



# Accounting for Drakes

## (Stand Alone Tales #21)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Abil has a tragic past, and her present is subdued. Fitting in is her dream, but executing it is a nightmare when she deals with a disgruntled guest who holds her future in his hands.

Her great-grandfather has raised Abil on Blue Station since she was ten. She was found on an unpopulated world and had been there since she was two. Her survival was a mystery that only her guardian had solved.

Her affinity for calculation put her in administration as soon as she was old enough, and as long as she remembered to act human, she got along fine. Being raised by a non-verbal drake had been challenging, but language and social skills hadn't been on the agenda.

Going into a scenario for a guest in distress introduces her to a rude drake who has to about face when the station master introduces him to some facts.

Meeting him has caused an energy surge, and Abil heads for an airlock to take flight for the first time. As she becomes a space-faring drake, everything changes, and the stars become her home. The rude emperor is going to have to wait.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

A bil checked her clipboard and clutched her stylus. The life signs of the clients in the suits weren't supposed to fluctuate like that. The boss came in, and she said, "I am worried about that intensity."

"Species?"

"Venkin."

"Scenario?"

"Battle of Crimhollow."

"Don't worry about it. They are aroused by violence."

Abil looked at the readouts and blinked. "Oh, oh."

Mbrak smiled. "If you want to intercede, they always enjoy another species at the bottom of their pile."

She blinked. "No. I don't interact in the system."

"Anymore. You used to."

She frowned. "You know why I don't do that anymore."

"With Styra no longer on the station, we need someone to troubleshoot."

“Eckval is better at that than I am.”

“She was on the last shift, Abil. We need someone doing more than monitoring.”

She huffed. There was no other word for it. She scrambled around to find the words but just muttered, “Scared.”

“The Yorathian in pod thirteen needs an assist. They are stressed. No sex in that scenario.”

“Oh. Okay.” She clutched her clipboard.

Mbrak sighed and turned her toward the change room. “Off you go.”

Abil sighed, walked into the change room, got to her locker, stripped, and put on one of the sensor suits with admin capabilities. She checked to make sure that all of the sensors matched up with the right area. If they were in the wrong place, things went bad quickly.

She checked her clipboard for the right lineup of actions to take. She clutched it, moved to an available pod, confirmed her admin status, and settled in the cradle with her face mask scanning her features to project her expression in the scenario.

Abil connected with the system, and then, she was falling end over end into the scenario. She landed in the hero crouch and stood slowly in her long tunic and leather leggings.

Ranger was the description of her clothing, and it let her move easily in most scenarios. She looked down and flinched when she didn’t see the clipboard she had been clinging to over the last few weeks since Styra left. Her memory was unravelling with the loss of her cousin’s mind. Her anchor point was gone, and the

others couldn't hold her up. The pain that Styra had to deal with had made her mind solid. Abil's small anchor had shattered when her cousin had transformed into a drake.

Abil tried to remember why she was there, but then she remembered she could ask, "Parameters of the program?"

Mountain climbing and cave exploration.

"Where is the client?"

In a cave-in two hundred metres to your left.

"Okay." She jogged toward the edge of the mountains, stating, "Requesting rescue kit at the cave-in."

Kit delivered.

She smiled and made her way through the grass and then the brush, and she nearly tipped into the crevasse that led below.

The kit was nearby, so she went through the rescue protocol she could remember, anchored three sites, and got the thin energy consumer that would let her carefully dig through the rocks.

The world around her was an energy projection in a computer, and the tiny unit would let her remove parts of the area around her.

The blockage in the tunnel disappeared in a few minutes under her focused, careful shots.

When the cavern was clear, she descended slowly and then saw the guest trapped under a stack of rocks.

She looked at them and tried to remember what to say. “Um, hello. Do you require assistance?”

The male lying there grunted; his eyes flashed black and silver. “No kidding. Can you move the rocks?”

“Sure. Would you prefer manual or electronic removal?”

“Get. This. Stuff. Off. Me.”

She nodded and quickly went to work with the small unit.

When he was free, she helped him stand and dusted him off.

“I am sorry. It was supposed to close the entry and force you through the tunnel to the caverns beyond.” Her hands brushed his back and the back of his thighs.

He paused. “Are you going to clear off the rest of me?”

Abil blinked. “Of course, sir. Apologies, sir.”

He looked at her and shook his head. “I can’t believe Mbrak employs simpletons.”

She recoiled and backed away from him. She hit her emergency extraction.

She sat up and removed her face monitor, rubbing her eyes as the tears started falling. She scrambled loose from the filaments and scuttled back to her locker, changing and getting into her normal clothing as quickly as she could. She clutched her clipboard,

filed the rescue on the admin terminal, then walked to the supply room and took inventory of the two million items that the space station stocked.

She had the quantities and usage of everything in her mind, but the people parts of things were tricky. She needed to link to another mind to communicate effectively, but Mbrak said that was rude. She wasn't allowed contact with strangers, which left her with family, and family thought her needs were creepy. She got that through the links.

She paused and took a deep breath. She had survived her first ten years on her own, hunting and gathering for food and clothing herself. No other being had been there to talk to or interact with, so she was missing all those pieces.

Styra had said that social stuff was like dancing, but Abil didn't know how to dance either.

Even for one of Mbrak's family, she was odd.

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M brak joined the other drake for dinner and smiled. "So, how did you enjoy being trapped in the cavern with normal human strength?"

Yorath snorted. "That was delightful."

Mbrak laughed. "Well, we sent in a rescue."

"The simpleton? Yes. I am aware."

Before the server could come to the table, Mbrak paused and got control of the rage that had boiled inside him. "What?"

“The woman who could barely form a sentence with the demeanour of the most menial servant. That one.”

“What did you say to her?”

“The creature? I said I was surprised that you employ creatures like her.”

Mbrak got up and said, “Get off my station.”

Emperor Yorath sat straight. “What? You said you had a bride of your lineage for me.”

“I did. You aren’t worthy of her. Get off my station before I tear you to pieces for your insult to my grandchild.” Mbrak could feel his eyes flaring, and fire wreathed him.

Yorath stood up and stumbled back. “Oh, shit. That was her?”

“Yes.” The words came out in a hiss. “My little girl raised herself until we could find her. She doesn’t know how to navigate the worlds. You stated she would be protected and sheltered. Get. Off. My. Station.”

Yorath stood and inclined his head, confusion in his expression. “Thank you for considering me.”

Mbrak left the restaurant and went in search of Abil. She hated her block to interaction and forcing her into the simulator had been a whimsical means to introduce her to Yorath. Fucking hell. She’s probably doing inventory or auditing the programs.

He walked through the station, and everyone got out of his way.

When he stalked into the supply area, he caught her sad scent. He sighed and went to find his granddaughter halfway through the stacks of supplies for the mechanical section of the station.

He walked up to her, and she looked at him. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

He wrapped her in his arms and rubbed her back. “He wasn’t good enough for you anyway.”

The hot, wet trail of tears on his chest broke his heart. “Come on, let’s go get dessert, and then you can audit the cargo department.”

She hiccupped and smiled up at him.

“You can even do a weapons count if you still have a sad.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Did you want to do another language course?”

She paused. “I can use language; I just don’t know when I am supposed to. It isn’t needed all the time, and I forget when I am supposed to use it.”

He frowned. “What else are you forgetting?”

She swallowed. “Protocol for going into the simulator, which pod to use for maintenance, and how to find the guests once I am in there.”

Mbrak felt unwell. “When did the memory loss start?”



“When Styra left. I... uh... anchored to her, and then, she was gone.”

His eyes widened. “She let you?”

“When I was smaller, she said that whatever I needed, I could have, so I linked to her for balance, and that helped, but now she’s gone, and I...” She shrugged.

“Oh, honey. Okay, I am going to work to find you someone you can link to who is right for you.”

“Can’t it just be the station?”

He ruffled her hair. “No. The station is my prison, and I am not going to make it yours.”

She frowned. “I don’t mind.”

“No. You can’t link to me. Period. I am in your genetic line.”

“Wait. So, the link is like mating?”

“What you did to Styra was more like holding on to a big sister. She didn’t mention it to me, so I don’t think she was aware of it. She had a lot going on.”

“I attached to her pain. When the pain was fixed, the link was gone,” Abil mumbled.

He nodded. “So, you picked a target that couldn’t feel you. Right. We need to find someone that you can link your mind to without fear. I am going to look as fast as I can for a candidate.”

“I want something to do. I need something to do.”

“I will make sure there is something for you to do.” He cupped her cheek and grinned. “Now, how is inventory doing?”

She grinned, clutched her clipboard as she walked with him, and told him about the twenty-nine items that were running short, and all were used in the maintenance of the pools in the spa. Someone wasn’t logging their parts.

Mbrak smiled at her attention to detail. Her mind was designed to navigate through the stars, but she hadn’t learned anything about people in the last twenty years. Now, he understood something he hadn’t before. She needed another mind to graft to and would give her an anchor point. He wished he had known about the link to Styra before, but he had been watching for an attachment to a psyche, not a symptom.

Ah well, it was time for dessert.

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A bil hummed happily with the promise of overhauling the records for the cargo-handling area. They kept horrible records, and she was looking forward to looking for weak points.

A figure loomed ahead of her. She stopped in her tracks and clutched her clipboard.

“Hello, little one.”

She stared at the man from the simulation. She nodded.

“Mbrak has ordered me off the station after issuing an invitation to take on one of his bloodline.”

Abil took a step backward.

“He also mentioned that you had an alternative upbringing.” He took a step toward her.

She nodded and eased back again.

Abil felt a touch on her mind, and she froze, shaking her head. “You should not be doing that. It is dangerous.”

He moved closer. “Little one, I don’t intend to hurt you.”

She frowned. “Not for me, for you.”

“What?”

“Dangerous for you. I attach my mind to yours and pull your power, and you just offered yourself to me. It is very stupid.” She felt her mind sending contact points to his, and he was surprised.

His eyes widened, and he reached out for her while she continued to break into his mind and examine everything he knew about drakes and transformation.

She heard a familiar voice calling her and stopped her audit of the emperor.

She backed up and looked at her grandfather. “He started it.”

Mbrak cupped her cheeks and looked at her. “Are you still connected?”

“I let go; he is still hanging on.”

Mbrak growled. “Yorath, I thought you were on your way.”

“I... had to see her. I understand now.”

Abil nodded and said, “Please excuse me. I need to go to an airlock.”

Mbrak blinked. “Why?”

“Because I know how to do it now, and she really wants to stretch out.”

“Do it?”

“Yes. He showed me how.” She smiled calmly. “He didn’t mean to, but I understand it now.”

Mbrak looked at her seriously, and she could see the icy green glow from her skin.

“Run, Abil.”

She nodded and ran. The sprint took her through sparsely populated areas, and when she got to the outer ring, she opened the airlock and stood inside. One last breath, and she hit the outer door release.

She fell out of the station, and the companion in her thoughts was delighted. We will be so pretty.

Another figure loomed, and she scowled. She was going to transform, and another stupid drake was getting in the way. He grabbed her and hauled her toward a small debris field left over from station construction.

He threw her toward the debris, and she felt the energy building. Remembering what she had learned, she let her attachment to her human form go and welcomed weightlessness. Her drake did the rest.

The wings were wonderful. They took in the light from stars and suns and let her move. She swept along, and the other drake was pacing along with her.

She curled and flexed, stretched and flew through space. This is what she was for. She didn't need a mate. She was fine to be on her own. Now, her grandfather didn't need to worry. She was finally whole.

Abil turned and flew back toward the station, snagging a small object in her claws before building up speed and going through the magnetic defenses of the dock in her human form.

She was naked. That wasn't mentioned in the other drake's thoughts.

The footfalls behind her made her turn, and she frowned. "How do you keep the clothes?"

He smiled. "If you come with me, I will tell you."

"Come with you?"

"To my home. Come with me."

She frowned. "I will take it all."

He grinned. "You can try."

"I will succeed." She was trying to warn him.

He walked up to her. "I have worlds upon worlds."

He grabbed her biceps and lifted her. When there was a centimetre between them, she

whispered, “Not an efficient storage arrangement. I will do better.”

The kiss surprised her. It roared through her system and flared along her nerve endings.

She heard Mbrak calling, but the kiss went on and on. The taste of him was something she couldn't describe, but it was comforting. She clutched at the embroidered tunic that he was wearing and felt him smile against her lips.

She backed up. “Laughing at me?”

“Happy to have found you. I have dreamed of you but never guessed that the old blue bastard had someone like you hidden.”

“I have never been hidden. I have always been right here.” She pulled up her clipboard and stepped away from him. “And he is not an old blue bastard. He is my grandfather and my friend.”

Mbrak sighed. “I have a wrap for you, Abil.”

She walked toward her kin, and he put a blanket around her shoulders. “Thank you.”

Mbrak smiled and put his palm on the top of her head. “Your language is better.”

She pointed back toward the other drake. “He linked to me first. I didn't do it.”

“I know you didn't, little girl. Go shower and head to bed.”

She nodded and smiled. “There are three lights out on the station. I will send maintenance the report.”

“I know you will. Off you go.” He kissed her temple.

She walked away without looking back but rather looking at the station around her. She could see it all. Every part of it. Every ship, life sign, and electrical signal, she could see it all. Abil smiled and headed back to her quarters.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

M brak crossed his arms and scowled at Yorath. “You linked your mind to hers?”

Yorath smiled with a dazed expression in his eyes. “Of course. You saw her. She’s beautiful.”

“Very beautiful, with a mind that can track molecules in a star. She now knows every hair on your head, every cell, and the volume of air that you breathe. I would have warned you if you hadn’t been an ass.”

Yorath blinked. “She’s...”

“My accountant. I have another to take over when she goes, but her mind is glorious and terrifying.”

“Oh. She’s a collector.”

“No. She is merely aware. That is how she lived as a child alone on an uninhabited world. She could find food, water, prey. She knew where it all was.”

Yorath frowned. “How did you find her?”

“A mineral survey built a small structure as a base, but parts continued to go missing.”

“She was taking them.”

“She built herself a tiny structure that looked like their base. She made clothing her



size out of stolen clothing. She took their dishes and their cups. She was trying to learn to be one of them.”

“But she lacked language.”

“She did. Her parents died before she had learned to speak, so no one spoke to her.”

“How did they capture her?”

“I had to call in assistance from a friend. He went and introduced himself and felt the crushing weight of her eager mind.” Mbrak chuckled. “She almost blanked him. His drake had to come to his aid.”

“She was brought here?”

“Yes. I introduced herself and the cousins who were here, and her education began. Knowledge comes easily, but social behaviours are the most difficult. Give her protocols, but don’t laugh at her. She really hates that. She spends her life not fitting in, and she knows it.”

“What is on that board she clutches?”

“Ask her. Once she has rested.”

