and insisting on using only their spears and breath weapons to attack, and not talons or teeth or bodyweight. The moment Val or I batted a spear out of the way and managed to close with one of those goldens, they were dead. How the fuck had they survived the Kouma War like this?

Some mortals—dragons and priests tend to be especially bad—don't like to get up close and personal with their violence. They think that if they don't actually taste the blood of the person they're killing, or touch dying skin, it somehow makes their killing less wrong. Stupid

fuckers. Dead is dead. The only thing you can change about how you kill someone is whether it's quick, or long and drawn-out.

I tend to go for quick, unless I've got a specific reason not to. Like needing lunch. But killing off enemies quickly is more efficient. And safer. They can't be rescued at the eleventh hour if their brains are already splattered all over the ground. I've seen a lot of perfectly good plots get ruined by that kind of shit.

And besides, torturing helpless enemies is *boring*. I want something that can fight back.

I tail-whipped a golden across the face and tore his throat out, and suddenly there were no more enemies within immediate reach. I was in a semi-cleared space right in front of the temple, which had a second ward around it. To my left, the wall curved away into the distance. To my right was the main temple entrance, and a bunch of goldens, including their decrepit old leader, were trying to get through the ward.

Val got there first, but this knot of goldens was larger than the ones we'd been dealing with so far, and there were more approaching as they left the rest of the valley floor to swarm the temple. I shook my center head and went to help him.

The old geezer had switched from trying to break the ward-dome to pushing himself up against it for safety, with a double row of younger dragons in front of him. I could have popped the ward like a soap bubble, but that would have meant letting the goldens inside the temple. Fuck that.

"Maryuu-oh!" the old golden said.

I turned my left head to face him, and smirked. "Always nice to be recognized."

"What are you doing here?!"

"I was invited. Funny, isn't it? That it's a bunch of dragons who are the ones trespassing on dragon territory?" I slammed a stray golden down and ripped his throat out with my talons. Some of the blood sprayed onto the front row of guards. A number of them shuddered, looking at me with wide eyes. The handful of ancient dragons watching from behind the barrier wore similar expressions. "If you want to save the rest of your dupes, you can get the fuck out of here right now, and never come back. Otherwise, well, you might take out a few of my minor minions, but there's no way you can kill me or my Priest. Or even hurt us very much."

"Are the ancient dragons under your protection, then?"

I snorted. "Let's just say that having what they're guarding being kept quietly in the middle of nowhere suits my purposes better than it falling into your talons. I don't *think* you could do much with it, but why take the chance?" I was banking on whatever was inside that temple, behind the massive ward, being one of the Darkstar Weapons as the rumours suggested.

The old golden snarled, lips drawing back from his worn, yellowed teeth. "How *dare* you?!"

"You seem to have made a mistake," I said, smirking. "I'm a god. You're a mortal. I have no agreements with you, so I can do whatever the fuck I want."

"You do have an agreement with me, though," Val said, positioning himself at my side. He was liberally splashed with blood, talons visibly coated with it, and everyone except me was staring at him. "And I want that bastard dead. He's the cause of all this."

"Not a problem," I said. "Take out the guards nearest you. I'll handle the others."

"Yes, Gaav-sama."

"*Wait!*" the old golden said, paling under his scales. "If we leave, and never come back—"

Now Val was the one who snarled, revealing sharp white fangs streaked with blood. "The others can leave. Not you, you self-righteous bastard. Never you. Egg-smasher. Hatchling-murderer. You're going to pay for this with your life."

Egg-smasher is actually one of the worst things one dragon can call another. They don't lay many eggs, and they take each one really seriously.

The other goldens didn't seem to know what to think. Some froze. Some backed off—I let those go. And some were giving their own Elder odd looks.

I snorted. "Don't tell me you stupid fuckers didn't realize what you were doing here. I don't care what shit about the Greater Good this asshole shoved down your throats. Murder is murder. At least we Mazoku give things their proper names." Yeah, several of them looked nice and sick, and I could taste the guilt and the self-disgust starting to overwhelm the delicious flavour of bloodlust. Well, it hardly mattered. I'd already eaten plenty today. It was just that I . . . somehow, I wanted to make them understand. What they were doing. Why Val was so pissed off at them.

