

# SHED

## EVERYTHING



the Inmara Fennumera

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PDF edition

the Inmara Fenumera

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# Contents

Chapter 1 - It happened	1
Chapter 2 - Tipping the scales	24
Chapter 3 - Admit it	44
Chapter 4 - Ectothermic or bust	63
Chapter 5 - Fight, flight, or freeze	83
Chapter 6 - What everything else wants	104
Chapter 7 - Cassandra's kitchen	125
Chapter 8 - Family time	144
Chapter 9 - The death of a name	167
Chapter 10 - How to shed the fuzz	186
Chapter 11 - Animal control	204
Chapter 12 - House arrest	220
Chapter 13 - Turning up the Heath	238
Chapter 14 - Cheating Todd	258

Chapter 15 - My new life	273
Other books by the Inmara	293
About the authors	295

## Chapter 1 - It happened

**W**AKE UP WITH a popping sensation, my body shivering and a hollowness in my gut.

*It happened!*

Never in my wildest dreams did I really think magic was real, but it just happened.

The first thing I do, maybe before I'm even thinking of it, I'm feeling my stomach with my hands. I rub my arms. Then, with a spike of anxiety, I reach for my junk.

Dammit. Of course. It's still there.

But I feel like it still worked, somehow. Something in my mind is telling me that jolt was *real*.

I don't even know the name of the being I was talking to in my dream. It? She, maybe? She had sort of a feminine aura, I think. Maybe I want her to. Her voice felt like the voice of the world. Not just the Earth, but the whole thing. But all I could see of her was a glowing source of light in infinite darkness, and the impression of a silhouette in front of that.

I know I live in the real world and it was just a dream, but we'd made a bargain.

I can't even recall what the bargain was. It was a dream! I'm awake now, and things like that don't make it into the

waking world of chores, school, and shitty classmates. The world where something's wrong with my body.

But I can remember what I was promised. Ever since about third grade, when my spontaneous erections really started to feel awful, it's all I've been able to think about.

I roll and scramble out of my bed, stumbling briefly on the way to my bedroom door. I do know where each leg is. I don't step on any of those. It's just that for a brief moment, the floor was closer than I expected.

That's the wrong direction, if I'm supposed to be shrinking, I think. Disappointment and bitter frustration war with a feeling like fizziness in my chest that today is somehow better than my birthday and Christmas combined.

And I realize that, yes, I'm yanking my door open and dashing across the hallway in my underwear. Not even a T-shirt.

Oh, who cares. It's early. My brother's still in bed, and I can hear my parents in the kitchen, and they've all seen me like this. The important thing is that the bathroom is free.

It'd be cool if I were wearing socks, because then I could slide into place in front of the bathroom mirror. Instead, my feet stutter against the floor, rooting me in place, making it necessary to step sideways to get there.

In the dark of the bathroom, my reflection is just a shadow against the backdrop of the open door. And I feel like what I see is thinner, smaller, and more slight than before, and my heart jumps in my chest with anticipation.

Turning into a girl right now would actually really suck in a lot of ways. My parents would totally drag me to the doctor, and I'd become a scientific oddity, and I'd

get bullied so hard at school. But, on the other hand, I wouldn't hurt anymore.

For a moment, I let myself sink into that fantasy and feel the relief as if it's actually happening.

Flicking on the light, however, slams me into reality.

It's just him again.

That boy.

Keith.

Short dark hair in a shitty bowl cut Mom made him get, messy with sleep, over heavy brooding eyebrows and lips too full and red for a guy. Everything gets pulled into a scowl, including his shoulders, and it takes me a moment to actually see him as me.

I never say this at home, but, *fuck*.

I still feel it in my gut, though. Like, actually physically. Something is pulling on something in there. And my blood is still pumping hard, audible in my ears. Muscles spasming.

I lean my palms onto the green Formica countertop, settling into a frown.

When I put a hand over my belly, to see if I can feel what's going on in there, I find myself hoping for the impossible. I know about ovaries and the uterus. I don't really understand why I need them, I just know they're the opposite of what I've got. And that thing is a parasite, gorging itself on my blood.

It occurs to me, based on the embarrassing coloring book my parents gave me on my last birthday, that testicles might be like ovaries. And if I'm undergoing a transformation, which I know I really can't be, they might get pulled into my abdomen.

I reach back and slam the door shut, and then grope myself to see if that's happening, tearing my eyes from the mirror and just kind of blankly looking at the wall.

I feel so gross doing this.

Dammit, I can't tell. And if I can't tell, it's probably not happening. The feelings that are churning in my gut are probably from being startled and excited by that dream.

And, now, I've gotta get through my day knowing that I thought this and groped myself about it.

Bile rising in my throat, I wrench the door open again and make to lurch back to my bedroom.

"Keith? Is that you?" Dad calls from wherever he's at. I groan. "Yeah."

"Remember not to slam doors, OK, bud?" he reminds me.