“You are leaving her on her own after that?”

“She is near heat but not in it, and she is my blood. I have no choice but to leave her to her new situation.” Mbrak shrugged.

“But... you were going to give her to me.” Yorath frowned.

“I was. Now, she is a living drake on her own. You will have to court her and lure her off this station before she considers everyone on it as her possession.”

“You said she wasn’t one of those.”

“Not yet. She’s working toward that goal. Once she gains a foothold, she will guard her hoard with everything she has. That will include her mate.”

Mbrak nodded. “I will allow you to remain on the station for four days while you try to persuade her to come with you. If she does not go with you, she will be out on her own. I cannot allow another adult drake to reside on this station.”

Yorath frowned. “What if she will not have me?”

“Well, I would definitely untangle my mind from hers before she takes off. That might hurt.”

“What?”

“Well, as she said, you made contact with her first, so she is under no requirement to release you. You should work on that, but after you do, get uncoupled, she will cease speaking again. Communication is a social behaviour.”

“Oh, so when she was awkward in the simulation...”

“That is her trying to find the words or the right thing to do. What did she do, by the way?” Mbrak tilted his head.

“I had been trapped under rock, so she brushed me off, and when I mocked her for it, she started doing the same to my front. That is when I insulted her.”

“People like to be clean. She knows that. If you can give her examples of behaviour, she will mimic it.”

“So, imperial protocols?”

“Yes, but as we stated, if you laugh at her, she will leave. Her cousins were tolerant, but she is different. There is no doubt of it, and they were not always kind.”

“How did she remain stable until now?”

“She linked to one of her cousin’s injuries and has been using pain to keep her language operating. She knows the words, but arranging them so they won’t hurt people’s feelings is tricky.” He sighed. “She is blunt to a startling degree.”

“Her beast is gorgeous.” Yorath smiled slowly.

“I noticed, but she is also dangerous. Do not forget the mind behind the beast.”

“Protocols are stringent, and from what you are describing, she could work with those as long as she has the ability to cling to my mind.”

“You don’t mind that?”

“From a mate? No. I have waited to find a proper mate for centuries. Now, you have presented me with one, and while I am fumbling, I do see the potential.”

Mbrak chuckled. “Your beast is threatening to split you in half if you try and leave without her.”

He sighed ruefully. “Yes. That.”

Mbrak laughed. “Well, you have four days to find and court her.”

“Wait, what’s her name again?”

“Abil. Abilathara Wekennick.”

“Wait. Wekennick.” Understanding was dawning in his gaze.

“Yes. He was on the way to become your adviser.”

“The mathematician.”

“Her first language.”

“We were told they were dead on impact.”

“A child doesn’t have much more of a life sign than a small predator does.”

Yorath looked ill. “They assured me there were no survivors. Wait. She was coming to my court.”

“Correct.”

“Why didn’t you send her on?”

“She is my blood. My life. My responsibility and my duty. They didn’t find her until she was ten, and she was in no shape to deal with society.”

“No one was looking for her.”

“Correct. I believe that as his employer, that was your job.”

Yorath looked ill again. “We were assured there was no point.”

“Right. Well, hindsight is always illuminating.”

Mbrak walked back toward the heart of the station. He left Yorath to his situation. His drake would sort it quickly. Anything for a mate.

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A bil smiled and did something that her cousins occasionally did for her. She booked a spa day and took a day off.

She never took one on her own.

Going to bed had been fun, and her mind felt settled when she got up.

She had her drake, and it was happy to be out with her at last.

The massage appointment would be first, so she headed to the spa and checked in. Her funds would cover it, and she warned the woman working on her that Mbrak might come by.

There was a grin, a nod, and then she got into it.

Abil sat and got a manicure after her pedicure. She had mint green nails with stars.

Mbrak showed up as the nails were being finished. “Hey, boss.”

“Grandfather.”

She looked at him. “Mr. Blue. Has his whatsitness left the station yet?”

“No. He has been looking for you.”

“I am getting my nails done.”

“How did you disappear to the sensors? I had to use financials to find you.”

“I learned hide and seek before I could walk.” She smirked and watched as the talons were finished.

A final hardening, and she was ready to go.

“Now, I am getting my hair fixed. It’s a little dry, and they are going to be nice to it before I lose the ability to explain myself again.”

“You think you are going to lose it?”

“He doesn’t think much of my intellect, but he likes my body. He will leave. His beast wants to visit, but I don’t know where I will be.”

Mbrak paused. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I can feel everything, and I am going to be possessive very soon. She’s eager to put down roots, and we studied the star charts nearby and have found some empty worlds where we can begin our lives together.”

Mbrak growled. “I wanted you protected.”

She smiled cheerfully. “I know, but as soon as he withdraws his link, I am going to go primal, and then, you need to get my ass out the airlock.”

“I don’t think he will.”

“I think so. He’s an emperor of a consortium of worlds; I am a very basic female. I am only good as a pet, and I will not be a pet. Well, not before I consume my handler.”

Mbrak nodded. “So, you are getting yourself pretty before you go?”

“Yes. One day to fix the things that have been bothering me.”

“You are leaving today? Your cousins will want to throw you a party.”

She snorted. “No, they won’t. They will exhale in relief. I am uncomfortable to be around, and I don’t want to make them uncomfortable anymore.”

“Did they say it?”

“No. I can feel it. The surface of their minds gets tense when I am there. They try and finish sentences for me and treat me like I am a child. I want to go back to where things are simple life and death, and my beast wants to build a house, and I know how to do it, so we have a project.”

They walked to the hair side of things, the groomers at work on a variety of clients.

Mbrak frowned. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I would rather your memory of me be me able to communicate freely and not clutching my clipboard for comfort and reminders.”

“I thought that it was cute, and I meant everything on that board.”

She smiled and settled in the chair when her stylist was ready. “I know, and I appreciate it, and when I find a proper mate and have little ones, I will bring them

here to meet you if you don't mind."

Mbrak smiled. "You want a family?"

"I have problems with speaking and crowds. My uterus is fine. Yes, I have always wanted kids so that I can make an effort to teach them all the things I was missing when I grew up. Or my mate can, and I can just stay as a drake. They don't need to talk and are good at defending."

Mbrak paused. "You plan to live as your drake?"

"Yes, it will be less complicated."

He sighed, and she settled in for the bonding treatment to protect her hair. He patted her hand. "Let me know before you go. Please."

"Of course, boss." She smiled and gripped his hand with hers before relaxing for possibly the last hair treatment of her life. After this, it was stars and scales.

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Mbrak called Yorath and then went to his quarters. "If you want her, you need to just fly back home with her today. She's leaving the station and intends to lose herself in the stars."

"Our connection. My connection." Yorath sat up and dismissed the holograms of his advisers.

"Tenuous. It will fade as distance draws it thin, and it will snap. She had decided to live her life in her drake form on a world with no population. She and her drake are really happy to be connected again."



“Of course. Wait. What do you mean again?” Yorath frowned.

“She and her beast had fused when I first saw her. It took years to tease them apart and convince the beast that she should remain in the background until summoned.”

“Which happened yesterday.”

“Correct. Now, they are planning a girls’ trip through the stars.”

Yorath snorted. “How do they know how to navigate?”

“Abil knows anything she studies. There is no learning or hesitation. She just absorbs it. That was the reason she survived on her own. The drake lent her claws, and she learned how to hunt and scavenge as soon as she mastered climbing.”

“Oh. So being alone is not her fear.”

“No, being surrounded and unable to communicate is. It happened several times before her language instruction began to take hold.” He sighed. “My other foundlings didn’t understand and were cruel. Styra was kind, but she had her own issues, and she is gone now as the wife of Yr-el.”

“Yes, that is what got my attention. If you were starting to release your charges, I wanted to make sure that I was on your list.”

Mbrak snorted. “Don’t you have enough females swooning over you?”

He laughed. “That wore off after a few hundred years. I have quarters for companions, but they will be dismissed the moment that I have a mate confirmed.”

“You do know what will happen if you bring her to your palace and there are still

women who believe they have a claim to you?”

“I won’t hurt her feelings.”

Mbrak laughed. “No, she will murder all of those women in front of you. She will transform and bite them into pieces, attack you, and fly off. No concubines. No mate. Don’t mess with female drakes, Yorath.”

The other male blinked. “Right. I will go dismiss them now. Just in case.”

“Wise.”

“Where is she?”

“She is at a hair appointment. How much debris did she absorb?”

“There were some construction remains left in a cluster. She took it all in. A few tons.”

“Oh dear. Well, she’s going to be a large drake. That’s good if she wants to fly between stars.”

Yorath growled. “She isn’t going to fly. I am going to give her what she needs.”

“What is it that she needs?”

Yorath smiled slightly. “Her own person. I will be her anchor and invite her to link her mind to mine. She will be safe with me.”

Mbrak sighed. “Thank you. While I cannot come by and tear out your throat if you lie, I have friends who will do it for me.”

“Friends?”

Mbrak chuckled. “Friends. To me.”

Yorath nodded. “How do I find her?”

“Head for the spa. And know that she is going to leave here today, with or without you. First, send your concubines away, or nothing else will be possible.”

Yorath nodded and turned to his terminal, setting up a call. A sturdy-looking female flared up on the screen, and Mbrak left. Whether the emperor did or didn’t dismiss his females, Abil would know and react accordingly. Yorath had been warned.

The rest was up to those two.

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A bil looked at her hair and smiled. “It’s pretty.”

The stylist smiled. “It is. I had no idea you had curly hair.”

Thick waves surrounded her, and the mint green of her dragon was now in her hair. She had a sheen to her skin that wasn’t there before, and she felt pretty.

“Thank you. Next, a dress that I can wear out tonight.”

She chuckled and got up.

Yorath was standing in the doorway to the salon and was looking at her in wonder.

Abil smiled. “Did you want your hair done?” His hair was perfect.

“No, I am here to offer myself to you. May I escort you to your next stop?”

She smiled and walked over to him. “Very well. I am using your language skills, after all.”

He took her hand and wrapped it around his forearm. She had seen that move before in the simulations. He was being polite and gentlemanly.

“So, why do you need language?”

She chuckled. “Mbrak already told you. I grew up without human language or intervention.”

“Yes, but were you alone?”

“Yes and no. There were no other bipeds, but a drake that had been struck in the same storm that took us down was there. She was damaged and couldn’t shift to human, so the drake took care of me and helped me do things. She was my shelter and my companion, but we didn’t speak, and she taught me only to take what I needed from her mind.”

“Did she have a name?”

“No, but I called her Nanny. She helped me get the education modules working on the shuttle. She buried my family.”

“I see. What happened when you were found?”

“She let them take me and told me it was time, but then I had to work to find language after so long in silence.”

“Did you ever see her again?”

Abil shook her head. “No, but she said she would dance at my wedding, and I laughed because I could not imagine her dancing with people.”

“Oh, you are thinking of her as a drake.”

“Sort of. I have been looking for a drake with dragonfly wings, but I couldn’t find one in the histories.”

Yorath’s mind went quiet. “A drake with dragonfly wings?”

“They were all thin and made a buzzing noise when she was mad. She showed me the damage she had gotten from the meteor shower, and it had burned through her wings.”

“That was why she couldn’t shift. Her wings were damaged. To take on a human form then, she would have been close to helpless.”

“Oh, she had to remain a drake to protect me.”

“That is my guess. If I ever see her, I will ask her.”

“You think she will come back this way?”

“No, but she will come to your wedding.”

“What?”

“If she said it, she’ll do it. Drakes are very trustworthy. It is what makes us steady rulers.”

“Really? I thought you had shifty eyes.” She smiled.

He looked at her in astonishment. “You are making a joke?”

“Certainly. When I first met you, you were trapped by a rockslide. Not very dapper of you.”

“I asked Mbrak to turn my strength down so I could feel what a human would experience in those circumstances. I had no idea he was going to trap me under a rockslide.”

She sighed as they entered the main commerce area. “He did that so that we would meet.”

“I am sorry about what I said, but I was aroused and embarrassed.”

She scowled. “Aroused? By rocks?”

He chuckled. “No, Abil. By you. A lovely woman descended on cables and carefully removed my restraints. I never bothered going to the cavern after that.”

“Too bad. The cavern is wonderful, filled with crystals and light and colours that my drake has seen, but I have not.”

“Would you guide me?”

“What?”

“In the simulation. Would you guide me so I don’t get stuck again?”

“Oh. I had plans for tonight.”

He chuckled. “Humour me.”

“Well, I guess we could go now.”

“No, we are going to get you a dress.”

“Why?”

“Because I said we would. I keep my word.”

She looked at him and smiled. It was one of the things on Mbrak’s list. Surround yourself with people you can trust.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

“I am using my employee discount,” Abil muttered as she got two pods in the same area.

Yorath grinned. “Thank you. I will pay the final tab.”

She snorted and got into the scenario suit. Yorath went very still when she got naked, and she glanced at him as she shimmied the suit over her hips. “You aren’t getting changed?”

“So, nudity isn’t an issue for you?”

Abil shrugged. “It’s just a body, and we both know that they are transient. We can switch them at any time.”

“Right. Yours is lovely. It is an amazing default.”

“Thank you, but are you joining me?”

He blinked and shook his head as she pulled the suit up and over her shoulders, shimmying everything into place before closing the front.

She paused. “So, you don’t want to go into the simulation?”

He jerked upright. “Yes, I do.”

She started to align the suit with the sensitive parts of her body, twisting to make sure her elbows lined up. He stripped, and she watched as he had to press his erection



down to get it lined up in the suit. That was going to stress the closure.

He sealed the suit and faced her. She snorted. “They didn’t show you how to fit the suit?”

“I told them I did not need intervention.”

She smoothed the sensors into place and made sure that all the contacts were in the right place. His body was hard and warm, and he was frozen in place while she adjusted things. It pained her, but she adjusted the groin sensors so that everything would line up properly.

“Right. Turn.”

He smiled. “Did you enjoy that?”

“I have done it dozens of times on men and women. This is a simple adjustment. Most of them do not have erections while I do it, though.” She got his suit settled.

“Do you need me to check your back?”

“No. I can feel that the contacts are right. I have been in a suit a few hundred times. You get used to it, but soft tissue moves and has to be compensated for.”

She shrugged. “Do you want me to help you settle in the pod?”

He opened his mouth and then nodded. “Right. Please.”

She smiled and set him up, pressing the face surround onto him. “I will be right with you, and we can drop in together.”

He nodded. "You can trigger it?"

"Sure." She tapped on his chair and sent control to her pod. She jumped in, triggered the filaments to lock to her suit, and pressed her facial surround onto her face. She murmured, "Scenario in three, two, one."

The world went light, and then, she knew it was wrong when the scenario formed around her.

"What the hell am I wearing?"

"You are my damsel, and we are on a quest."