Fucked if I knew why that mattered to me, though. It certainly went beyond the bargain I'd made with Val. I'd told him I would destroy the goldens, not that I'd get his revenge for him by getting through their thick skulls exactly what it was that they'd done wrong. But . . . well. The crazy young dragon seemed to be getting under my skin without even trying to.

What if his dreams really had been sent by the Golden One? What if, instead of a trap or a danger, he was a *gift*? Fucking unbelievable idea, but internally consistent. Still, what was I supposed to do with a gift-wrapped dragon?

Think about it later, I told myself. "If you want us to let you leave in one piece, put down your spears and back off," I ordered the goldens. "Go stand over there, or something." I pointed with my wing. "You've got one minute. After that, I take care of anyone who's still armed or standing too close."

I could just have killed them all, of course—Xellos had once slaughtered double this number of goldens with a wave of his hand—but I don't derive any pleasure from that kind of pest removal, and these idiots weren't even nearly up to my weight grade. I'd been having a fun time fighting them so far because I'd been doing everything on the physical. Now that they'd

realized who I was, they were too scared to be nearly as interesting. Although you'd think they would have figured it out before—how many red three-headed dragons are there in the world? Stupid fuckers.

Watching them scramble for the spot I'd indicated was a bit entertaining, though. They were coming close to climbing over each other, scuttling and stumbling and sometimes crashing. I snorted and let my smirk widen. A few of them stayed where they were for a few seconds, then realized everyone else was moving and rushed after them, often plowing into the quicker goldens' tails.

As for the dragons who were staying in place, well, Val was grinning and tasted viciously pleased, the golden Elder looked pissed and tasted scared, and the ancients watching us from inside the ward had solemn expressions, with an emotional flavour too subtle and complex for me to pick out from the anger and pain and guilt and fear swirling all around me.

I threw up a ward of my own, separating the three of us—Val and me and the golden Elder—from the subordinate goldens.

"He's all yours," I told the young ancient.

"Thank you, Gaav-sama." He adjusted his position, bracing his feet a bit more widely. Then he sprang forward.

The old golden squared his stance and met the charge of the larger, younger dragon. It did do him a little bit of good in that Val didn't manage to bowl him over, but he ended up squished against the temple-ward in what looked like a pretty fucking uncomfortable position. But he reared up and wrestled as though his life depended on it . . . which it did. I gritted my teeth as he got his left foreleg loose and bloodied Val with his talons. If the young ancient got torn to pieces, then this would end up being one of the least satisfactory bargains I'd ever entered into. But it wouldn't be a good idea for me to interrupt before he was in serious trouble. He'd be a lot happier, and thus a much better investment, if he got some closure out of this. Which meant he had to kill the geezer himself.

Val had no compunctions about using his teeth in a fight. He bit down on the old golden's shoulder and tore a chunk off, sending a spray of blood arcing across the ward. One of the other ancients, who would have been splattered if the ward hadn't been in the way, took a half-step back as Val spat out the piece of dragonflesh.

The golden sent a Laser Breath at Val's face, but the younger dragon spotted it in time and leaned to one side. I flicked my wing to deflect the stray shot away from any of Val's relatives who might have been in the line of fire.

They brought their rear talons to bear simultaneously, falling over and rolling on the ground. Val had deep gouges in his soft belly scales, but he tore the golden's scales right off, revealing bloody meat, and then digging deeper until he hooked an atrophied rope of bowel and shredded it. The old golden howled in agony and thrashed, talons reaching for Val's eyes . . . but an ancient dragon's neck was longer than a golden's foreleg. Val responded by spitting a blast from his breath weapon directly in the other dragon's face, searing a red line along his muzzle and up over one eye.

The golden roared with pain and tried to bring his hind legs up again, but he was getting weaker from injuries and blood loss, and Val hadn't been seriously hurt yet. The young ancient shoved his tail brutally into the slash on the older dragon's stomach and hooked out some more guts to shred. The golden coughed blood and sagged back against the ground—had Val found a lung?