"Sorry," I call back.

"And, good morning!"

"Right."

I more or less fall into my room, putting the door between me and my family, to land face down on my bed again. I think I kick one of my few action figures into a dark and cluttered corner on the way. It might have been Bossk.

Who cares?

I'm so messed up. Everything's all wrong. How can anyone expect me to go to school like this? Or even eat breakfast, let alone take care of my old toys.

There's clothes I need to wear. And then, like, a handful of blocks I need to walk while Mom gets Travis to Bayview Elementary.

I hope it's cloudy out. At least clouds will give me something beautiful and distant to look at.

If only I could fly, I could get away for good.

I'm reminded that I need to get up and get moving when Travis starts bawling that he peed his bed again.

He's in fourth grade. 10 years old, and he's still struggling with this. I honestly feel his embarrassment as if it's my own. His mewling is so annoying, but I also hurt for him. Mom clearly does, too, and I wait for her to pass my door to attend to him before dashing to the bathroom again.

I've gotta pee, too. I'm so good at holding it in, it's hard to make it come out.

The rest of the morning is chaos and yelling.



Westward Middle School is downhill and then uphill from where I live. I go through a cow pasture to get there, even though I live in what's officially a city. Even when it snows, I have to trudge through that. At least, as long as the snow is less than a foot and a half.

When I'm older, I get to use the uphill both ways line. Not that I'm ever gonna have grandkids.

After I take that left, at the highway on the other side of the field, I hear a familiar shout from behind me.

"K! Wait up!"

It's hard not to smile.

I mean, I got my wish about the weather at least, and the early morning sun is just barely shining under a dark and brooding sky with roiling slate grey rain clouds just waiting to dump buckets.

But, also, that's Heath. Or H, 'cause otherwise our names would be confusing in class.

We're H and K. And, yeah, it's childish and silly, but the coincidence is just too good and we're also friends with I and J. Or, Indigo and Jeffrey. We kind of make it out like we're secret agents or something, even if Indigo hates his initial. But, the nice thing about it for me is that they don't call me Keith. I've even got some teachers doing it, too.

Whatever. Heath's cool, and it's good to have someone to walk with. Half the time, he's ahead of me and we miss each other.

"Yo, dude!" Heath shouts as he gets closer. "I got a new game we gotta play. It's 'a grim world of perilous adventure' and it's so rad. It's British, too. Like, they know their medieval shit, right?"

He's actually got the book out. He must have been behind me because he's been reading it while walking to school. He does that with novels, too.

It's a big, thick paperback, and I can't see the cover yet, because he keeps flipping back and forth in it looking for something.

I just stand and watch.

"Shit, bro. Here we go!" Then he holds it up so that he can read something in it without showing me the text. I see the title, WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY. "Ahem! 'Your blow crushes your opponent's limb, leaving it a bloody pulp. By chance, a piece of bone severs a major artery, and they bleed out in a matter of seconds.' Fucking *sick*, right?"

Ignoring his cussing, I ask, "What is that?"

Despite his language and enthusiasm, he's not quite the type of person to deliberately misinterpret my question

and give a sarcastic answer, which is a huge part of the reason we're friends. He's as focused as I am.

"Critical hit chart," he says, instead of, like, needlessly explaining what an RPG is. "There're other great entries, too. Like, 'Your blow cleaves your opponent from shoulder to sternum, blood spraying everywhere. Death is instantaneous.' Ooh, just like the artwork on the cover!" He points out the dwarf killing the goblin with an axe.

"J is gonna love this," I say.

"*Yeah* he is!" Heath exclaims.

It sounds like he's arguing with me, the way he emphasized the word 'yeah'. As if he heard me say that Jeffrey won't like it. But I've heard other kids do that. It drives me nuts, but I know better than to point it out. It means he agrees. I just sigh, and start walking.

"We should make characters at lunch," Heath says. "That way, we can start playing right after school!"

"I didn't bring my dice," I confess.

He flips through the book some more as he steps up to keep pace. "Oh, I've got plenty. You can borrow mine. Oh, awesome! Look at this chaos beast! This book is so full of grody shit."

The conversation continues like that for a bit. Mostly with Heath just telling me things he's just noticed about the game.

Maybe a block away from school, it suddenly feels like I've been kicked in the balls. The sick pain radiates up into my gut and encircles my kidneys. Or, at least, that's what I imagine. It makes me hiss and squint, and I almost double over, but I manage to hold it in.

An amazing feat of endurance, but I have to.

I'm too embarrassed by my inner thoughts to let anyone see what's happening to me. I can't answer

questions about it. No matter what I say, even Heath would see through it.

Fortunately, he's loudly blabbing about the chaos gods, Khorn, Nurgle, and Malal.

When the pain slowly resides and I can breathe clearly again, I remind him to put the book away before we step onto school grounds.