She looked down at the silky froth that wasn't doing much to conceal her, even if it covered her from wrist to ankle. She felt like she was dressed in mist, and he was standing next to her in leather.

"What did you do?"

"I changed our scenario. The drake wanted to play, too."

She stared for a moment. "Play how?"

He grinned, and she heard the rustle of scale against scale. He stepped back, and a familiar figure swung downward and picked her up in his claws before flying to a mountain cavern nearby.

Abil was set carefully down on the stone floor, and the drake nuzzled her, sniffing her from neck to knees.

She frowned and felt her language fading. She grabbed his head and rubbed her cheek

against the drake, stroking his ears carefully and rubbing between his eyes. Her mind reached for his, but the mind she was seeking was inside Yorath, in the physical world. She was stuck again with no doorway.

The drake looked surprised but pleased as he nudged her to a very soft-looking bed. She looked at the princessy bed and back at the drake. He huffed, but amusement was in his serpentine eyes.

She felt sleepy and knew it was the scenario. “It feels stupid that the scenario knocks the female out ten minutes in.”

The drake huffed and lay his head down near her feet, guarding her from the intrepid adventurer.

She grumbled as she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Y orath climbed the mountain and stepped into the cave. “Where is she?”

The drake faced off against him and huffed. A spark of flame curled out in front of the muzzle, and he blocked access to the fair maiden sleeping beyond.

Yorath paused. “You are really playing this up?”

The huge head nodded.

Yorath drew his sword. “Fine. Surrender the maiden!”

The drake moved, and the tail swatted at Yorath, sending him back to the base of the mountain.

Yorath looked up and rolled rapidly to the side as the drake took a shit off the edge of the cliff face.

He huffed as he got up and looked at the mountain. “It seems that nothing is going to come easy.” He started back up the rock face and glanced back. “And we are going to talk about your diet.”

He was grinning as he continued the arduous climb for the second time. He was eager to see Abil’s hair out of that braid she managed to bring into this adventure.

He climbed faster.

When he pulled himself back onto the ledge, he saw the dragon, holding her carefully and combing her long pale green locks with the claws at the tip of his wings.

There was a soft croon that he was directing toward Abil, and Yorath was stunned. It was like he was tending a child or something infinitely precious.

The soft waves of her hair were combed and silky, but the woman slept on.

“Drake, stand aside!”

The drake looked at him and shushed him.

Yorath blinked. “What?”

The drake held a wing claw to his muzzle and shushed him again.

The slow path to the woman in the drake’s embrace wasn’t blocked or interfered with. “Damn, she is stunning. Is she glowing?”

The drake nodded again and crooned again.

Yorath suddenly understood. “You are calling out her drake to play.”

There was a soft chuff, and he crooned again. Abil’s body heaved upward, and she drew in a gasp as the drake flew out of her form and headed for the opening of the cavern. His drake flew after, and he smiled and turned to Abil.

Her skin was chalky, and she was still asleep. He smiled until he realized she wasn’t breathing.

There was no way to summon assistance, so he leaned forward and began to breathe for her. Her heart was beating, but it took six breaths before she woke enough to suck in air.

\* \* \* \*

His mouth was touching hers when Abil woke. She blinked and smiled as he woke her. He leaned back, saw that she was awake, and crushed her in a hug.

“Thank. You?” She wanted to ask why he was upset, but the words slipped away.

She touched his cheek and frowned. She stroked his cheek again. He kissed her, and she met him halfway, doing what felt right with every slide and caress between the two of them. He kissed his way down her neck, and she felt a slight pause and then a slight pain that sent ripples of pleasure through her. She moaned softly and clutched at him.

He pulled her to him, and she bent her leg, stroking the side of his thigh.

She paused and found the words, “My drake is out?”

“She is.” He kissed his way into her cleavage, and the fabric parted as he eased her breasts out.

She focused and got out, “And other parts of me are out as well.” She looked down at him wryly. One of his hands had gathered up her skirt while she was distracted by the bodice. There was a disconcerting breeze.

Abil whispered to him, “What are you doing?” It was coming easier to her. She felt his mind close to hers.

“Getting to know you better. Each part of you tastes different, did you know?”

“Um, I can’t lick myself under most circumstances.” The image made her frown.

Yorath looked at her and grinned. “I will do it for you.”

“Wait, how do I taste like anything? This is a simulation.”

“Well, the computer reads your body, and it translates it here.” He licked at her breast, and his tongue was moving around.

“I know that, but it... never mind.” She huffed and threaded her fingers into his hair, making a fist as his mouth settled over her nipple.

He chuckled and sucked softly, causing her fingers to flex and her hips to twist.

Abil looked at him, and then, her eyes fluttered closed as he did something with his tongue that made a soft, warm bomb go off in her abdomen.

He shifted, and his hands stroked, and she just closed her eyes as she arched and twisted against him as his fingers delved into her, and she did nothing but gasp. Her

words were gone again, but her body spoke for her.

He eased her toward an orgasm, and she flexed her thighs around his head. His hands held hers at her hips as the strange undulation into her via his tongue took her breath and her focus.

She understood in theory, but Mbrak had encouraged self-experimentation over playing with others, and Abil had never gotten used to the idea. Now, she believed a little practice might have been nice so her own body didn't constantly catch her by surprise.

The shriek that came out of her as heat built to an incredible degree, there was a bolt of pain, and then wave after wave of tension released from her with sounds she didn't know she could make.

His tongue slowed and withdrew carefully. "Abil, are you all right?"

She was still gasping but muttered, "Yes?"

He kissed her hands one by one and lifted himself to look at her. His expression hardened, and then, he got a soft expression on his features. He stroked her cheek and kissed her softly. She could taste herself on him, but the flavour faded quickly.

His leather pressed into all the parts of her he had exposed, and she whined and then noticed someone over his shoulder.

Her drake was on the floor with her head propped on a rock. Yorath's drake was draped over her with his head next to hers.

She blushed when she realized that they had been watching. She didn't have words.

\* \* \* \*

Yorath rolled to her side and held her against him. A drake. He had a drake bride, and she needed him. That was a heady mix. He guessed that as they lived their lives, her social gaps would fill, and he would put out a proclamation that anyone mocking her for it would lose a finger or their family homes. Either would do.

He smiled. “Do you want to conclude the scenario and get back to the station?”

She looked around and nodded.

Her drake huffed and sighed, getting up and pushing the other drake off. She walked back, and Abil had to fight her way out of Yorath’s embrace.

Yorath was laughing at her as she got her clothing into semi-decent lines and pushed her skirt down as she wobbled to stand off the bed.

\* \* \* \*

A bil fell against her beast’s muzzle, and the drake slowly walked into her, disappearing to the frustration of Yorath’s beast. Abil blinked as she realized that her drake had gone much further than she had. It was a good thing that no one could get pregnant in the scenario. The male had been intent and the female delighted. The skies had not been safe for public consumption for hours. Wait. Hours?

She focused and said, “Time remaining?”

Time expired. Emergency extraction beginning in three.

She looked to Yorath and his beast. And then they were gone.



She pulled her mask off as Viida fussed around her. “Easy, Abil. You guys were in there past the safety protocol.”

Abil’s muscles jerked as she tried to move. Halla was getting Yorath out of his link and helping him sit up.

Viida frowned. “The computer turned off the safeguards when you were in there.”

She focused. “I checked.”

“That is what made the safeguards kick in.”

“How long?”

“Eleven hours.”

“Oh, no.”

“Come on, he’s in good hands. We will get you changed.”

Abil couldn’t say anything. She was stunned, and her senses were dull. She dressed in the new outfit she had bought or, rather, Yorath had purchased for her. As she was ushered out, a series of imperial guards came to get their emperor, and Viida kept an arm around her as the door closed and cut off her view.

“Well, you certainly went above and beyond for the station. What did you two get up to in there?”

“The drakes flew together.” She focused her words.

“What? His and...”

“Mine. My drake likes to fly with his.”

“So, your drake really came out? I thought that was just a rumour.” Viida chuckled.

“No. She came out. Mbrak ordered me off the station as it came out. I will go tonight.”

“You are talking a lot.”

“My mind finds the words are closer right now.” She paused and gripped Viida’s wrist. “Can you make sure that he is all right? I would hate for my influence to have injured him.”

“Mbrak won’t let another of his kind come to damage here. He’s already headed down. Now, where do you want to go?”

“Well, there is no delaying it. I suppose I should head to the first cargo bay. It is time to go. I would apologize for my awkwardness, but I had no control over it and did all I could to fit in. I am sorry that it didn’t work, cousin.”

Viida paused. “You want to go to the cargo bay?”

“Yes. I am going to fall through the magnetic shielding, get far enough from the station to shift, and then let my drake take me on adventures.”

“What about him?” They got into the lift and hit the cargo level.

“No words, no promises, nothing that he hasn’t done a thousand times with hundreds of different women.” She sighed. “My drake got that from his drake. While she is wanted, I am disposable. So, I will see what the worlds have to offer.”

“Does he know?”

“I left his mind cycling in the scenario for eleven hours. He doesn’t know if he has feet right now. His guards will watch over him until he is ready to leave the station or choose another bride. Mbrak has a bunch of us, and only a few work in the entertainment unit.”

“What?”

“There are dozens of us here. All descended from Mbrak and his carefully chosen brides over two thousand years ago.”

Viida softly asked as they started toward the cargo area. “How do you know that?”

“A drake told me long before I came here. He sent her to guard me until someone came, but she was injured and could not shift to human. The drake guarded me and taught me. When the mining company sent their exploration units, she told me what to take and how to build. I learn through images and physical action. That is not what the teaching is here.”

Viida asked, “A drake raised you?”

“Yes. Her wings were damaged in the same meteor storm that crashed my family’s vessel.”

“How can you speak now?”

“Yorath touched his mind to mine, and it gave me focus. Don’t worry, my focus is shifting, and I am losing the ability to form the next sentence.”

Viida walked her toward the area with the shielding, and she triggered the first of

three security doors. “I am sorry it has been hard for you.”

She nodded and kept walking as Viida hit the second door lock. Her skin was glowing, and her drake wanted out.

Mbrak was standing behind the final door to the cargo area. “What happened?”

She struggled and said, “No words. No promises. I hurt him. Drake wants out. Link faded.”

He paused and sighed. “Of course, he would just make assumptions. Right. Little drake, go and enjoy the stars.”

She smiled and hugged him. She looked at the dress Yorath had bought for her and looked to Mbrak. “Return this and get him the money back?”

Mbrak nodded. “Of course. Fly well, little drake.”

She dropped the dress and took the steps toward the magnetic shielding, jumping through it and spinning into the stars, trying to clear the station and get to some more debris.

A shuttle cruised in close, and to her astonishment, it sent out a bundle of shiny metal and gleaming jewels. She looked at the shuttle, and it had the imperial markings.

She caught the first piece, and it disappeared at her touch. She grabbed the next and the next as they drifted toward her, and it disappeared as well. Necklaces, tiaras, bracelets, and belts all dissolved at her touch.

Her drake knew what they were for, and when the last of the offerings were absorbed, she transformed.

Her wings were wide and batlike, and she slowly began to stroke through space, using the heat from distant stars to move her body and navigate.

It was wonderful, and she knew the path she was taking as clearly as if she had flown it a thousand times. Her drake took her through the stars with joy and hope.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Y orath had his pilots shadow her as her drake flew in a familiar path. He got the message from his beast, and he grinned. He sighed. “Make a portal. They are heading home.”

“Your Majesty?”

“Take us home, pilot.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The pilot set coordinates and opened a portal.

The dainty drake would be home in a few days. It would allow him time to prepare.

\* \* \* \*

A bil was enjoying the journey and the small portal jumps. They stopped now and then to consume more minerals on asteroids that were floating past. The world the drake was taking them toward was bright and filled with cities, but one, in particular, caught her attention. A huge building festooned with lights and a runway of sorts was gleaming in the darkness.

The drake followed the path and banked, landing on her claws as her wings slowly folded. She shook her body and looked at the crowd that had formed.

She huffed and looked toward the doorway. Abil wondered what she was looking for and sent the offer of more travel and adventure.

The drake mentioned rest and recovery before more adventures.

“It has been interesting waiting for you, Abil.” The voice rang out, and Abil looked through the drake’s eyes.

Yorath was wearing formal robes made of heavy embroidery and was stalking toward her. His crown gleamed in the reflected light, and she remembered who he was.

The drake bowed low.

“Don’t you dare bow to me.”

Abil snapped up and straightened. Her tail lashed idly.

“So, my mate has finally arrived, and the wardrobe prepared for her won’t fit currently.”

She cocked her head.

“I need you in a biped form, Abil.”

She huffed and crouched, wagging her tail. She liked this form. No one mocked this form. It made raiders turn and run.

He grinned. “You like your drake?”

She nodded.

“But you are behind the eyes right now.”

She nodded.

“Why won’t you come out?”

She frowned and cocked her head.

She exhaled, and the word floated out in common. Why?

He stared and blinked. “Why? Why do I want you out?”

She nodded and sat back.

“You are my mate. I thought we covered that.”

She cocked her head and looked at him, blinking slowly. She shook her head.

“Change to biped, and I will explain it to you. I promise.” He caressed her jaw.

She fidgeted her claws and huffed.

“Come on, little one. Let me show you a whole new world and give you jewels and tributes to add to your gorgeous glory. Let me give you a link again, and you can take whatever you need from me.”

She swallowed and angled her head to press to his. He stroked the spot between her eyes, and then light swelled, and she was standing in front of him. She smiled and then fell. Her legs hadn’t held her in a while.

He offered her his hands, and she took them, standing up and shaking her hair to cover her.

She looked at the length and blinked. “Oh. I have been out there a while.”

“Two years. I got regular notices of your progress, or I would have come to get you. Did you have fun?”



She smiled. “We did.”

“Would you like something to wear?”

Abil nodded. “Yes, please.”

He took his outer robe off and wrapped it around her. She blinked and put her arms into the sleeves, and then he picked her up and began the walk to the building.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and fell asleep.

She heard soft movements around her and woke up when dawn tickled her lids. Yorath spoke. “You sleep hard, but then, you have been travelling for two years. Is this the first time you rested?”

She sat up and blinked. “Yes. It is. Where am I?”

“My imperial chambers. Those ladies there are drawing you a bath and getting ready to tend you.”

She glanced at the ladies in question, and one of them looked at her and gave her a slow wink.

Abil stared and held the sheet to her chest. “Oh. Yes, that would be a good idea.”

He looked between her and the woman who was suddenly busy hanging a gown. “Are you well?”

“I am. Very well. Hungry, I suppose. I have eaten nothing but asteroids recently.” She shrugged.

The familiar-eyed woman came toward her with a robe. “This way, Your Highness. We will send for a meal while you bathe.”