The young ancient rocked back on his heels, coming half-upright in preparation for some final strike.

The golden Elder coughed again, and said, "We would have ended this foolish combat between the world and the Mazoku race. Now it will continue. You have just caused millions of deaths."

Val shook his head. "You would never have gotten your talons on Galveyra, you self-righteous prick. You would have killed every one of my people for *nothing*, only for what you sought to end up in the hands of the Beast-Priest one day. And what disgusts me the most is that you would still have believed you were right."

He reached down and slashed twice across the other dragon's throat, destroying the scales and releasing a river of blood, and the Elder's remaining eye went glassy with death.

So the violent part was over. For now.

Chapter 4 (Gaav)

"Val, son of Ran. Come forward."

I'd been a bit surprised when the Elders of the ancient dragons had invited me to watch Val's trial without my having to ask. I mean, pacifists or no, they were still dragons, and they still hated Mazoku. Maybe I'd made an impression on them by saving their lives, doing their dirty work, and not asking for anything more than Val and I had already agreed to in return. I was doubly surprised that they'd started this idiocy almost immediately after the goldens have left, waiting only long enough to get the worst wounded patched up.

Val made his way forward into the circle of dragons that had formed outside the temple. He still had liberal splashes of blood across his hide, but then so did everyone else.

"You have violated our most sacred laws," said the centermost of the three Elders, who was kind of young for the post—grey was only just starting to frost his scales. "You have fought and you have killed. And you have invited Mazoku into our aerie. What have you to say for yourself?"

Val raised his head high. "That I did what I did of my own will, after deep consideration, and with full knowledge of the consequences. I ask no mercy from you. I will leave this place and never return . . . but at least I'll do it knowing that you're still here to disapprove of me. That was all that ever mattered to me."

A complex set of emotional flavours washed around the circle of dragons: anger, grief, regret, and quite a bit of self-righteous smugness. I snorted, because I had no fucking clue why Val even cared about these idiots.

"Very well. Hear the ruling of the Council of Elders: Val son of Ran is dead to us. He is a ghost, and less than a ghost. None may speak to him. None may touch him. None may have commerce with him. He is dead." Slowly, deliberately, the Elder turned his back on Val, and the other two Elders, flanking him, followed suit. It ran around the circle in an irregular wave, until I was the only one facing inward, looking at the young dragon who had single-handedly saved all the scaly asses his relatives were currently displaying.

Val stared at their tails, looking slightly dazed, until I spoke. "Coming, little dragon?"

He smiled in a sort of quirky, crooked way. "Of course." His tail flowed gracefully behind him as he turned and followed me away from the circle.

I could have teleported us straight out of the valley, but instead we walked. I wasn't sure whether it was kind or cruel to give him that last look around. Fuck, I wasn't sure if Val knew either, but he went slowly and craned his neck around a lot, although he never said anything.

We were right at the mouth of the valley when our quiet amble was interrupted by a mass of yellow falling from the sky. Nine golden dragons, who had either been left behind, or had stayed behind on purpose, dropping toward us with spears extended.

Four of them didn't make it to the ground. I mean, they were perfectly exposed targets for our breath weapons, so why the fuck would we *not* knock them out of the sky? The charred remains hit the ground before the rest of the goldens, and Val used them as cover to dodge out of the way, since all the spears were aimed at him. I guess they'd figured out that he was the only one here who was mortal enough to be taken out with conventional weapons.

I swatted one of those goldens to the ground with my talons and gutted him, ignoring the screams. Stupid fuckers. They looked pretty young. Well, they weren't going to live to get any older.

I took another golden's little toy pigsticker away and broke it over the back of his neck, squishing the nerve bundle there. He went down like the five-ton lump of meat he was. Might have been dead, might just have been out cold and paralyzed. I didn't care . . . but I tore his throat out to make sure he wouldn't get up again.