"Oh, yeah. Shit, thanks!" He slings his backpack off his shoulder and opens it while it's hanging off his elbow. "I'll keep this in our locker until lunch."

"Good call."

We've got small, sixth grader lockers, and we share them. Heath and I are locker partners. And there's barely enough room in there for our textbooks, but we'll do what we need to in order to make it work.

Anyway, from there, the morning goes in the usual way, starting with our walk through clouds of hairspray in the hallways, progressing through English and Science in our core room, and then ending in PE. Heath and I have the same core room, but different PE teachers. He gets the same teacher as Indigo and Jeffrey.

I go mostly ignored for most of it, which is nice. And the weird sensations in the middle of my body fluctuate on the lower end of dismissible. PE even takes my mind off of it, once we start a game of floor hockey.

Either the action distracts me from these obviously psychosomatic symptoms, or the blood pumping is good for whatever is going on.

I'm not great at floor hockey, but I sure like it better than anything else we ever do in PE.

I like it best when I get to play goalie, but that almost never happens. Certainly not today. So, I have to content

myself with jamming my stick into the fray to get at that puck.

It's still a high aggression game for the amount of physical effort required. And I've got kind of a buzz going when we file back into the locker rooms.

Mr. George makes a pass through the room as we all start dialing our combinations, and mumbles something about using the shower. No one's going to do that, though. And once he's made that pass, he disappears into his office. He's so oblivious.

The locker room smells like chalk and sweat, mostly. A big bin of hand chalk is just a couple steps from my locker, and the guys keep playing with it. There's a hint of urine underneath the faint wafts of deodorant that some of my classmates are begrudgingly experimenting with. Of course, that's all on top of the sweet and caustic odors of hair gel and spray that just permeate the school. The hallways are worse for that, but the gym is a close second place.

Everybody's got some form of bangs they need to control, I guess. The girls have these big loops and waves pulled up above their foreheads, while the skaters go for chin length curtains that cover half their faces that they can whip about with jerks of their heads. Most of the rest of the guys spike their hair, so their short little bangs go straight up with the rest of it.

It's all so gross, and I don't know why anybody lets them all do that. The smell is just impossible to live with.

But, anyway, I'm rushing through this routine. I want to spend as little time here as possible, and as much time at lunch as I can. But, I still have to strip down to my underwear and swap T-shirts and shorts, because, you

know, I'm not supposed to wear PE clothes all day, I guess. I even have PE shoes. Same socks, though.

"Hey, *Katie!*" A nasty voice slices through my nerves.

"This is the *boys'* locker room. You know that, don't you?"

Someone else snorts, "Pfft!"

I can't help but hunch my shoulders, which gives away that I heard them. Todd and Marcus, those assholes.

Sometime in the last couple of weeks, they've decided to start making fun of my nickname. Before that I was 'just' a nerd. And not because I wear glasses, either. But because I hang out with my friends and ace my tests.

It's so annoying that Todd's latched onto calling me a girl just because of my first initial. Because I wish I could be in the girl's locker room, just to avoid him. And I know that'd just make things worse, actually.

"Why're you here, Katie?" he sneers behind me, and I feel his fingers push me in the shoulder. "Didn't get enough of playing with a stick?"

"Wo-ho-ho-hoah!" Marcus jeers. "Yeah. We've got sticks for you."

*Jesus fucking Christ!* I can't stop myself from whirling at him with a snarl. This is one of those rare instances where I have no compunction for swearing, either. "Fuck off, asshole!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he shoots back, with a smirk. Not that that makes *any* sense.

He's still shorter than me. Everyone is. I've been the tallest in my class since I can remember. He's also scrawnier. He's got straight sand colored hair that's always in the same stupid style. And his mouth is in a permanent sneer all the time. Which is fair, because this place stinks. But it makes him look ignorant and dismissive of everything. Which he also usually *is*.

He once called our fifth grade student teacher a dolphin fart to her face.

"Yes!" I shout at him, waving my arms. "Just fuck off forever. Leave me the *fuck* alone!"

"But you're in the wrong locker room, Katie." He pushes me in the shoulder again.

"It's K, you dick! Not fucking Katie. *K!*"

"OK, Katie," he laughs. "It's still a girl's name."

"Fuck you!"

He jerks his head up. "What're you gonna do about it? Huh? Wanna fight? I know you fight like a girl."

Everyone else is ignoring us. They always do. Even Mr. George. He doesn't get involved in anything that happens in the locker room. And everyone else is just scared or they don't care. Or, they're in on it, I guess. No one ever stands up for anyone (not even me, if I'm honest, though I wish I could change that). And the shit always just rolls downhill. And it keeps rolling.

I'm realizing that if I don't pick on anyone, then it stops with me. I get all the shit.

I don't need this. I don't deserve this. I don't want this. I just want to eat and join my friends at lunch. I'm not doing anything to anyone.

I find myself wishing I had claws so I could tear him apart, and I clench my eyes shut to focus on what I can do to make him go away.