Abil put her arms in the sleeves, and the strange woman helped her stand. She glanced at Yorath at his desk, and he was fully scowling. She sent happy laughter to him through a small tendril of a link.

He smiled, and the strange maid helped her over to the area that was hidden by a pulled-out screen. The moment they were behind it, Abil threw her arms around her guardian and smiled brightly.

“You are looking well, Your Highness.” Her guardian slid the robe off her shoulders and hung it up nearby before helping her into the deep pool in the floor.

Yorath was bustling around on the other side of the room, and then, it was quiet. Her guardian cleaned her back and then set her back for a shoulder massage. She asked, “Ladies, please go to the kitchen and arrange some food and some tea for our lady.”

The other two women nodded and left.

The guardian peeped around the divider, and then, she came back. “You are all grown up, Abil.”

“Nanny! I can’t believe you are here.”

“I told you I would dance at your wedding. That is scheduled a few days from now, so I should have enough time.”

“Wait. I am getting married? When?”

Nanny rubbed her shoulders. “In three days to Yorath. He’s been planning this event

since he got home.”

“Do mates get married? If we are drakes, why do we have wings?”

Nanny laughed. “We are drakes, but a dragon got in a few thousand years ago. It built in the automatic wings, so most of us use them for energy collection so we can fly right away. It is easier than simple propulsion for new drakes.”

“What about old drakes? What about Yorath? I just realized he flies without wings.”

Nanny gathered her hair and helped her wash it. By the time the ladies had come back with the tea, Abil was sitting on a stool, wrapped in a warm robe, with Nanny pulling a comb through her hair until it gleamed.

Yorath returned and smiled. “Care to share your snacks?”

Nanny moved a table from the side and continued working on her hair. One of the other women brought a chair for the emperor.

Nanny brushed the hair until it was smooth, and then, she twisted jewelled pins into it.

Nanny poured the tea and set the tray of snacks close to the edge of the table. “Please excuse me.”

She bowed, and Abil didn’t want her to go, but it was Yorath who said, “Remain, Nanitha. I was expecting to see you sooner. I never thought you would make your way into my household.”

Nanny paused. “How long have you known?”

“Since you winked at my mate, she lit up, and joy spilled through her. I haven’t felt anything like it.”

Abil wrinkled her nose. “I am sorry, Nanny. I was just happy to recognize you. You look different.”

Nanny sighed and flicked her fingers, and a chair flew over to her. Her clothes turned into court daywear, and she had a seat.

Abil gasped. “Can you teach me to do that?”

Nanny looked to Yorath. “I believe your mate would like to do that, but if you still don’t know how to make your own clothing in six months, I will show you.”

Yorath nodded. “Thank you. For now, we have created a wonderful array of clothing for you. If Lady Nanitha is willing, I would appreciate her assisting you when I can’t be at your side.”

Nanitha smiled. “I would be delighted to be there for her.”

Abil nodded. “Again.”

Yorath passed around the teacups, and they all sat and sipped. “So, Nanitha the Devourer, how did you happen to find young Abil?”

Nanny rubbed her brows. “I was... travelling. Going from world to world and eating volcanoes because my beast thinks they are a spicy treat. I was between worlds when I saw the asteroids shedding all kinds of rock, the small ship was in the path, and I tried to get in between. It worked for a while but destroyed my wings, but I was able to protect the rear of the shuttle as it dropped to the surface.”

She sighed and looked at the tea. “The adults were dead on impact, but I could smell a tiny one in the vessel. I couldn’t shift, and my drake is better at healing than I am, so I carefully pried open the loading hatch and found this little one in a small padded enclosure, wailing for her parents. I chuffed to her, and she stood up, taking my claws in her little hands. And from there, we created shelter, and I scavenged rations from the shuttle as needed. When she was stable and feeding herself, I was able to hunt. It got easier from there. By the time she was four, she was hunting with me, and when she was six, she had her first kill.”

Abil smiled. “It was a fish.”

“It was still a kill, precious.”

Abil said, “Why did you have that strange walk when I was little?”

Nanny paused. “Oh, I was definitely injured when the ship came down. Spinal injuries. They took a long time to heal.”

Yorath blinked. “You could have called him.”

“He wanted a stationary mate. I wanted to see the stars before he locked me up. Three hundred years didn’t seem like much in the grand scheme of things.”

Abil caught on. “Yorath knows you.”

“Oh, yes. Well, he knows my would-be mate. I am content to fly from world to world.” Nanny smiled. “There are many blended-blood mates that would have suited him as well. I wasn’t exactly the most desirable of mates, as he pointed out frequently.”

Yorath blinked. “What?”

“Oh, yes, Zenim said he could do better but was stuck with a backwater drake with no sense of the worlds.”

“Zenim? I thought your mate was Arken.”

Nanny took in a deep breath. “Arken was always very kind to me, but he wasn’t the one who claimed me.”

“Shit. I need to make a call.”

Nanny smiled. “If you called Zenim, I can rip his throat out now. I am quite a large drake. I can fly without wings now. Zenim used to catch them and hold me by them to keep me from going faster than he was. I needed to create a form with no wings with enough surface area to catch sufficient light and propel me through the stars.”

Yorath nodded, got to his feet, kissed Abil’s cheek, and walked toward the com station in the corner of the room.

He spoke rapidly, and Abil asked, “What is he saying?”

“He is telling Arken to get his ass here and not care what Zenim says.”

Abil asked, “Are they related?”

“Arken is Zenim’s older brother. Zenim wanted a mate, and Arken was content with offerings, so when I arrived with my parents, he was kind to me. And then I shifted, and he was still kind to me. Zenim got possessive and mean, so I left.”

Abil looked at the tense marks around her mouth. “He got more than mean.”

“He was violent. He held me down and tried to force a bond. It didn’t take, and as

soon as he was off me, I ran. And then, I took to the sky and didn't come down until I found that storm."

Abil saw flickers of the pain her guardian had felt. "Oh, no, Nanny."

"Yes, well, you were a welcome distraction through a horrible circumstance. I am sorry that your education suffered."

"It was my social exposure that took the worst hit. My speech is spotty."

"It seems fine to me."

"Yorath linked that part of his mind to mine, including the language and protocol portion." She smiled. "He is giving me a very slow download of what to expect."

Nanny smiled. "That is good. Slow is good."

Abil looked at her and sent a link to her mind. She felt heat and pain and embarrassment.

Nanny looked up. "You were always interested in learning, little one. I am sorry it was such dark subject matter."

"So, you really—we really live for hundreds of years?"

"Yes. If you are in your other form, time passes slowly for you and rapidly for the worlds around you. It is amazing to mourn a decade when you thought you were just stopping to let your wings repair."

Yorath came back and looked worried. "Arken and Zenim will be here for the festivities."

Nanny smiled. “You might want to propose, Yorath. She doesn’t know she’s getting married yet.”

Yorath paused. “Mbrak mentioned that she would not assume, but I am thankful her beast brought her here. You don’t seem worried about the two I mentioned.”

Nanny laughed. “I had to take a shuttle in so that I would not disturb your gravitational systems. I was not joking when I said I ate my way through the stars. I am huge. Zenim will not be able to bully me again, but I will haul him outside of your gravitational system before I kill him.”

“You would kill another drake?”

“If he tries to hurt me again... absolutely. I taught Abil to defend herself when cornered, and I do not expect her to react in any other way.”

“Drakes don’t kill each other.”

“And yet, out of the five percent of female drake deaths, mate murders are the cause. It is always the biped form that does the killing, and the beast goes mad.”

Yorath frowned. “He attacked you?”

“Twice. I didn’t run out of maidenly sensibilities; I ran wounded and desperate. I sought the stars, and they gave me comfort.” She sighed. “I will return to my quarters in the city.”

Abil jumped to her feet. “Stay.” She reached out and clutched Nanny’s hands.

“I am staying until your wedding, little one. I will return here if the palace sends an invitation. Don’t worry about Yorath. He doesn’t move fast, but he moves in the right



direction.”

Abil looked at her and smiled as she understood. “Got it.”

Nanny hugged her, and the familiar scent wrapped around her. “Have fun, and make this world your own, little one.”

Abil chuckled. “Three hundred forty-seven thousand.”

“That’s my girl. Don’t worry. I will be here if you need me.”

Yorath blinked. “What is that number?”

“The amount of people within the city and castle.” Abil smiled. “They will be part of my collection, and I will protect them.”

Nanny kissed her forehead. “Good girl.”

Yorath asked, “You showed her how to do that?”

“She was born to be a collector, auditing and counting all things around her.” Nanny stroked her cheeks. “She knows what is hers at a glance.”

Abil looked toward Yorath and blushed. That was the problem. She knew.

He met her gaze and smiled slowly.

“Well, now that I have thrown that out there, I will be on my way. Like I said, I will only return when invited. It is a lovely hotel. Lots of amenities. I can get a foot rub any time, day or night.”

Abil nodded. "It will be nice to know you are here."

"I am glad. Now, Yorath needs to speak to you. Listen with everything in you."

Nanny touched her once more and left.

Abil turned to Yorath. "Um, hello. Nanny raised me."

"I gathered. She did a good job. How long were you with her?"

"Eight years? Ten years? There was a lot before I was found and brought to Mbrak's station."

"But you made it, and she got you through."

"She did."

She blinked as Yorath went to one knee in front of her. "I might not have used my own language, but I have hoped for you, felt joy with you, and looked forward to you since I met you. Your mind is meshing with mine, and I feel the amazing potential you have within you and wish to help you find it. You have it in you to be a bright and blazing star, and I want to be at your side when you become all you can."

She stared. There was nothing to answer.

He smiled. "Will you marry me and be my empress and my companion, and my drake will fly with yours whenever you need to fly?"

Abil cocked her head and found the question. "Um, yes?"

He grinned and kissed her while on his knee between her thighs. She held his head

and felt something on her hand, but she broke off and said, “You dumped jewels for me.”

He stroked her cheek. “You needed them, and they helped. We often dress our females in precious metals and other stones. It gives you a burst of power if you need it.”

“It did. It helped me open my first portal.”

He nodded. “That was the purpose. It still took you two years to come to me.”

She smiled. “There was so much to see, and my beast wasn’t in a hurry. She said you had to clear out your quarters, but I don’t know what that meant.”

He smiled. “I did that before we spent time in the simulation. That is when I knew you were the one for me.”

Abil sighed. “I wish you had told me. I thought I hurt you in the simulation.”

“Mbrak extended our time and notified the other staff afterward. I was stunned by withdrawing from you, not from being with you. I have missed you.”

She blushed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I missed you, too. The stars were empty without you.”

He lifted his head to hers and kissed her again, stroking his tongue along hers. When it looped around, she blinked and had to wait. She was tongue-tied.

He pulled his head back and smiled. “Three days to the wedding.”

She laughed. “How long were you watching for me?”

“Eighteen months. When you didn’t show up, I set up a reward system for sightings. You scared the hell out of those raiders, though.”

She giggled. “Yeah. That was when I learned to breathe fire. It was fun. It used a lot of biomass, though, so I had to go out and eat right away. Their ship was too fast.”

He lifted her in his arms and spun her around while laughing. “They sent me the image of you snapping at them. They were definitely scared.”

She leaned against his chest and smiled. “A fun few days.”

He started laughing again.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

The maids swarmed her and put her into a court casual dress, commenting on the hairstyle that Nanny had pinned in place.

Abil stood, and when Yorath came to take her hand, she beamed and said, “These clothes are heavy.”

He smiled. “They are formal so that anyone who sees you will know who you are.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because I want you to have an easy time here. It is important that you feel at home here.”

She put her hand on the back of his offered wrist and walked with him to the throne room.

The gathered folks got quiet as he led her through the crowd and the path they created. He walked up the dais with her and settled her in the large chair next to his.

He smiled. “Now, we sit and gifts for you are delivered.”

Abil blinked. “How did they know?”

“The lights on the palace, the landing lights, and the glowing green and silvery dragon that landed on our soil.”

She smiled. “Ah, that was a good indicator. Has Mbrak been told I have made it

safely?”

“He has and is looking forward to a call. I have spent the last two years learning what I could about your family and compiling it for you.”

She blinked. “That is very sweet.”

“I can be very sweet.” He kissed her cheek, and she felt the flick of a tongue and realized she was crying.

Abil leaned into his touch, and when she was calm again, the gift-giving began.

Yorath lifted his fingers, and a shimmering sound rang through the room.

The woman who sashayed up first had a bright smile and familiar eyes. She carried a chest and handed it over to the two guards who were there to receive it. The chest thudded to the ground when the lady backed up. “Sorry, I work out.”

Abil laughed. “Thank you, Nanny.”

Yorath frowned. “Nanitha? How many forms do you have?”

Nanny shrugged. “Twenty-five or so. This one dresses fancy.”

The gown was indeed fancy. There were curves and lace and gems and a high collar. Her hair was up in a pile, and the impish look was still there.

She winked and got out of the way. “More presents coming.”

“I thought the wedding wasn’t for a few days.”

“Oh, these are just for your arrival on this world and are setting you up with security for the future. These presents are just for you.”

The guards dragged the chest to Abil’s feet, and she leaned in to open it, flipping the lid back. “Oh. That’s a lot.”

She smiled. “It will help your drake be all it can be, and you will find yourself here with him.”

She bowed and walked to the side while Abil touched the metal. “Two hundred kilos?”

“You need to buff up a little if you want a family. It would be unfair to send you into his arms with nothing.”

Abil blinked, and her eyes widened as she understood. Yorath had a hopeful smirk on his lips.

Abil took the chest and set it on her lap while the guards watched. She chuckled and ran her hands through the gems and metalwork.

Yorath chuckled, and she realized she had been making happy sounds. Abil bit her lip and closed the box, setting it down next to her. “Right. Uh, next, I guess.”

Yorath took her hand. “You can play later.”

“All right.”

She sat with her hands on her lap, and the next offering arrived. Lengths of silk that were enough to start a wardrobe.

The rest of the morning was set in a path of items that were offered to her, and she admired, thanked, and then held them for someone to add to the sort that the maids had going on.

She was getting hungry when there was another murmur in the room, and the silvery blue population spread to the sides to let two very commanding males walk toward the throne.

One had gold eyes, and one had silver, but they looked nearly identical.

Abil looked at the two; one had an unhappy flex to his lips, and the other was hopeful and looking around.

Yorath got to his feet. “Arken, Zenim, welcome to my imperial seat.”

The grumpy one growled. “Where is she, Yorath?”

Abil looked at Nanny and then at Yorath.

“Ask those assembled if they have seen her.”

The one who was Zenim, based on his attitude, said, “Where are you, you low-born little bitch? How dare you run from me and make me wait?”

Nanny looked at Abil and stepped forward. “Now, where is the whiniest cunt in the land? Oh, yeah. Zenim. That would be you.”