The other three goldens were still attacking Val and ignoring me. It was pissing me off a bit, so I grabbed one by the tail and swung him around like a sack of potatoes. He crashed down hard, and I cut his throat almost in passing. Meanwhile, Val had blinded one of the other two with his wingtip and torn his talons across the other's face. The disfigured dragon screamed, and Val cut his throat to shut him up.

That left one, who was starting to taste pretty panicky, not to mention horrified. He wouldn't be any fun to fight in that state, so I lashed out with my power for the first time since they'd dropped out of the sky at us, and sliced him in . . . well, it was closer to two thirds/one third than halves. He didn't even get a chance to scream. Just as well, 'cause my ears were still ringing from the last one.

"Let's go home and get cleaned up," Val said. He looked tired.

Me, I was more startled. *Home* was . . . not quite a foreign concept to me, but pretty close. I'd never thought of the pocket dimension I'd been using as a headquarters as *home* in the mortal sense. It was more like a place of business. Even if I did sleep there.

Plus, well, *I* wasn't tired. More frustrated than anything. That hadn't been much of a fight, but it *had* been enough to get my blood running hot without giving me anything to really take it out on, and I was feeling a stirring back between my hind legs. It was an infuriating problem that I'd never had before Ragraia had cursed me with a physical body.

"Fine, little dragon. Let's go . . . home." I yanked him through a fold in space, hopefully before he could realize that I'd needed to force the word out. *Why do I care what a subordinate thinks of me?* I wondered in the split second before we popped out again, in the dragon-sized cavern I'd created for him. Which was a bit of a tight fit with both of us in there—we weren't squished in or anything, but I had my flank pressed against his, and his wing brushing my shoulder. A lot more intimate than I normally got with any mortal, unless I had something to gain from it.

That only lasted a second before Val shrunk down to human dimensions, though. Well, the bath was in that size range . . . although I had a sudden urge to just lick the splashes of blood

off his skin. The firm muscles of his bare torso looked delectable . . . and there was that sensation of pleasurable-uncomfortable pressure between my legs again. *Fuck*.

I shrank down to human size before my cock could unsheath itself, and hoped that the problem would be less noticeable in this form. Or that Val wouldn't care. I knew that involuntary erections just *happened* to male mortals, so he was probably used to the idea. But I wasn't a mortal, and I was pissed off that I had less than perfect control over any part of myself. It was beyond shameful—something that just wouldn't happen to a normal Mazoku.

We walked together in silence, through the unfurnished human-scale main room of the apartment, and along the hallway to the baths. I could just have washed my hands and face—or waved my hand and made the blood disappear and been done without messing around with soap and water—but watching Val strip off his trousers to reveal more of those delectable muscles, lean legs and a nice firm ass, somehow had me fumbling at the buttons of my coat.

I finished pulling off my shirt and realized that he was watching me, with a crooked little smile on his face. He tasted . . . The flavour shot straight to that ungovernable part between my legs before I could classify it consciously as lust. And . . . appreciation? I wasn't as practiced as I might have been at sorting out the subtleties of positive emotions. It's difficult to focus on the details of how something tastes bad.

I stripped off the rest of my clothes as quickly as I could, but I already had an erection hard enough that I could have hung a coat off my dick. Another bad taste slithered through the subtleties of Val's emotions when he saw that: pleasure. I had no doubt at this point that he wanted me to jump him—was trying to *entice* me to jump him. Arrogant little dragon. Fine, then. We'd see how he liked it when I actually *did*.

I stalked toward him. Not too quickly. That would be implying he had power over me, even if it was a subtle and nebulous power. Mazoku only believed in absolute authority: if you were above someone, then you were above them in *everything*.

Val waited, still smiling, lust intensifying with each step nearer I took. When I was just outside arm's reach, he made a gesture, running one hand down his flank, and until he stopped, I couldn't take my eyes off that moving hand.

I'd learned the tactics of seduction long ago—most Mazoku do, although my nature meant that I had less opportunity to apply them than, say, Zelas—but I'd never imagined what having them used against me, while clad in a human body, would feel like. I was able to confine my squirming to the astral, but I could feel my tail tying itself into knots there.