"Ooh! Is she getting angry?" Marcus quips.

"Yeah, I think *she* is," Todd agrees.

That does it.

I rock back, lifting my right foot to brace it on the concrete bench that's against the wall below the row of lockers, and pull both of my fists back to my chest. Then

I push off, opening my eyes in time to aim the heels of my palms at Todd's chest.

It's actually, probably the best move I've ever done. I'm such a klutz most of the time.

There's a horrendous clammer as I slam him into the lockers behind him.

And then the next thing I know I'm on my ass.

Bent over, clutching my gut and pulling my knees together to my own chest, gasping for breath, I can't even really see. It takes me a couple of seconds to even register that I'm in pain, it's so intense. Unlike on the way to school, I must have actually been kicked in the nuts.

I feel Todd kick me in the butt from the side.

"Ha-ha! What's wrong, Katie?" he cries. "Got the cramps? Did you start your period today? Hey, guys!" he calls out to the rest of the class. "Katie's a *real woman* now!"

I can't really do anything, though. And I don't really know how it all ends. Just that, somehow, some amount of time later, I'm numbly stumbling into the cafeteria with my bag lunch in hand, dressed in my regular clothes.

He must have decided he won once I was incapacitated. And everything else is just a blur.

One thing's for certain. If magic is real and I actually *am* turning into a girl, I'm *not* using that name.

Gonna go for a whole new initial, dammit.

If that happens, my friends will just have to deal, I guess.



"Oh, this is dumb," Jeffrey exclaims, pointing at a page of the book in his lap. He's the next tallest in our group, with a sharp face, dark brown curly hair, and a perpetual jean jacket. "This book doesn't have Slaanesh in it!"

Heath frowns, "What's Slaanesh?"

"Oh, just one of the chaos gods," Jeffrey explains. "This book is a riff off of a game called Fantasy Battle. In that book, there are four chaos gods, Nurgle, Khorne, Tzeentch, and Slaanesh. Slaanesh is the god of pleasure and a hermaphrodite."

I cringe and lean back, focusing on my granola bar and staring at the ground.

"Huh, weird. Let me see that."

"Here you go."

"Seriously?" Heath asks, scowling at the book. "This is based on another game?"

"Oh, yeah. I've seen the guys in Hedgehog Games playing it. It's pretty hard core. Got to look through the rules while they were playing, too."

"Ah, maybe I should get that, too."

"Yeah, the crit tables are almost the same, but I think they're better in this one. You know, because it's a role playing game."

"Yeah, I was telling you, man," Heath replies with enthusiasm. "This game doesn't pull *any* punches. It's the real thing. But we can totally use the chaos gods from Battle. There's no reason we can't do that. Same world, right?"

"Sure," Jeffrey frowns. "I think it'd be pretty easy to convert the stats for the demons, too. Might need to fudge them a little bit, but it should work."

Indigo is even further away, leaning his back against a tree, chewing his family's dinner leftovers from a

Tupperware. But he's listening. His hair is black, with larger curls than J's, and he wears it longer, too. He also wears a puffy quilted jacket, even though it's mid-Spring. He's usually pretty quiet, but it's clear he's thinking about the game.

We're sitting amongst the trees in the back corner of the main field. It's where we always go to hang out at lunch, have pine cone fights, play the merc game (a freeform diceless RPG Indigo made up), and generally just avoid everyone else.

Usually, no one bothers us out here because it takes so long to get here it's not worth it. Also, there's four of us. And we've got lots of pine cones here.

It's not raining yet, which is fine by me. I mostly like it when it's just threatening to.

Unfortunately, we're not making characters yet, either, because Heath still needs to sell the idea to everyone. Even if we're basically on board already, there's sort of a theatricality to presenting his new find that he just has to go through. And now Jeffrey's got the book and is digging through it for the world building and gross pictures, maybe in part to take the reins from Heath.

I'm thinking about how maybe I *won't* make a female character for this game.

It's sort of a thing that the others introduced to me as even an option, last time we played D&D. Both Heath and Jeffrey made characters who were women, and then Indigo's character shamelessly flirted with them, and it was admittedly kind of funny. It wasn't serious. It was just a game, and they all played it up, using lines they remembered from movies and comics and shit like that. And I'd just watched, dumbfounded. But when Heath told me, "It's OK. It's just part of roleplaying. You get to

be whatever you want. To see what it's like," that sat well enough with me that I started exclusively playing female characters after that.

But maybe not this time.

Especially if Slaanesh is going to be a thing. I'm not sure I want to tangle with *that* in a game while also playing a girl.

I like my friends. I even kinda trust them. But I don't want to see just how far they'll go with *that* subject. Especially when I'm struggling even harder with, well, what I'm struggling with.

Apparently I've sighed or something, because Heath looks up and asks, "What's wrong, K?"

"Ah, just thinking," I respond, before actually thinking about it.