Abil gasped as the larger male rushed in while the one with golden eyes smiled slowly.

Nanny waited until he was close and his hand was drawn back to strike. She lashed



out and kicked him in the groin, causing a crunch that could be heard in the chamber. He dropped, and she grabbed him by the back of his formal tunic and muttered, “C’mere, bitch. Isn’t that what you said to me? We need to have words, Zenim. Yorath has cleared the courtyard for our chat, you whiney brat.” She shook him like a dog shook a rat.

Arken looked to Yorath and Abil and said, “She’s strong.”

Abil smiled slightly. “She works out.” She glanced at Yorath. “Can we go watch?”

He grinned. “Of course. She’s your guardian, after all.”

He held out his hand, and she stood. They walked with Arken to the main doors. Thumping was happening outside, and when they entered the sun, there were two drakes writhing, and Abil heard a soft voice. “She’s a planet eater.”

She looked at Arken. “She is, or she will be. She has the potential.”

Arken smiled. “You know her.”

“Yes. She raised me. She found me as a toddler and raised me until I was ten.”

“Did she talk about us?”

“No. She didn’t talk at all. She made this rattling noise with her wings when she slept, but they were stumps, so they banged together.”

“Stumps?”

“She tried to protect my parents’ shuttle as we all fell from the sky. Her wings were burned, or that’s what she said.”

Arken murmured, “He tried to catch her to hold her, so he bit her wings to break them. She flew anyway.”

“You didn’t go after her?”

“She made me promise to stay out of it. I had to remain separate. It wasn’t our time, and she knew it.”

There was a thud, and Nanny had gotten bigger, pinning Zenim’s head down and sitting on his body with her other claws holding onto his tail to stop the damage.

Yorath called up. “How long can you hold him?”

Nanny huffed and pushed harder on Zenim’s skull.

Abil asked, “How long is she going to hold him?”

Until he surrenders his obsession with me. I don’t know how he can be so obsessed while being violent and insulting. Hello, Abil.

She looked at the drake and watched as the wingless version of her guardian kept the male dragon under control.

“She’s magnificent.” Arken sighed.

It was supposed to be Arken for me, but Zenim expressed his interest, and Arken never defied him. The more Arken pulled back, the more vile Zenim became. It was... disappointing.

Abil looked at him. “You hurt her as much as he did. She wanted you just to speak out, but you refused to go against your brother, so he began more vile behaviours to

get you to react. I think you both need to grow up and try again. Nanny needs someone who respects her the moment they see her.”

Yorath smiled. “That is why I made more than one call. Arken and Zenim are too tightly bound. One inflicts pain, and the other feels it. Wait, is she speaking to you?”

“Yes. Now that I have a better grasp of language, it is easier.” She watched the wriggling of Zenim.

Arken walked forward, and he bowed low to Nanny. “Lady, you have avenged your honour and have proven your point with Zenim. Neither of us was worthy of you. He understands how unworthy he is, don’t you, brother?”

There was a low whine, like air escaping from a punctured hose, and it was coming from the drake on the ground.

Yorath was grinning. “The moment I met Nanny, this is what I envisioned. There are others with better temperaments. These two are going to be stuck with offerings. I think they prefer it that way.”

Arken looked at them and blushed. “I... he... we do better with shorter-lived beings.”

Abil heard a blast in her mind. “Then why did you let Zenim put a claim on her to begin with, you wormy, crawling bastard? I am paraphrasing. She was a little more blunt.”

“Your Imperial Highness, if she gets off Zenim, we will leave.”

Abil listened and then said, “As soon as she marks Zenim’s back the same way he marked hers. Her tail has a fin, so she isn’t going to follow up on other assaults.”

Arken flinched. “Thank her, please. He will take the damage.”

Zenim’s eyes flared open in panic.

Abil and Yorath walked over, and Abil looked into Zenim’s eyes. “Just the same marks on your back that you left her with. It was the marks on a young woman, a young drake, and she went into open space with her scales shredded and her wings broken. I am sure that you, being a big, strong male, can manage the same. It might take a decade to a few centuries for you to regain your biped form, but that should be fine. You don’t have much use for young ladies, so the cooling-off period should be fine. Enjoy celibacy. Oh, and in case you feed off Arken’s conquests...”

Abil turned toward Arken and raised a hand with bright claws. She pulled it down his face and then exhaled into his skin, scarring it. “There we go. Less pretty.”

Arken touched his face and staggered back. Zenim rose, Nanny marked his back, and he grabbed his brother, and they flew up and out of the atmosphere.

Nanny shook her scales and shrank back into her ladylike garments. “Not what I had expected when I saw them, but it was satisfying. I hadn’t considered that Arken shared emotions with him. It let him look pure and delve into pain together.”

Yorath sighed and wrapped his arm around Abil’s waist. “Well, that was unexpected. It is a good thing that I have called in reinforcements. Nanitha, what are you doing for dinner?”

“I am guessing I will be back at the palace. Why?”

“Well, we are about to have lunch, and perhaps you could take Abil for a walk in the city. I trust you to keep her safe.”

“High praise.” Nanny smiled.

“Let’s consider things over lunch, and I can give you a few shops to visit to increase her gem collection.”

Abil asked, “What will you be doing?”

“Calling Arken’s and Zenim’s parents and letting them know what their nasty little offspring have been up to. What did you blow in Arken’s face, Abil?”

“Diamond dust mixed with hard carbon.” She shrugged. “And some lemon juice from the tea for fun. He looked pretty, but he was worse than his sibling.”

Nanny nodded. “Seeing them together with my mind solid, I see it now. A youngling couldn’t.”

Abil blinked. “How young were you?”

“Fifteen. It was legal on their world.”

Yorath bristled with fury. “What? I will skin those bastards myself. I wasn’t aware you were so young.”

She grimaced. “I am eventually going to take their territory and set their population free.”

Abil said, “If you kill them, their territory will become your prison.”

Nanny shrugged. “You could still come and visit if you liked.”

Yorath shook his head. “They are about to be stripped of their territory and

banished.”

“What?” Nanny stared at him.

“We needed a witness who wasn’t afraid to speak against them. All you need to do is recount your experiences with them and what they put you through. Are you willing?”

Nanny smiled. “As soon as we finish lunch.”

Yorath nodded. “Right. Shall we, dear one?” He offered Abil his wrist, and they walked back to the court.

Nanny followed behind and easily hefted the box she had brought for them, walking back to the royal quarters. Abil looked behind and watched the grinning Nanny following her. It felt good to have family again.

They sat around and ate, and then Nanny went to the terminal and saw the faces of a number of elder drakes and two dragons. She gave her testimony of all interactions with Arken and Zenim, including her recent sitting on and scarring them.

A female said, “May we confer with Yorath?”

“Certainly. He’s right here with his mate.”

The group murmured, and Nanny smiled brightly at Abil as she came and sat next to her. “So, are you having fun?”

“This is much nicer than being alone in space.”

Nanny sighed. “That is true. I loved my time alone, but knowing you are safe is so

much better now, rather than hacking into Mbrak's systems."

Abil blinked. "That was you? It was driving him nuts."

"He is as much my grandfather as yours, little Abil. It was fun to taunt him."

"But... you weren't raised on the station."

"I was not. My parents lived on a world with two drakes, and that is where they found me. We travelled to see Mbrak when I was small, and I remembered him. I asked him about you when you were taken into his care, and he told me that I was one of his line as well."

Abil hugged her. "I always felt a connection to you."

"Me, too, little bug."

Abil laughed and didn't let go.

Yorath came back after giving his testimony and said, "The brothers are being dealt with. They will not walk their world again."

Nanny exhaled with a shudder. "Who is getting their territory?"

"It is being assigned. Their people will not suffer."

She nodded. "Good. It was a good society, good people. My parents are still there, I think. Oh, maybe not."

Abil asked, "Why not?"

“They weren’t active drakes, and I have been gone three hundred years. It is likely that they have passed.” She looked resigned.

“I think we can check. Can’t we?”

Yorath looked at them and nodded. “What are their names?”

Nanny provided the names, and he went to the terminal and went to work. Abil hugged her friend and cousin. She felt closer to Nanny than any of the ladies on Blue Station had ever been with her, and being raised by her was just part of it.

Nanny turned to her. “I felt it, too. That’s how I found your shuttle and then found you.”

“It was easier mind to mind.”

“It was, but I had to be so careful so you wouldn’t learn too many curse words. You learned them anyway.” She grinned.

Abil smiled. “I remember memorizing all the configurations of excrement to understand what you meant. It wasn’t until the station that I understood it wasn’t about tracking.”

“The tracking was fun. You were good at finding, if not catching, until you were eight.”

Abil laughed, and they chatted about her early hunting and the songs that Nanny crooned to her.

Yorath called out, “They are still alive. They are tending to a small outpost in the mountains, but your parents are alive.”



Nanny slumped. “That is good. I had forgotten about them when I was shifted. It was only when I was back on two feet that I remembered them.”

Abil paused. “That was the same with me and my journey here, but my beast knew where she was going. She let me see the stars.”

“That was important. Mine let me eat them.”

They giggled, and Yorath had a soft smile as he watched them. “Well, ladies, you might need to go to the market. There are a whole bunch of drakes that are due in my territory, and you need not be here when they arrive.”

Abil frowned. “When can we come back?”

“Dinner. Give me six hours to get the drakes settled. You two are causing unprecedented interest, and as Abil is mine, the attention will fall on you, Nanitha.”

Nanitha grinned. “I can deal with that.”

Abil nodded. “I will smite anyone who irritates her.”

Yorath chuckled. “My precious one, you are going to be busy.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Nanny looked around and said, “So, what do you want to buy? I have tons of currency. Literally.”

“I think I want to buy things for my cousins. Can we do that?”

“Sure. Let’s head to jewellers’ row.”

Abil smiled and linked arms with Nanny as they eased through the crowd of locals.

They stopped for fruit, and then, they were in the jewellery section.

Abil looked at Nanny. “I can buy anything I want?”

“Of course. I am acting as your family here, as Mbrak did on the station. We are your family. This is part of your dowry, and gifts for the family are often included.”

“Well, then, I should do the socially normal thing.” Abil took a deep breath and began looking into the shops while Nanny munched on sliced fruit.

Abil looked at her friend after the eighth shop. “Help.”

Nanny grabbed her and hauled her into the shop they were looking at. “Mal, this is my little cousin and your future empress, Abilathara. She is looking for gifts to send back to her cousins, and I just know you are going to provide the best.”

Mal straightened, and his skin darkened with grey and silver over his cheekbones. “Of course. Jeweller to the new empress is a heady thing.”

Nanny sliced another piece of fruit and took a seat on one of the couches. “Then, don’t fuck it up.”

Abil laughed, and Mal grinned. “Have a seat, Your Imperial Highness. I will bring the display pieces out, and you can choose what you like or ask for changes. They will be ready in a few days.”

Nanny munched more fruit and handed Abil the occasional slice as the soon-to-be empress made a list of all her cousins on the station and chose presents for them all.

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A bil looked at the total on the list, and Nanny put the fruit and small knife away and said, “Right, Mal. You know we are going to be making sure that those minerals are all high quality and correct. I will spit them out on your doorstep if you try and undercut the quality.”

“Of course, Madam Nanitha. Your discerning taste is not in doubt.”

Nanny grinned at Abil. “I chewed up some sub-standard samples and melted them in the shop of Gabiette, two doors down. I have a bit of a reputation.”

Mal shuddered. “Right. Well, thank you for your patronage, Your Highness. The balance will be charged to Madam Nanitha’s account when it is delivered.”

“How long?”

“A week? A few pieces on your list are in stock with the others. I will confirm the purity of the metals and then proceed.”

Abil stood as Nanny did, their tea set left behind. Nanny looked at Mal. “Get to

work.”

He laughed. “Yes, Madam.”

Abil smiled. “That was fun. How much more time do we need to kill?”

“Three more hours. We are heading to the fabric merchants. Brace for more tea.”

Abil giggled. “Okay.”

They stormed the fabric merchants and the leather merchant, and by the time all of the orders were placed, they were out of time and on their way to the palace once again.

They were laughing and giggling, having gotten more than tea at the leather merchants, but it had led to some hilarious choices for her cousins. Mbrak was just going to shake his head.

Nanny chuckled. “You know if they are wearing these outfits, they are going to be gone in the first shift.”

“Yes, but they will be pretty when they dive out the airlock, and that counts for something.” Abil smiled.

Nanny laughed, and they giggled their way past security who eyed them warily, and they snickered as they continued to the dining room where Yorath was waiting for them.

He caught Abil and said, “Oh, dear. Imbibing with the merchants?”

She beamed. “We did fun stuff and bought fun stuff for my cousins.” Abil looked up

at him and smiled. “You’re pretty.”

He blinked and then grinned. “Thank you, Abilathara.”

Abil frowned. “Now you say it to me.” She punched his arm.

He barked a laugh. “You are gorgeous, little one. A little drunk but gorgeous.”

He swung her into his arms and said, “Lady, please come with us.”

Abil waved at Nanny over Yorath’s shoulder. He was shaking with amusement, but it wasn’t mean. She could feel the difference now. A servant held a chair for them, and she smiled brightly at them, and they smiled in return.

Nanny moved past them and had to sit at the far end of the table. Abil frowned and turned her head, seeing six new faces that were looking at her with amusement. Well, five were looking at her in amusement, and one was looking at the place where Nanny was propping herself up on her elbows with her hands supporting her face.

Abil chuckled.

Yorath smiled. “This is taking a strange turn. I thought to introduce you to more of your relatives, but it seems you imbibed a little.”

Nanny raised a fist in the air and shouted, “More shopping,” before subsiding back into her previous position.

Abil smiled. “We may or may not have been in the leather merchant area for an hour and a half. They really were friendly.”

“I’ll bet.” Yorath cuddled her in close. “These are your parents’ grandparents.”

Abil turned and stared at the two couples. “You are? What about Mbrak?”

“He is about ten generations removed. He’s the first drake in your line. He had a child every hundred years for a while until he was sent to the station. He is a very old drake.”

She snorted. “Tell him that to his face. I dare you.”

Yorath and the others laughed.

She was introduced to them, and their names blurred, but she saw her father’s grandparents. They were silvery blue, like Yorath’s people. Her mother’s grandparents were icy green, like her hair.

“Why didn’t you come to get me when they found me?” Abil asked either couple.

Her father’s grandmother said, “Mbrak insisted that he educate and raise you. He sent us progress reports, including the references to your clipboard.”

Yorath murmured, “What was on it?”

“Oh, just reminders of how to be human. I kept forgetting. So, it said things like stand up, don’t hiss, smile, ask questions, be calm, you are wanted, you are loved. ”

Yorath looked sad, and she heard Nanny sniffing. “I am so sorry, Abil.”