But then, one more step and I was able to touch him, to grab his arm, pull him toward me, and kiss him with bruising force. His mouth opened under mine, giving me access. I was digging my fingers hard into his arm, and he let out a low growl and a sharp, sweet puff of anger, but he didn't try to pull back. He did nip my lower lip, and not gently, either, but did I give a flying fuck?

He gasped as I finally lifted away, and kept on staring at me even after we broke the kiss, golden eyes burning. I reached down and checked and . . . yeah, in terms of hardness, that was right up there with the one I had. Val thrust his hips forward as I palmed his erection,

making a throaty noise as his hands, flexing at his sides, suddenly sprouted talons from all ten fingertips. I felt my eyebrows twitch, and then I grinned too. Oh, this little dragon always managed to be interesting. Maybe he really *was* a gift from the Golden One.

He gave me a smirk and broke my grip on his arm with a sudden yank, running for the bathing pool at the end of the room. I wasn't ready for it, so I didn't catch him before he jumped into the water, splashing some of it onto the marble. Another thing I hadn't planned for, and my foot slipped. I turned the fall into a roll and hit the water like a cannonball.

I sorted myself out and grabbed for Val. He dodged.

"Come here," I ordered him.

There was that smirk again. "Make me."

This time, when I grabbed for his shoulder, he scored the outside of my arm with his talons. Feisty dragon. He wanted to play games? Fine, I'd play along. And I was going to win.

I needed to corner him first, so I aimed a strike at his jaw that he should instinctively dodge to the left. Perfect. Step forward, swing my fist at his gut . . . Another dodge, again to the left. Good. And now hook his ankle and lunge forward again. His instinct was to move backward, as any sane person would, but that meant he lost his balance and fell against the corner of the pool.

He reacted fast enough to break the fall with his elbows—at the cost of some bruises, no doubt—but I had him pinned now. He wasn't going to escape this corner without teleporting, and I knew he wouldn't do that. Because it would violate the implicit rules of our game.

I grabbed him by the waist and lifted him so that he was at the right height for me to grind our crotches together, and he groaned and gripped my shoulders, sinking all ten talons in. I hissed, but if anything, the pain made my blood pump even hotter. Just lift him a little higher . . . damn, when had he gotten his legs into that position? If he kicked me, it would do quite a bit of damage.

"Is this how you treat your master?" I snapped.

"I'm your servant, Gaav-sama, but I'm not your slave. Or your whore. Tell me, if I asked you to let me go right now, would you?"

An interesting question. Would I? Would it bother me if that lust of his flashed over into fear and he started to fight me for real? What did I want from him right now that I couldn't get from fucking my hand?

That fire. That was a big part of it. The burning spirit behind those golden eyes. The total lack of fear. The trust. Not easy things to break, judging from what I'd seen so far, but raping him might do it.

Fuck, was this arrogant little dragon actually *testing* me? It was enough to make me laugh! And yet . . . And yet . . .

I snorted. "If all I wanted was a warm body to vent on, I'd go find someone I didn't care about breaking. Yeah, if I thought that was what you actually wanted, I'd let you go. But that *isn't* what you want, is it?" Once again, I slipped my hand in between his thighs. His cock twitched and drooled as I teased at his balls with my fingertips.

"Of course not." Burning golden eyes, taking in my every expression as his legs relaxed and spread. "Fuck me, Gaav-sama. Before I lose my mind."

He held himself up with his grip on my shoulders while I repositioned our lower halves so that the head of my cock was at his entrance. Then he pushed himself down.

I found myself making a throaty noise of satisfaction as his body slid down over my erection. Thanks to dragon anatomical quirks designed to help with egg-laying, he was hot and slick and tight, but not ridiculously so.

He moaned as he bottomed out, and I withdrew slightly and thrust back in. The steep angle and the way he was holding onto me made larger movements difficult, so I detached his hands from my shoulders and had him lay back on the marble edge of the pool. Yeah, better. I could pound him properly like this. And I did, with his hips moving in time with mine and his cock bobbing between us like an obscene flag. Why had I ever thought that enthusiasm tasted bad? His was delicious. Even his pleasure . . . wasn't so bad.