"Bout what?" Jeffrey asks, glancing up from the book. Indigo's eyes switch to looking at me.

Dammit.

Now I can't exactly lie. I don't do that. So, I find myself saying something that makes me cringe, and I try to edit it, hold back the worst details. "I just had a really cool feeling dream last night," I tell them. "I can't stop thinking about it. It made me feel powerful."

"Oh?" Indigo asks. "What was it about?"

"Well," I stall with a word that's just a bit too short for that. "It was like I was visited by a goddess. Like, all glowy and light. And she agreed to give me some kind of power. It was just really cool."

"Oh, shit," Heath says. "That sounds rad."

"It was just awesome," I say.

"What kind of power did she give you?" Jeffrey asks.

"It was a dream," I brush him off. "You know dreams. I just woke up feeling really good. Like a superhero. And I

kind of still do? Even after Todd wouldn't leave me alone in the locker room."

"Right," Indigo says, pointing his fork our way. "I sometimes get dreams where all I can remember is how they made me feel."

"Sure," I nod, and reach into my bag for the couple of Pilot crackers I've got in there. They're kinda awful, and I like to eat them plain. Then I feel comfortable enough saying, "But, I don't know. I kind of feel like she gave me the power of shapeshifting."

That usually goes over well with other roleplayers. They get it.

"Oh, hell yeah," Heath nods. "I'd take that!"

"Like, what, though?" Jeffrey asks, his eyebrows dancing upward. "Just general shapeshifting, into whatever you want? Or, like a were?"

I shrug and go back to just barely deflecting, "I think a one time thing. I'd take a wolf or something like that. That'd be cool. Or..." I squint and think about another plausibly deniable choice. "Obviously a dragon would be awesome."

Oh, weird. Saying that made me feel *weird*.

"Oh, yeah." Jeffrey grins.

"I can see why you'd feel powerful after a dream like that," Heath says.

"Hm." Indigo uses his tongue to scrape food from his teeth and swallow it without opening his mouth. Then he says, "That might be really awkward in class, though."

"But if K was a dragon, he wouldn't even *go* to class," Jeffrey counters. "He'd just hide in a cave somewhere. And we'd go there after school and play WARHAMMER with him then."

"You guys would do that if I was a dragon, too, right?" Heath asks.

"Sure! We should all be dragons, though," Jeffrey replies.

Now I'm feeling as embarrassed about that as the girl thing, and I can't figure it out. *Why?*

Fortunately, my body doesn't do anything dramatic for most of the rest of the day, and maybe I'm OK because it *is* psychosomatic, and getting into roleplaying games with my friends calms me down. Like, even if I get embarrassed and hold things in while hanging out with them, it's not nearly as bad as when I'm doing literally anything else with anybody else.

I don't know. I suspect that's how it works. Like, maybe this is just anxiety. But, also, maybe I felt like I was literally changing into a girl in the locker room because that's what I was being teased about.

I consider telling my friends I want to start going by 'Keith' again. But I don't.

After lunch, then, it's Math with Mr. Freiling. And then back to my core room, with Mrs. Early, for social studies. Then the day ends with electives. Which is home economics for me, because it wasn't *actually* an elective for sixth graders, and the school just made me take it this trimester. Ms. Jennings is pretty cool, though. And she teaches us how to make Dutch babies.

I get more weird feelings just looking at the eggs, but I try to ignore them. It's probably hunger.

After school, we meet at the trees again, and talk about how to go about making characters. But, then, I remember it's a Tuesday, and I need to go home to babysit Travis until my parents both get back home from whatever they do on Tuesdays.

Mostly, that just means being in the same house as him while he plays with his toys in his bedroom. Or watching cartoons and MTV together.



Travis' school gets out before ours does, and his school is closer, but we still make it to my house before he does.

He's got some kind of after school activity on most days. I don't recall what it is, because I guess I'm bad about that. It doesn't have to do with me, so I don't pay attention to it. And maybe that makes me a bad older sibling, but I've got a lot going on.

It makes this arrangement work, though. I get to open the house up for him before he gets dropped off by the parent who runs whatever it is that he's doing.

Oh, right! It's Spanish class. The little jerk gets to take Spanish after school as sort of a midway babysitting before I get home.

He's confused by it, I think, but whatever.

The guys have come over, and we're sitting around the dining room table rolling dice and jotting things down on notepaper when he comes up to the sliding glass back door that's situated between the kitchen and dining room.

He's frowning as he struggles with the door.

I have to admit, he's still painfully cute. Like, in that way that makes it so that whenever we get in a fight and I end up hurting him, I feel really bad about it afterward. And I want to ignore him when he's crying, but if no else is around, then I can't.

He's such a pain in the ass, and he's going to be really annoying once he comes inside. But I get up to go get the door anyway. I'm not feeling all that great about the bounty hunter I'm rolling up.