“You didn’t do it. You weren’t even there. I knew I was loved with you. It was what was needed to keep me focused on playing human.” She wrinkled her nose. “It worked until it didn’t.”

Nanny sniffled. “I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. You taught me to fight, and that was important. I was nearly kidnapped three times when I was little, and I bit my way through my bonds and called Mbrak for help each time.”

Yorath held her tightly. “He didn’t mention that.”

“It was years ago. They didn’t get me off the station, and I had to add only bite when necessary to my list.” She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “That was sensible. My drake is bitey, too.”

He chuckled. “I know. I have seen the recordings that the raiders sent out to keep others from your path. You nearly got them.”

“Yeah. I missed... them.”

He snorted. “There were others that you found?”

“Ships stick in your teeth.”

Nanny snickered. “Try swallowing them whole.”

“I think I need to keep you busy learning your new worlds, Abil.”

“My new worlds?” She looked up at him and knew she had a silly smile.

“Yes, how many people are on this world right now?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Two billion, three million, seven hundred fifty-eight thousand, nine hundred twelve. Thirteen. There was a baby just born.”

He grinned. “Pardon for not understanding sooner.”

Her mother's grandmother asked, "What did you not understand?"

"She's a collecting drake. My people are now part of her hoard. So, it is very good that we are going to marry as I want to be included in what she considers hers." He smiled and stroked her cheek.

Abil looked at his dark hair, golden eyes, and slow smile. He was already hers. He belonged to her drake way back in the simulation. That reminded her of something.

"Which side has wings? I am curious which side of the family has wings."

Her mother's grandfather raised his hand. "It is from my side. Our son married a human, and she bore our granddaughter, who had you. My ancestress took in a dragon, and the wings come every two generations. I am guessing they come naturally to you?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "His gift to us."

She shrugged. "Thank you. I just wanted to know. Are we eating now?"

Yorath chuckled. "Yes, we are. Nanitha, have you met Orwon and Rikian?"

Nanny looked up and cleared her throat. "No, but they are staring at me so hard their gazes are colliding in the middle."

Yorath said, "Orwon is the one covered in tattoos, and Rikian is the other one."

The folk at the table laughed. Abil watched as Nanny blushed.



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Nanny could feel them looking at her, and she wished she was off eating an asteroid or something. Orwon was smiling at her. And Rikian had a calm expression.

The tattoos mentioned were tendrils that crept up Orwon's neck and wrapped around the edges of his jaw and hairline. His clothing rose to the base of his throat, and the collar of his formal tunic rode along the base of his neck.

His arms had the same blue-black marks as the rest of him, and she knew that whatever they were, they were not tattoos. They were moving.

Rikian chuckled. "You seem to understand about Orwon, so I will contact Mbrak and see if he has a lady who enjoys the finer things."

Nanny blinked.

Orwon smiled. "It is for the best."

Rikian laughed. "I value my life. He's been around longer than I have, and until he saw some of the files on you, he had sworn he wouldn't find a partner."

She looked at Orwon. "What files?"

He grinned. "You are a planet eater."

"That is a gross exaggeration." She mumbled. "I just ate one dwarf planet." She shrugged. "It was rogue anyway."

Orwon grinned. "I am sure it was. What did you do with all that energy?"

“Got bigger.”

He laughed. “Do you have wings?”

“I did. I don’t anymore.”

“Would you care to go for a walk with me before dinner is served?”

She opened her mouth but was stalled by a parade of servants bringing in place settings and food.

It wasn’t the way things were normally done in a palace, but the servers were improvising around an unprecedented roomful of drakes.

Nanny sat and watched Yorath angle Abil so she could eat her meal with some decorum, and she smiled. They were vibrating with the same frequency. It was lovely.

Orwon lifted his cutlery. “What are you seeing when you look at them?”

“They are humming at the same frequency.” She smiled and tried to find a starting point on her plate. “It is a very good thing.”

“You can see that?”

“Sure. I always know when drakes or dragons and some other species match. My eyes see the frequency.”

“So, your little friend—”

“Cousin.”

“Right. She has found her match?”

“Yes. I don’t need to stay close now.” She speared a vegetable she didn’t recognize and started eating.

He nodded. “That is good. My home is a distance away from here, and it is larger, so density is required. Something tells me you won’t have an issue with that.”

Nanny looked at him and kept poking at her plate. “Why would I worry about that? I don’t know you. First, I have to see my parents and check on them. They are gonna be hella old right now, but I need to see them and ask them why they sold me to Zenim.”

The table got quiet, and Nanny kept eating.

Abil whispered, “Nanny? They sold you?”

“Yup. That is how they afforded that little temple in the hills. They sold me to the royal family when Zenim expressed interest. They didn’t defend my age, my lack of interest, or care about his cruelty.” She kept eating with focus, stabbing her food.

She finished and looked up to see everyone else staring at her. “Emperor Yorath, is there dessert?”

He blinked. “Yes. Would you like two?”

“Please.”

He raised a hand, but the servant nodded and was out the door before the order could be issued.

Abil was staring with a pale complexion. “Nanny, I had no idea.”

“No one did, but the royal family, and they were interested in keeping things quiet. That is why I ran for so long and tried to become what they told me I never could.”

“A drake?”

She snorted. “Powerful. As was evidenced when I flattened Zenim into the courtyard. I could have crushed him easily, and he knew it after about a minute. I could have waited for them to fly and chased them into the stars, eating them in one crunch of my jaws.” She sighed. “I could have followed them home and consumed their palaces and population, but those actions would have caused the drake council to hunt me down and either destroy or restrain me. Either would be unlikely, and more would die.”

Orwon smiled. “You are that confident in your abilities?”

“No. I am that sure of them.” She sat back as the plate was removed and dessert was slid in front of her. Both of them.

She smiled and kept eating, finishing dessert well ahead of her dinner companions.

She sat and sipped at her water, the buzz of earlier long gone.

Orwon asked, “So, you like shopping?” He continued eating.

“I am good at it.”

“I am guessing that you are good at everything you put your hand to. Do you still need gems and jewellery?”

“Need it? No. I don’t consume it anymore. Now it’s just pretty.”

“Do you wear clothing or shift into it?”

She smiled. “Both, but I like clothing that comes off at the end of the evening.”

Orwon smiled. “Me, too.” He finished his meal, and a dessert was placed in front of him. He looked at it and slid it over to her. “Here you are, my lady.”

“Thank you. Presumptuous, but thank you.” She lifted her spoon and glanced at him. “Are you sure? It’s really good.”

“I don’t consume food that frequently. It would be lost on me.”

She grinned and went for her third dessert. He watched her with a soft smile that turned into a grin when she sat back and looked around as if scanning for more. When she realized what she was doing, she put her hands on her lap and sat quietly.

Rikion chuckled. “It seems that you live up to your reputation for appetite.”

“Not a great thing to say to a lady, but yes. Once I started consuming, the hunger grew, no matter which form I was in.” She shrugged.

Orwon smiled. “Would you like to go for that walk to settle yourself and interrogate me?”

“Sure. I know a nice path by some cliffs. I hope you have a good sense of balance.”

She smiled brightly. She nodded to Yorath. “With your permission, Your Imperial Highness?”

“Please. Go hike. Just remain in condition to dance at the wedding tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I thought it was three days from now.” She scowled.

“Well, as the important guests are already here and preparations are underway, tomorrow it will be so that I may have time with my empress as soon as possible.”

Nanny smiled at the startled Abil. “That sounds excellent. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

Yorath chuckled. “Take the dark star for a walk and keep him from scaring the locals.”

“I can do that.” She started to rise, but Orwon moved behind her, held her chair as she stood up, and then offered his arm to her.

She swallowed and slid her hand under his elbow to hold him, and she saw it. They were the same frequency. Of course.

Orwon cocked his head. “You look startled and resigned at the same time. It is an interesting combination.”

She snorted as they left the room, and she winked slowly at Abil as they passed, making her giggle. It always worked.

When they were out of the dining room and pacing down the hall toward the entry to the palace, Orwon asked, “What was with the wink?”

She smiled. “When Abil was little and I was in the form with my broken wings, she would silently ask me how I was feeling, and I would answer with a slow wink. It made her smile every time, and I used it sparingly or when she needed reassurance.

Here, I used it for recognition as she would not recognize my main form and certainly not my biped forms.”

“She never saw it?”

“No. The form I was using at the time was the only one small enough to be considered appropriate for contact with others. I regretted it as soon as the meteors struck, and I was unable to cover the vessel, but Mbrak had told me to use it so that I wouldn’t scare the family.”

“Understandable.”

“I failed as a guardian to them.”

They were walking out of the entryway and into the evening air.

“You kept her alive and nurtured her instincts even if it wasn’t the socially acceptable set. Her drake is very prepared for space and had no issue in navigating her way to her mate.”

“But her parents...”

“How large was the meteor shower?”

“It pelted the ground for a week. I kept my body between the rocks and the shuttle during every fall.”

“The parents should have navigated around the storm. Most would. As they were headed here, was there any reason for them to go through it?”

She sighed. “It saved them two days of travel with a toddler.”

“So, you have already done the math.”

“A thousand times.”

“Which way are we going?”

She pointed to the left, and they walked toward the well-worn path that would take them to the overlook.

He nodded, and they kept walking, silent for a few minutes while she wiped the tears from her cheeks.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Nanitha sighed. “I can’t help but feel guilty. She was so small.”

“That leaves me with a serious question.”

“Okay.”

“If you were stuck as a drake, how did you change her diaper?”

Nanitha laughed. “Oh, that. She went free-range, and I used a light cleaning fire on her butt and bits. Fortunately, she potty trained shortly after we met.”

Orwon nodded. “Sensible. So, when we have little ones, I think it is best for all that we do it in the biped form. Mating your larger form would be difficult. Not impossible, but I think your gestational appetite would wreak havoc.”

She felt heat flare in her cheeks. “You seem very sure.”

“Do our frequencies match?”

She sighed. “They do. Rikian is very close to one of my cousins, but I would have to see them together to confirm it.”

“And you just blurred over the fact that we are a match.”

Nanitha wrinkled her nose. “Caught that, did you? So, you are a dark star?”

“Yes. Nice and dense.”

“Your markings?”

“Follow me in every form. I was egg-hatched and transformed first when I was two hundred. This form has taken getting used to, but right now, I am very pleased to be here.” He lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss.

“How old are you?”

He smiled. “Five hundred to your three hundred fifty years.”

“Wow. That isn’t common knowledge.”

“You flew through the stars for three hundred years. Everyone knows of the devourer.”

“Ah. What quaint names they give a person.” She ducked her head. “Time stops meaning anything.”

He nodded. “That is true. However, with you, I want every moment to count.”

She looked at him, startled. “You just met me.”

“You passed through my system on your great journey. I watched you help a foundering vessel to get moving, cleared a path for them through the asteroid belt, and got them back on their way.”

Nanny frowned. “Where were you?”

“Curled up in the dark star, having a nap.”

“Oh. Oh! I know where that was.”

“You should. You left munch marks all over the system.” He chuckled. “I was enthralled with a female of such appetites, but there was no way I was going to put my smaller self in your path. You looked hungry and irritated.”

“I was filling in.”

“I know. I feel honoured you stopped to sate yourself in my territory.”

She blinked at him. “You are saying something under the words.”

“Absolutely.” He chuckled. “How many forms do you have?”

“Twenty-five or so.”

“That is... many.”

“Ten of them are bipeds. Five are bipeds with wings. The rest are dragons or drakes.”

“What is your most comfortable form?”

“Oh, my original biped form.”

“The one you are in?”

“Oh, no.”

He blinked. “No?”

“My eyes stay the same, but this form is more approachable than my other one.”

“Abil recognized you.”

“She recognized my eyes. She never saw my original form.”

“May I see it?”

“Today? Now? I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“Then, may I share a kiss with you?”

“There are people around.”

He chuckled and halted. “There really aren’t.”

She glanced around, and he was right. They were at the edge of the lookout, and there was no one but them.

Orwon caressed her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “Just one kiss and meet me halfway.”

She sighed. “I kiss like a drake.”

He grinned. “We can expound on that.”

She looked at him and leaned in, lifting herself up, and he was truthful. He met her halfway.

His mouth was warm against her closed lips, and then, they moved, and when she was pressed entirely against him, he wrapped an arm around to support her, and she tasted him, and he tasted her, and they continued as they vibrated softly together.

When they parted, she was flushed and warm. His hands had been respectful and supportive. The tendrils on the side of his face had caressed her cheeks, but now, they

were flat against his features except for one little tendril waving happily.

Nanitha giggled, reached up, and smoothed the happy little tendril down. “Very cute.”

“Thank you. The darkness that wraps me is one of the things that has made me wait for my proper match. It got very excited when it saw you, but it was also confused.”

She chuckled. “It wasn’t confused; it was eager to see if I matched. I can confirm that I do, but I think I need to think about things now.”

He chuckled and stroked her cheek. “You are staying at the palace?”

“Oh, no. I have a place in the city. I didn’t know when she would arrive, but I knew she would. I needed a separate residence.” She smiled. “As tomorrow is formal, I will wear my actual biped form to the wedding. The rituals begin at dawn, so I should get to bed.”

He chuckled. “My beast is freaking out.”

“He can cool his jets, or I will take a bite out of his tail every time he annoys me.” She smiled.

“Well, that did it. May I escort you to your home?”

“Certainly. It is in the city limits.”

“The sooner we get you to bed, the sooner I see you in the morning.”

She chuckled, and they walked back to the city. It was far slower than their walk out to the cliff that overlooked an ocean reflecting a sky full of stars. That had all seemed

inconsequential to the soft smile and hope in his eyes. Orwon's entire body resonated with hers, and her drake felt it.

They walked through the night market, and she showed him her favourite fruit vendor, the place she bought her silks, and poor Mal who was working into the night to fill Abil's order.

He looked up warily. "What can I get for you, Madam?"

"I am just showing my friend where I shop. He is trying to get a feel for my tastes."

"Yours or your friend's?"

"Mine."

"Oh. Right. Opals. Madam loves opals in platinum."

Orwon chuckled. "Why does that not surprise me?"

Mal brought out her purchase history prior to Abil's arrival. "Here you are."

Orwon flipped through the pages and grinned. "Good. This is good information."

She smiled. "We will leave you to it, Mal. Would you like me to send you some food?"

He looked at her and checked the time. "My wife is on her way with something. Thanks to your orders, we are planning a new house."

"Well, I will likely be leaving soon, but Abilatha will be using you as her jeweller as she develops. That should change things up."

Mal smiled. "So, I am gathering that you are going to be travelling again?"

"Yes. You could say that." She didn't look at Orwon, but she could feel him smiling.

Nanny walked around the space while Orwon seemed to memorize her collection. He glanced at her. "You don't consume these?"