I curled my hand around that bobbing cock, and grinned as he arched and screamed and came violently, his body squeezing tighter around mine and *fuck* that felt good and I was coming too, just like that. Into him, with his body trying to milk me dry.

Afterwards, as he lay there breathing hard and tasting sourly of contentment, I found several questions chasing each other through my head, like why the Golden One had chosen *now* to reward me, and why with him. Not that I was complaining. But there was only one of those questions that I could be bothered to ask.

"Did you dream about this, too?"

Val laughed. "Oh, yes. In a lot of different versions, and considerable detail. Enough that if I hadn't come here, I would have ended up missing you badly."

"I think you're the first person ever to turn up on my doorstep because you were horny, then," I said with a snort. *Certainly the first dragon, anyway.*

He shook his head, putting on a serious expression. "No, I wouldn't have come here if I hadn't needed and trusted you."

"I usually don't inspire trust, you know."

"I know. But that's because most people don't look deep enough to realize that you have integrity."

It was an interesting choice of words. No claims that I was a good person, just that I was consistent in some things. I could live with that.

One thing I knew for sure, though: I was keeping this dragon. No matter how crazy he was.

Epilogue (Val)

The air inside the Barrier tasted of black magic. Or maybe, I reflected as I waited by the side of the road, it was more that there was no flavour of holy magic here at all, with Ragraia dead and the other Dragon Gods shut out. I'd never been inside here before Hellmaster's death had brought the barrier down, in my dream of the reality that had never happened.

I just hoped Gaav-sama kept his promise to stay on the outside. Once I'd explained to him what had happened in my dream, he'd said he would, but I knew that it was possible for his anger and pride to override his common sense sometimes.

Hopefully, I'd be able to make sure he didn't *need* to come here. If he and Lina Inverse stayed on opposite sides of the Barrier, there should be no problem.

Footsteps on the road. I pushed myself away from the tree I'd been leaning against and took a couple of steps forward so that I could get a better look.

Yes, that was them. Short, fiery-haired sorceress, tall blonde swordsman, chimera, shrine maiden-princess, and . . . I scowled, but I'd known there was a possibility I'd need to deal with him. I'd have to be careful, though. Xellos was slippery.

"Lina Inverse," I said, stepping out into the road. Their group came to a stop.

"That's me," the sorceress admitted as her blonde escort reached for his sword. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Call me Val," I said. "As for what I want . . . why don't I buy you all lunch, and we can discuss it? The next town is just over that hill." I gestured vaguely behind me.

"Free food?" Her eyes went soft for a moment, but then she recovered herself and wiped the drool off her chin. "What's the catch?"

"Really, Lina-san, you can't be thinking of going anywhere with this scruffy person," Xellos said. "He looks very disreputable, don't you think?" His eyes opened just a sliver, giving me a glimpse of their cold, purple depths.

"The catch is that the people Xellos works for and the person I work for are currently opposed," I said seriously. "It's possible that he might even get violent."

"Oh, well, that's fine, then," Gourry said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Having Xellos follow us around has been exactly the opposite of useful," Zelgadis added.

"So long as you pay for lunch, you can annoy Xellos all you want," Lina Inverse said firmly.

"Lina-san . . ." The Beast-Priest didn't look happy, but as I understood it, he hadn't revealed his identity to them yet, and if he attacked me, they'd find out one way or the other.

Lina rolled her eyes and punched him in the arm—not gently, either. "It's a free lunch, and I don't necessarily have to believe everything he tells me. We're talking to him. Lead on, Val, or whatever your name is."

Perfect. I'd treat them to lunch at the best restaurant in town with the hundred gold I'd reserved for the purpose, and then we would have a little talk about the Giga Slave and Mazoku politics. Hopefully I'd be able to ram my point home without giving them indigestion, and get Gaav-sama out of danger.

Maybe I was crazy to be in love with a Dark Lord, but I wasn't going to lose him again.

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