"Here ya go, Travis," I say, as I open the door for him. It was inexplicably locked for some reason. "Stay out of our way, OK? We're gaming. Oh, and the TV's all reruns today."

He scowls. "It's *always* reruns."

"Well, keep it down, OK? We need to be able to hear each other think," I tell him, then head back to the table.

"Whatever," he scoffs, and then drops his bag right there in the middle of the floor before taking a left into the kitchen to look for his fruit rollups.

"Think he might be ready to play with us?" Indigo asks.

"Not *this* game." Heath shakes his head.

"Yeah, probably not," Jeffrey agrees, tapping the open page of the book that's in the middle of the table. It just has a detailed illustration of someone slaying a dragon, but it's pretty graphic.

Travis stumbles up to the table, snapping off a piece of fruit rollup and then smacking it as he asks, "What are you playing?"

I don't know exactly what comes over me, but I feel a surge of frustration and rage.

He's so annoying. He's knows better than to smacker his food, but he does it anyway. He stinks, smelling like food and candy all the time. And right now, this is *my* table, *my* game, and *my* friends, and I don't want him to be bother me right now.

So I pick up the one wooden pencil that's on the table and throw it at him, shouting, "Go away!"

The eraser of the pencil bounces off his chest, so he's not really hurt by it, but he looks down and stumbles back, scrunching up his face anyway. I know he's just doing that to make me feel sorry for him, so I don't. I don't feel sorry *at all*. (I have to force myself not to.)

"I'm telling Mom!" he shouts back even louder than me, and then runs to his room.

I sigh and roll my eyes, and then go back to trying to make my character. I find myself erasing the name and the little 'M' on the sheet. *Of course*.

I also decide to take a couple inches off the height.

"You didn't have to do that," Indigo says to me. His tone is so neutral and mild, though.

"It's for the better," Jeffrey comments and then rolls a couple of D10 and jots down the result.

Heath shakes his head. "We should totally let him play, if he wants. Maybe it'll teach him something."

"I don't want to share the table with him," I mumble.

Indigo shrugs. "Well, you're going to have to do it at dinner, right?"

"Yeah. And he *smackers*," I reply without even looking up. "Anyway. I guess I'm playing a girl again. I don't need him teasing me about that, either."

Heath looks over at my sheet. "A female dwarf? So, going for a bearded lady! That's a classic!"

"*No!*" I glare at him. "Female dwarves don't *have* to have beards."

"So, you shave then?"

Instead of cussing in my own home, I tighten up my lips and flip him off. He's my closest best friend, so he can take it.

Heath lifts both his hands up, and says, "Hey. I'm just the GM. I don't make the rules."

"Actually," Indigo says. "I believe there is a picture in there of a female dwarf without a beard, and I didn't see anything in the character creation rules that says they grow them."

"Yeah, this isn't D&D," Jeffrey adds.

Heath levels an incredulous look at Indigo, and then reaches for the book without breaking eye contact. Raising an eyebrow, he flips to an early page in the book, and then looks down to make sure he's on the right one. He nods, and puts his finger on the lefthand column of the left page and reads, "Dwarfs. It's dwarfs, not dwarves. 'Dwarfs are short, burly creatures, immediately recognizable by their long hair and thick beards.' Period. There. Dwarven women have beards." He turns to me. "Unless you shave, you have a beard. But you can shave if you want, that's fine."

I scowl.

"I believe that would be '*dwarfen* women'," Indigo says.

"Whatever you say, Tolkien," Jeffrey laughs at him.

"Anyway, yeah. I'll concede that," Indigo replies. "That wording seems pretty definitive. Dwarfs just all grow beards. I don't remember it saying anything more than that. Can I see the book again?" He holds his hand out across the table.

"Be my guest," H says, and hands it over."

"Thank you."

Narrowing my eyes, I erase 'Dwarf' from my homemade character sheet and sigh. Then I scribble human in there, but I keep the height really short because I know that can happen still. People can mistake my character for a dwarf. That might be interesting, anyway. I'll just have to change all the bonuses now.

I'm not a minmaxer. Not that you can minmax in WARHAMMER. It's all random. But, I don't play to win. I play to roleplay. So it doesn't really matter to me how tough my character is. I just want her to be the way I like her.

As I'm eyeing the book and trying to work up the courage to ask for it again, Travis goes stomping by, from his bedroom down the hall to the kitchen and toward the rec room door. That's where the TV is.

And I see he leaves that door wide open.

God dammit.

I slam my mechanical pencil on the table and get up to follow him.

The rec room used to be a garage, but a former owner had it remodeled, to use it as an attached hair salon. My parents decided it's a great place for a ratty sofa, a stinky love seat, the computer, and the TV, so it's as far away from quieter activities as possible. But Travis famously ignores that idea, and always leaves that door open and turns the volume up super loud.

One hand on the door handle, I shout around the pantry shelves at him, "Keep that fricking TV down, jerkwad!"