"No, I have trained myself to avoid opals and platinum. None of my forms eat them."

Mal blinked. "Wait. You eat them?"

"No, I just said I didn't." She smiled. "I haven't needed to eat jewels in years."

Mal stared. "So, you are actually a drake."

"Yes. I am surprised it took you this long to figure it out." She grinned. "I brought the next empress to you, and she obviously is one. The designs please the drake, and the work is only absorbed if necessary."

He blinked. "Well, thank you for coming to me."

She grinned. "You are welcome. I am very happy to have brought her here. You are very personable."

Mal smiled.

"And your wife is amazing."

He laughed. "She is, and here she is."

The door opened, and the lovely woman with a ponytail of dark brown hair that

reached her middle back stood there. “Mal, you are chatting?”

“Just conversing with the patron, Leena.”

Leena looked over and blinked. She curtsied deeply. “Lady, it is good to see you walking the city.”

“Don’t curtsy, Leena. You know it makes me feel icky.” She held out her arms. “Come in for a hug, if you will.”

The thud as the woman hugged her reverberated in the room. “Hey, Lee. You look prosperous. Mal, take the basket; it is digging in.”

Mal smiled and pulled the dinner basket away from his wife’s grip, and Leena held Nanny tightly.

Nanny stroked her back and neck. “Hey, little one. It has been a few years since I saw you.”

Orwon smiled. “You have been collecting strays?”

“No, just guarding those without shelter. There was a broken long-range vessel that sent some of its unattached children to Yorath’s care, and I opened an orphanage and raised them as best I could.”

Orwon frowned. “Unattached?”

Leena mumbled, “We were born outside of a confirmed union; they had no use for us. They were building a new society, and we were proof that impulses won out.”

“Ah. How old were you when you arrived?”



“Twelve. There were fourteen of us, but I was the youngest. Lady Nanitha set us up and bought us a house and educated us so we could introduce ourselves to local society. Most of us are in the service sector, but we have small shops and businesses that are well attended.”

Orwon handed the list back to Mal. “What is your business?”

“Flowers. I am just taking a few minutes out to bring Mal dinner because the wedding has been moved up, and we have hundreds of table displays to create.”

Nanny smiled. “Would you like help?”

Leena smiled slowly. “You would help?”

“Certainly. I have to leave by dawn to get ready for the party, but I can definitely do it. I think I can remember how.”

Leena clapped and hopped.

“I will be there as soon as I can, love.”

Nanny smiled. “Leena, you are going to be on admin only. I don’t want you stressing out that little bean you are carrying.”

Leena blinked. “You know?”

“Your pattern swirls from your chest and now your belly. It is obvious.” She glanced at Mal, who was looking very pleased with himself. “It explains your plans for a new house.”

Orwon offered, “I will help as well. I find the discovery of more layers to Nanitha

fascinating.”

Nanny looked at Mal. “Eat your dinner and finish what you are working on, then come and take care of your wife.”

She linked arms with Leena. “Lead the way, little one.”

Orwon smiled and said to Mal, “I will speak with you before we leave.”

Outside, Leena asked, “You are leaving?”

“You started your life with Mal. I am going to try to start one with Orwon. He matches me.”

“I had hoped you would be here for this baby’s arrival.”

She glanced at Orwon. “I might be able to get a ride. He seems to have a better grasp of time than I do.”

Leena nodded. “I hope you can make it. I have convinced myself you would be there if I needed you.”

“The new empress was also one of my charges. I will be a regular visitor to this world.”

Leena smiled. “Good. I want my family to know you.”

Orwon followed them as they went to the florist part of the market, and Leena’s shop was bustling with light glowing into the dimness. Excited voices greeted them as all of the other fosters stopped what they were doing for hugs.

Orwon whispered in between meeting her charges. “They don’t know you were here?”

“They needed to start on their own, and I have a lot of biped shapes.”

He nodded and smiled. He looked to Leena. “Where do you need us?”

“Can you strip the thorns from the roses?”

Nanny grinned and hauled him over to the side where the base flowers were waiting for treatment. She made some claws, and he followed her lead as she used her index, middle finger, and thumb to thread the rose, and then, she pulled it out, removing thorns and extra leaves. He followed, and they went through the entire collection of roses.

After that, it was clipping flowers to a precise length and setting them in the vessels waiting.

The whole shop was moving fast, but with them adding built-in clippers and Orwon’s height, the archways got arranged, and by the time it was one in the morning, the extra twenty people via the foundlings and their spouses had completed the order for the next morning, with Leena focusing on floral crowns and bouquets.

They looked at each other and looked at the assembled mass.

Leena blinked. “Now, how do I get it into the palace.”

Orwon smiled. “I’ve got that. I have a very large guestroom and can stow everything in there for the night. At dawn, I will move it to the main hall.”

Nanny nodded. “Everyone, stand away from the flowers. Get behind us, please.”

The family parted and backed away from their efforts. Orwon held out his hand, and the entire mass was covered in black. A guest suite was visible, and the flowers filled the room. When he dropped his hand, the portal closed, and the flowers were safe.

Leena looked dazed. “We did it!”

Nanny opened a com link and left a message for the housekeeper and the majordomo. They would know where to get started the following morning.

Nanny smiled at Orwon. “It looks like you need a place to sleep tonight.”

He smiled. “Really? I hadn’t put that together at all.”

The men in the gathering laughed as they were all hugging and slowly drifting into different directions. Mal came up, hugged Leena, and then whisked his wife off for the night after she locked up.

Nanny linked arms with Orwon and asked, “So, shall we adjourn for the evening? Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

He chuckled. “Lead the way, my lady.”

She walked him through the quiet streets and eyed a few would-be thieves in the shadows. They caught her gaze and melted away against the buildings.

“So, you have a reputation.” Orwon chuckled.

She shrugged. “One of my forms has wings and a tail. A very long, sharp tail.”

“And the claws.”

“Of course.”

“I like you very much.”

She smiled. “I think I like you as well. You certainly know your way around a floral arch.”

He sighed. “Misspent youth.”

She giggled, and they walked to her home inside a wall inside the wall.

Nanny opened the gate and stepped inside her sanctuary.

“Oh, my. I am definitely in your territory here.” Orwon looked around her courtyard, where the fountains, plants, and fruit trees were all well-tended and healthy.

“Yes, you are. Yorath doesn’t even know about this place. One would think he would catch on to another drake on his world.” She chuckled.

“I understand why. You have marked the stone. It says don’t look behind the walls.”

She smiled. “You are very smart. Come this way. I have a guestroom.”

“Just one?”

Nanny chuckled. “Only one bedroom that you will be seeing.”

She walked him into the house and up to the guestroom she was offering to him.

“Thank you for tonight. It was nice to see you interacting with normal folks.”

“None of them are drakes?”

“Not one. All blissfully human.”

He smiled. “I will see you in the morning. Five?”

“Yes. That sounds reasonable. Good night, and thanks again.”

He inclined his head. “Sleep well, Nanitha.”

She nodded and headed to her own bed. She had four hours of sleep to cram in before she put on her own face again. That was nerve-racking in and of itself.

She showered, left the room wrapped in a towel, and looked at her wedding day dress on its stand. It wasn't really a dress; it was a pretentious set of handkerchiefs, but that was what passed for wedding wear on this world.

Nanitha breathed in deeply and exhaled, taking on the shape she was born with. Her hair rippled to her knees in a soft silver waterfall, her eyes were sparkling opal, and her skin had a glossy iridescent sheen.

She put the gold clothing on, and her back was exposed and the rest of her was covered with the delicate silks that moved around her slowly. The light slippers concealed her toes, and she twirled once to let her hair and dress settle, and then, she put on her jewels.

Nanitha left her room and headed downstairs to make breakfast in her full regalia.

She made some tea, toast, fruit, and eggs. She didn't have any breakfast meat on hand, but it was ready when Orwon came down for breakfast.

He froze. “You are Nekkordan.”

She smiled. "It is the ears, right? The big pointy ears?"

He nodded. "And the eyes. The eyes of brightest opal."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose that is what made me a collectors' item."

Orwon walked up to her and looked her over. "I have never seen one of your kind up close."

"Well, you are close now. Sit your ass down and eat, or I switch back into my other form." She smiled. "No more eye candy if you don't eat."

He grinned. "You already ate?"

"Yes. Now, eat, and we can get you dressed for the wedding and head out."

He winked, and his clothing shifted into a silk sleeveless tunic and dark trousers. His hair smoothed, and she noted that his markings covered his arms. Her heart thudded in her chest at the sight.

She mentally fanned herself and had to turn away, putting everything back into its proper place.

"You live here alone?"

"Yes. The house that had the children is more centrally located."

"Do they know what you look like?"

"No. They know the form I wore yesterday. They will understand this one when I introduce myself or they see me with you. Either one will get the point across."

He finished his breakfast, and she cleaned up the plates and cups and put them away.

Orwon stood up and was bristling with power. “You are stunning, Nanitha.”

She smiled. “I know. That is all I heard from the brothers. I haven’t worn this form since I ran from them.”

“I hope I never give you cause to run from me.” He walked to her and slowly wrapped her in an embrace.

“I hope so, too. I know how to manage myself now.” She held onto him. “I just had to grow up.”

He inhaled deeply and sighed happily. “You smell like you now. It’s wonderful.”

“Thank you. Today is a trust exercise. Make sure that there is no reason for me to take off on my own, but either way, I am still going to talk to my parents. They have a lot to answer for.”

Orwon nodded. “I will be careful. Now, smile for the bride. It’s her big day.”

“I will smile when Abil is in front of me, and I will probably cry.”

He laughed, and they left her home and locked the gate behind them.

The wedding began at dawn.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Nanitha entered her little girl's chambers while Orwon went off to help with the flowers. Half a dozen maids followed and helped Abil get up and bathe for her big day.

Abil looked around, and her gaze locked on Nanitha. "Nanny?"

"I thought to dress up in my best for your big day."

"Oh, you are gorgeous." Abil gushed.

"I get that a lot. It's why this is only for special occasions. Now, hold still; you have a smudge."

The maids went after it, and Abil was soon clean, brushed, and ready to be wrapped in soft cloths and put on a comfortable chair while food and beverages were provided.

Nanitha smiled and looked at the dress that was waiting. "You will be a lovely bride, but that is only to be expected. I raised you right."

Abil laughed. "It must have been eating all those herd beasts."

"Yup, for a healthy mane and coat or whatever."

Abil snickered, and they kept the banter up until she was dressed and the jewels Yorath had sent over were provided. They made Abil's eyes sparkle and weighed her down in case she was going to make a run for it.

“Are you ready?”

Abil looked at her and smiled. “Yes. I am.”

Nanitha took her hand and led her out of the room, down to the main gardens where the ceremony was being held.

Yorath and Orwon were waiting, along with her great-grandparents. Nanitha walked her charge to her fiancé and helped her to kneel.

She moved behind and to the side, kneeling on her own.

Yorath stared at her for a moment, shook his head, and then focused on Abil. He didn't look away.

They held hands, and the light caressed them, their contact blessed by the rays of the sun.

Nanitha caught the scent of the flowers as the morning air warmed up, and she smiled at the archway over the couple.

Yorath murmured pledges to Abil, and she repeated them back. Their beasts already liked each other, so this was just for optics.

The ceremony was a gentle exchange of pledges, and when they sealed it with a kiss, Nanitha and Orwon rose to their feet and helped the couple up before walking back to the entry point of the gardens and opening the doors for the army of servants to come and set up tables and the flowers and chairs and the wave was endless. The party was about to commence.

Nanitha and Orwon got together and watched the efficient servants of the palace

dress the room for dignitaries from around the neighbouring systems.

He asked, "So, do you want a large ceremony?"

She smiled. "Are you an emperor?"

He chuckled. "Thankfully, no. I am simply the guardian of my worlds."

"Good. Um, how many worlds?"

He shrugged. "A few thousand outside of my home system. I try and visit four or five per year, but I use portals."

"Hm."

"I would offer you traditional transport for a mate."

"What is that?"

He grinned. "In my mouth."

"Oh. I have heard of that. And then I walk down your tongue like a cargo ramp."

He laughed. "Yes. I haven't done it, personally, but I am assured I will not feel the need to swallow. We can even go flying with your full form if you like. I know empty systems where you can stretch out and enjoy yourself."

She smiled. "There is the sweet talk I knew you were capable of."

He grinned. "It isn't a conventional courtship, but you have been through quite a bit, and this seems to be working."

A maid walked up and said softly, “If it pleases, the emperor would like to meet with you in his study.”

Nanitha got to her feet, and Orwon joined her. “Could you lead the way?”

“Of course, Lady.”

They followed the woman through the palace and walked into Torath’s office, where Abil was sitting on the arm of his chair and smiling.

“Nanny, why didn’t you tell me?”

“How? I couldn’t speak, and when I had words, you were safe with Mbrak. This is the first time seeing you in twenty years, and I didn’t think about my appearance as the first topic of discussion.”

Abil sighed. “Fair.”

Yorath sighed. “Your species is rare.”

“I am aware.”

“Did your parents have this appearance?”

“Not that I can remember. Why?”

“It’s a dominant gene.”

“Oh. Oh!” She blinked.

Abil asked, “What does that mean?”

“My dad isn’t my dad, or my mom isn’t my mom, or I am adopted.” Nanitha shrugged.

Yorath smiled slightly. “You don’t seem concerned.”

“I eat small planets. Concern for my bloodlines isn’t high on my priorities.”

Orwon said, “It might not be a bad idea to look into it. If your parent is out there still, it would be a good idea to find them in case any of our children are of an independent streak. Mating within a bloodline isn’t great.”

Ninitha blinked. “Right. I forgot about that. They might not have my senses.”

Orwon squeezed her hand. “I appreciate your senses.”

She beamed.

Abil said, “You are staying for the dancing?”

“Of course. That was my promise. Have you been in touch with Mbrak?”

“Yes. He’s sending wedding presents.”

“That sounds like him.” Nanitha smiled.

“And we have to visit in the next three years.”

“That definitely sounds like him.”

“There has been a resurgence in interest in Nekkordans in recent years. Some want them for collector’s items, and other races are attempting to rework themselves in that

image. There are alerts set up around the inhabited worlds to notify interested parties when one of your kind is seen.”

“I am also a drake-dragon mix.” She smiled and looked at Orwon. “I have different genetics.”

He nodded. “I know. Your scent screams it. I am not worrying about crossing bloodlines on my end.”

She blushed. “I have been soil-bound for too long. The scent comes out most in this form.”

Orwon wrapped himself around her and sniffed behind her ear. “There it is. Intoxicating.”

“Which is what led to Nekkordans being dissected and used for irresistible aphrodisiacs.”

Yorath nodded. “You are okay for the party?”