"Whatever!" he shouts back. "You're not my Dad!"

I open my mouth to scream something angry back at him, but my breath catches in my throat and I feel myself falling to my knees. It's like my whole middle is being gripping by a giant clawed hand. Literally, it's as painful as knives cutting flesh. My eyes flick shut, and I feel myself falling forward and twisting to the side to land on my right shoulder. It's all I can do just to curl up into a fetal position.

"Holy shit, K!" J calls from the table. "You alright, man? What's wrong?"

It's absurd. You'd think my mind would be totally blank, with this much pain and agony wracking my body. But, once, while flipping through channels I caught sight of a scene from a movie where this guy turns into a werewolf, and the transformation looked like it was absolutely agonizing. And I can't help but think that something like that is happening to me. It's all I can think about.

Like, this is probably cancer or something. Or an ulcer. Or, I don't know. I mean, an ulcer would make sense, because I've been bullied non-stop since second grade, and I hate being what I am, and I can never do my homework or chores, so I'm always arguing with my parents, and I have to live with Travis in the house. But, all I can think is, *Holy shit, this is really happening!*

I want to be something different more than anything else in the world. A girl would be *fine*. I'll accept that fate, if I can't stop it.

I'm almost completely out of it, but I do hear my friends get up out of their chairs and come rushing over.

## Chapter 2 - Tipping the scales

**O**K, SO THE *HILARIOUS* thing is that when Mom gets home and I tell her I think I need to go to the hospital, *that's* the reason we don't go.

No matter how much I tell her that my gut is killing me, she decides that I'm being melodramatic, and that I should just stick it out. But, she does heat up a hot water bottle for me.

As my dad argues with her about that, I'm lying on my side in my bed, curled up around that heat, pressing it to my abdomen just below my belly button, and thinking about how I got *here*.

It's a bit of a haze, really. My friends stuck by my side, I think, until Mom showed up. And they told her what they thought was going on, while Travis just turned up the sound on Disney's *The Adventures of the Gummi Bears*. But then, I guess I was sitting upright, with a worried look on my face. And because I was able to talk and mentioned the hospital first, that meant I was fine.

Though, like, Mom did ask my friends why they hadn't called 911 if it was so bad.

But she also thanked them for sticking around until she got home.

I didn't even see them pack up and leave, though. And sometime after that, I'd moved from sitting with my back against the rec room door to lying in bed. Probably after Mom heated the hot water bottle.

"I use this for my periods," she said when she handed it to me. "Let me know if you need some Midol."

Maybe I ended up taking some Midol? *I think?*

I feel like I'm going to miss dinner. It's spaghetti and meatballs, and the smell of the sauce is making me feel ill. Actually, so is the starchy stench of the noodles. Normally I like the noodles. With mounds of Parmesan cheese on them. And the meatballs on the side. But this is almost as unbearable as the worst of my pain.

I'd get up and close my bedroom door, and open my window, but I'm too immobilized by the smell and the ache in my gut.

I wish I could figure out what's happening to me. It's making me genuinely scared.

God, I hope I don't barf in my bed. And I wish I could have gotten around to playing my bounty hunter, so I could take my mind off this, whatever it is.

Oh, man, I even forgot to check the paper and read the funnies, too!

I stare across the room at my miniature painting desk.

It's really my homework desk, but I never use it for that, so my figure painting set is always set up on it. *If* I ever do homework, I prefer to do it on the dining room table. It's easier to do that kind of work if I'm around other people doing things. I don't know why.

The lights are off, because that was hurting, too. And I'm not wearing my glasses, so I can't really see anything clearly. But I can still see my Ral Partha figuring of Belinda the knight on the shelf above my desk. Her little sword

sticking up at a forty-five degree angle is unmistakable. But I also just know what I have on that shelf, and that's where I left her. I'll probably use her for my character, even though the figurine doesn't have a crossbow.

She's one of my first miniatures. And yet, somehow, she's also one of my best paint jobs. It's my second attempt at painting her, though. The first time, I used oil based paints, and it sucked. Acrylics are so much easier to work with, and they look better for gaming miniatures.

Miniature painting is, like, the one thing I can do better than anything else. Which is pathetic, really. It's such a specialized skill. And I'm just decorating someone else's work, too. It's not like I sculpt the figures.

Still, I'm still a beginner.

I don't know. I can ace tests without studying. That's pretty cool. And I can kind of draw. And I have no trouble learning things like sewing or cooking, when I'm forced to do so. Unlike other guys, that stuff doesn't repulse me, and learning it is just like learning anything else. But, I had Shop last trimester, and nothing I made in it was any good. And I'm terrible at sports. And even though I've tried writing, I know I can't do that. I keep realizing I suck at words by the second sentence. Unless it's a book report. But fiction? No, it's just too embarrassing.

I remember way back in third grade, we were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up, and I said, "a firefighter," because that's what I heard other kids saying. By fifth grade, my answer to that was "artist", because I was told I was good at drawing earlier that same day.