“I will dance as promised to Abil, and then Orwon and I will leave if he doesn’t mind.”

“That will be sensible. The gifts and good wishes have been offered. I am looking forward to the dance.”

Abil smiled. “I have sort of seen wedding dancing in the simulations. It is lovely, but I never really learned.”

Nanitha cleared her throat. “At the station?”

“Yes.”

“I may or may not have visited Mbrak a century ago and let him create scans of me.”

Abil grinned. “That was you?”

“Whether the skin was or wasn’t, I have no idea, but I am pretty sure the moves were based on the original scans.”

“Oh, boy, this is going to be nice.”

Yorath looked to Orwon. “You have been warned that she is hunted.”

“I have been.”

Nanitha waved her hand at the emperor. “My other form is the size of a world-killing asteroid. I will be fine.”

They all blinked as if they had forgotten.

She laughed. “Everyone forgets that. It’s why the ships get so close. They look away and forget.” She shrugged. “I am not sure which of my genes has that effect.”

Yorath smiled. “The drake. For years, it was thought that all drakes were dragons, but it turns out that dragons are rare while drakes outnumber them one hundred to one. They are just more successful in breeding. Dragons are far more charming than drakes are.”

Abil smirked. “Must be the wings and smoother necks so someone can ride them.”

Yorath leaned over, and she turned pink.

Nanitha chuckled and looked out one of the windows to see the polished dance floor being arranged under the open sky.

Her performance was drawing nigh, and then, it was time for Abil to finish the wedding night with her husband. Nanitha's duty was done. Abil was all grown up.

The sun was high, and the plants Nanitha had put at the corners of the dance area were in place. She began to dance with the plants rustling and thumping to a beat only they knew, but they were sharing with those around them.

She slid her feet, held out her arms, and twisted, feeling the vines from the plants moving with her. She moved, twisted, and focused on the beat, ignoring Orwon's hot gaze on her.

Her dance lasted ten minutes, and those who had seen it were silent as she stepped from the stage. She kissed Abil on the cheek and whispered that she would be back soon.

Orwon got to his feet, nodded to the dazed Yorath, then wrapped his arms around Nanitha, and took to the sky in a single bound.

When they landed, he shifted into his drake form and opened his mouth. She stepped inside, and he carefully closed around her before lunging skyward.

She felt the change as they left the atmosphere and then cruised away from ships and planets until he could open a portal that would take them to his home.

When he landed again and opened his mouth, she was surprised. It was her home. She stepped out of his mouth and cleaned herself off with a rapid shift.

He changed form and said, "You wanted answers. This is where you will find them."



The temple up the hill had a serene garden and bright light everywhere.

Nanitha exhaled and started the long walk up the hill. Orwon was next to her the entire way.

The older couple came out, and she saw that they were drake-born but not drakes. All the potential and none of the activation. She nodded as she stood in front of them. “Mother, Father, I have questions.”

Her parents clung together, and her father said, “Ask.”

“Why did you sell me to Zenim and Arken? Why didn’t you help me when I said I needed to run, that he was hurting me? Why didn’t you make him wait until I was an adult?”

Her parents stared, and her father began to sob. Her mother swallowed. “We are not your parents.”

“I know that, but you were my guardians. Why did you just hand me over to that bastardy nightmare?”

She looked at them, and her mother straightened. “They threatened to put us off world. We didn’t have anything left over to start again.”

“I could have helped you.”

Her mother nodded. “You did. We got enough funds from selling you to set up this temple to the drake ancestors, and this is now how we live.”

“Hmm. Who were my parents?”

“We found an egg. We don’t know who your parents are.”

She nodded. “Tell me where I was found.”

Her mother’s expression darkened. “No. You have no right to make these demands of us.”

Nanitha stretched and put on two whipping tails and four wings. She spoke softly and ended on a roar. “I have every right!”

Her father stopped weeping, went inside, and got a display unit. “Here. We got you here. We sold your shell to get us this far.”

“So, I hatched out as a teen.”

“Correct. We thought you were an adult.”

“Right. So, you sold a hatchling. That makes it so much worse. Well, Arken and Zenim are no longer the lords of this world. Be nice to the one who comes behind because he might not be so pleasant to those who sell their hatchlings.” She grimaced. “The next guardian here might even be me. Take that under advisement.”

She rose up on her wings and went to the hillside behind their house and exhaled, melting a wave of stone that cascaded down to butt up against the rear of the temple. The entire hillside was now made of precious metals with occasional studs of precious gems.

She landed next to Orwon. “There. You have all the precious metals you could ever want and all the gems just waiting for you to free them, and I would do it before other pirates come to claim them.”

Her parents stared at each other, and horror dawned.

“You sold me, and I have gifted you with enough wealth for several lifetimes... if you can claim it. Enjoy. I will be notifying treasure hunters in two days.”

Orwon looked at her and inclined his head. He said, “Shall we go?”

“Yes, please. Your place?”

“Excellent. Please make yourself comfortable.” He shifted and opened his mouth. She stepped inside and settled again, looking at the display she had taken from her father. So, she came from that small world that had fresh water and not a lot else.

She felt the portal, felt space on all sides, and the undulation of his body caused her to nod off.

She woke up in a comfortable bed with a dark arm wrapped around her waist. “Hello, Orwon.”

He kissed her shoulder. “You were firmly asleep, and I had to roll you across the ground to get you off my tongue. It made quite the first impression. You sleep soundly.”

She grinned. “I know. I just used to sleep while floating in space and woke up with grapples in my scales.”

He rolled her to her back and stared at her. “You sleep out there?”

“Absolutely. I sleep when I am tired.”

He smiled. “Do you want the ceremony?”

“I want a public pledge, but it doesn’t have to be fancy. I don’t need an empire full of flowers.”

Orwon moved over her and kissed her. “What if I want a star system full of flowers?”

“You have to arrange them. I am no good with floral arrangements.” She stroked the markings on his neck and shoulders.

“I am very good at arrangements. What is your normal focus?”

She grinned. “Raising children.”

He nuzzled at her neck and licked softly. “That sounds like fun.”

“I have only dealt with them from two years onward. I don’t have any experience with smaller ones.”

“Oh, I am sure you will rise to the occasion.”

She held his head as she moved against him. “It seems as if you have already done the hard work.”

He chuckled. “This situation has been steady since I first saw you.” He put his head between her breasts and licked and sucked at each as he slowly moved down her body.

She threaded her fingers through his hair as he slid into the juncture of her thighs and settled in to sample her until she was softly whimpering until she whined and arched as her body throbbed under Orwon’s careful tongue.

He pressed his mouth to her thigh, and she felt a sharp stab that made her jump. She

felt suction, and her head dropped back to the pillow. He drank for a minute, and then, he slowly moved up her body, pressing into her deliberately.

She gasped and met his gaze; no time for blushing as he sank into her; she had to respond. As they moved together, he rolled to his back, and she was bracing herself on his chest and figuring out what her body wanted.

When her rhythm was established, she stretched her arms skyward and let her hair tumble around them both. Orwon's eyes glowed, and she continued to rock against him.

The next release came with his lower appendage writhing inside her and the dark tattoos gripping her thighs.

She sighed and lowered herself over him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "Well, I am guessing that this is the answer to my query of if you will be my mate?"

She giggled and nipped at his chest. "Let's see how the next century goes."

"Or first pregnancy."

"Yes, whatever comes first, we will make it official."

He grinned. "Well, you will be coming first if I have anything to say about it. It makes you taste so sweet."

"Is that why you drank?"

"Yes. You may feel the urge yourself later. I will oblige and give you everything at my disposal."

Nanitha smiled and put her chin down on his chest. “Where are we?”

“The centre of my home solar system. Mlaken Four.”

“How big is the system?”

“Twenty-three planets and I am depending on you to help me keep them in order.”

She smiled. “That is a nice reasonable number.”

“Do you think so?” He caressed her back and hips.

“Absolutely. Do you think we can take a short trip to find where my egg was found?”

He grinned. “Of course, my lady. Do you want to get dressed and see your new world?”

“No, and yes.” She eased off him, flicked her shape twice, and dismounted to the floor.

He sat up, and she was able to appreciate all of the glorious dark lines that wrapped him and mimicked the dark star he was named for.

He grinned. “You have a fast recovery.”

She chuckled. “Apparently. Now, come and show me your world, and then, we can plot the stars to find out where I was laid.”

“I have never met another hatchling before. You are different from most other drakes.”

She grinned. “Is it the two-tail thing? I like the two-tail thing.”

He got up, his scales turned to clothing as he slid an arm around her and walked to the closed shutter. He pulled them open, and she saw a space full of creatures that flew, graceful stone buildings, and so many citizens walking and driving and flying in the distance.

“Oh, my. This is quite the situation.”

He squeezed her. “Do you like it?”

“It looks wonderful.”

“Good. This was my home and where I always return.”

“Do you have any family here?”

He chuckled. “You could say that. While my parents are no longer with me, the descendants from my numerous siblings are. They are the kings and queens of the worlds around us, and I guard them.”

She chuckled. “It seems that the urge to care for others is a failing in our union.”

He grinned. “Or its greatest strength. Now, would you care to fly across our world?”

“Of course, Orwon. Don’t forget about tracing the egg. I am fixated.”

He nodded and wrapped his arms around her, spreading his wings and taking flight.

“Of course you are. I would be as well.”

She grinned and looked at the world beneath her as he flew them, and the locals

cheered and called greetings as they passed. Nanitha waved, and Orwon held her close. He wanted to show her her new world, and she had no objections.

\* \* \* \*



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:38 am*

Six years later.

Nanitha landed with Orwon next to her. They had dropped to the surface, but their shuttle was waiting in low orbit.

“Are you sure?” she muttered as they walked through the valley.

“I am positive. Out of the ninety-three drakes questioned, this was the most likely spot. So, let’s just ask.” He kept a hand on her back, and they walked along the path until they were standing in front of a neat house which sported a lovely garden with waterfalls and a wall to keep out predators. The front gates were currently wide open to let the sun in, and a couple were working together, talking softly.

The couple looked up, and Nanitha froze. Orwon kept his hand on her back and continued their approach. “Excuse me, but we have some questions regarding a drake egg abandoned a few centuries ago in the Nyath sector.”

The woman with the mint green hair gasped, and the man with the crystal hair and opal eyes looked hopeful. He whispered, “We were coming home and under attack. The egg was lost.”

Nanitha whispered, “It was found, and the shell was used for currency. The occupant survived but took longer to mature.”

There was silence, and she lowered her hood. “Hi!”

The woman gasped, and the man smiled, but his eyes were shining. “Hi. We didn’t

think you made it, or we would have gone back for you.”

“I am stubborn. Oh, I am Nanitha, and this is my mate, Orwon.”

Orwon smiled. “She is the devourer, and I am the dark star.”

They looked at each other and smiled. “Would you care to come inside? There is a lot to talk about.”

Nanitha paused. “May I have a hug first? I have really gotten into hugging.”

The woman wiped her hands on her apron and then blew fire on them. “I thought you would never ask. Come here, baby.”

It was the same gentle fire Nanitha had used on Abil.

Nanitha walked forward and hugged her mother, the drake. Her father wrapped his arms around her, and she felt the dragon in the Nekkordan.

“Oh. Oh! You are having a little one.” Her mother leaned back.

“Not so little. Due in two months.” She smiled and rubbed her belly.

Orwon chuckled. “This was our last chance before the healers recommend that she stay planet-bound.”

“Come in, come in.” Her mother led her to the house that had a dimensional effect. It was huge on the inside.

Nanitha was settled in a chair, and her father got two more as it was obvious that her parents lived alone and liked it.

Her mother sat close and kept a hand on her, pressing for information on her upbringing and adulthood. She mentioned her adoptive family, being sold, making a run for it, and spending blissful centuries eating her way through the stars.

Her father stared. “That really was you? They put alerts on travel in those regions. They recommended against it.”

Orwon smiled. “That is Nanitha. A caution.”

She grinned.

Her mother smiled. “You chose not to bear in your original form?”

“At present, I am close to ten kilometres long. I don’t think he could find it, and I certainly couldn’t feel it.”

Her father laughed. “Thalina got pregnant in her biped form and was stuck during one shift, and from then on, it was egg all the way.”

“Mordon was in my mouth when we were trying to transport you from where labour had hit to our home. We wanted you here, but we were under attack. They fired at me, but when they fired at my jaws, I had to protect my mate. I am sorry, Nanitha.”

Orwon smiled. “It is understandable. She was an idea; your mate depended on you.”

Nanitha smiled. “I really do understand. Did you have more children?”

Thalina shook her head. “No. You were all of our hopes and dreams, and we left you behind. I left you behind.”

Mordon shook his head. “You did nothing wrong. You had to choose.”

Thalina looked at Nanitha. "I think I chose wrong."

Nanitha smiled. "I survived and have reconstituted most of my shell. It has been transformed into sculptures, tablets, tables, chairs, hair combs, jewellery, and a tea tray, along with several raw samples. Do you have a com?"

Thalina smiled. "We do."

Nanitha rubbed her belly. "Do you travel?"

Mordon smiled. "We can."

"We are intruding, and you have much to settle, but I would like you to see your grandchild in their first year. You are invited to stay, and we have a quiet country home not too different from this one. There is a garden, there are fountains, and there is peace."

Orwon smiled. "Until the three little ones that we have adopted run in, and then, all bets are off."

Nanitha smiled. "And on that note, we will be off. I hate being away from them, but this was so very important."

Thalina got up and fell to her knees in front of Nanitha. "Thank you for this chance. Thank you for seeking us out."

Mordon nodded.

"Nanitha is all about giving chances." Orwon waited, helped her up then walked carefully with his hand on her back.

They were escorted to their pickup spot, and as Nanitha put on her four-winged form

with the two tails, Mordon started to cry as his own four wings and two tails manifested.

They exchanged com data and flew up to their shuttle, returning to the stars.

When they were on their way, Nanitha wiped tears away. “I wonder what they will say when all of our first three are Nekkordan.”

“I think they will enjoy their new grandchildren and enjoy the one that is coming.”

Nanitha smiled and looked at the stars. “Is it bad that I want to bite a volcano?”

“I have heard that Abil said they are spicy.”

Nanitha laughed and looked at her mate. “They are.”

He grinned. “By the way, I would have had you spit me out to protect the egg.”

She looked at him ruefully. “If you don’t know by now, I don’t spit, I swallow. You just would have had roommates, but we are not them, and I have no idea how large Thalina’s beast is.”

He snorted, hugged her, and got back to business.

Orwon made a portal, and they transferred back to home space. When they returned to their house and the guards that looked over her little ones, Nanitha’s heart swelled happily. She knew where she came from, so now, she could plan where she was going. A thousand possibilities and asteroids to eat loomed in her very long life. It was a delightful thought and one for the ages.