But, now? If someone asked me that, I'd say, "Dead."

I don't want to experience dying. And I don't want to miss my friends, or hurt my family, or anything like that. But, it's honestly been a long time since I can remember

being happy about life and being alive. Maybe even never, honestly. And I'd rather not exist.

It would be cool if I was really changing shape and becoming something more bearable. But, I know that it's not going to change what hurts about the world. It's not going to make it so I don't have to do chores, or homework, or figure out what to eat. It won't do a thing about global warming or nuclear war, either. Reagan will still be in office, and AIDS and drugs will still be things. I'll still be alive, and I'll still eventually have to face death.

If I were to turn into a girl, I'd have periods, which would be a lot like what I'm experiencing now, I'm told. But also, with more blood. And that would suck. But also, I'd have to wear makeup and perfume, and those things are gross. And everyone would call me stupid and dumb, and tell me I can't do anything, and I know *that* because I'm not *totally* oblivious. I know what we all say and do to the girls at school. We've all been doing it since Kindergarten. Even some of the girls.

Being a wolf would be better than being a girl, because then I could just go running off into the woods and never be seen again. But then I'd have to kill my own food and eat it raw, and *probably* eat the guts because that's where the nutrients really are. And I think *that* might be grosser than perfume. Also, I might get hunted.

And a dragon? Forget it.

But, if I have to be a wolf, it needs to be a girl wolf, because, really, my biggest problem is my junk. Same goes for a dragon, or anything else, really.

Why is it that whenever I think of being a dragon, I get as much of a sick and naughty rush as when I think of being a girl? Is it because dragons are so powerful?

It doesn't feel like it, really.

Like, having that much power would be undeniably cool. It'd be the *best*. Well, second best to just not existing. And it'd have to be enough power to stand up to the U.S. military, because you know they'd send *tanks* after me or something. And knowing my luck, I wouldn't be *that* strong.

But, I think I'd take it anyway? Basically, the idea of having such completely different anatomy feels comforting. And knowing that when people looked at me they wouldn't see a human being does, too. And being able to sleep with my tail over my snout, and *feel* it there, would be unbelievably cool.

If I concentrate, I can almost imagine the sensation of my tail touching my snout. It's easier to visualize what my snout would feel, because that's just the top of my nose. But, I don't have a tail, and never did, and I can still get an idea of what the underside of my tail would sense if it was draped over another part of myself.

That's kind of cool all on its own. The human brain is amazingly powerful.

Visualizing being a dragon is, itself, soothing. Things are starting to hurt less, but now I'm kind of cold? The hot water bottle has cooled off a lot, too.

It's not like I'm shivering or anything like that. It's mid-May, anyway. I shouldn't be *that* cold. But I have the urge for more heat. Hm. Heh. Like, maybe you really are turning into a dragon, K.

Motivated to change this heat problem, I drag myself off my bed, almost crawling off of it face first. But, at the last moment, I swing my legs off and pivot up so that I'm putting my feet on the floor.

My stomach muscles ache as I sit up, though. Like I'd done a bunch of sit ups earlier today, even though I know

I didn't. And they complain when I stand up, so I stretch a bit before doing anything.

Then, hot water bottle dangling in hand, I shuffle out into the hallway and toward the kitchen.

Leaning a hand on the wall, and sort of hugging it with my body, I watch Mom work on dinner for a little while. Dad is in the living room, on the sofa there, napping. I don't remember him getting home, but he always naps like that about this time of day. He'll get up when dinner's done.

Travis is now on the computer. He's playing Jumpman. And it's making annoying noises from back in the rec room. But at least it's easier on the ears than the TV.

"The hot water bottle's done," I groan, more pathetically than I actually feel. But I don't want to end up arguing with my Mom, so I've gotta sell this. "And I'm cold, so I'm gonna take a bath. I need one anyway."

"Dinner's almost done," she reminds me in a telling singsong. It's an argument. A statement, telling me that now is not the time for a bath. But I've got something for that.

"Yeah, the smell's making me feel sick," I tell her. "I don't think I can eat right now."

She looks at me with genuine concern. "I cooked the sauce separately, and we've got plenty of cheese," she says. "Are you sure?"

I shake my head, pressing a worried look through my face, to make my point even more strongly. "Even the noodles smell bad to me. And I *like* spaghetti."

She takes in a deep breath. "Well, I can put some noodles aside. They're easy enough to reheat, when you're hungry. Maybe you *should* take a bath, then."

"Yeah."

Mom bites her lip. "How's your stomach?"

I cringe. "A little better? All my muscles there hurt. And, dinner smells awful to me. It makes me feel like throwing up."

"Keith. Please don't say that about my cooking," she snaps.

"It's not your cooking!" I retort. "It's *me*. I feel sick."

"OK," she relents. It does feel like she's taking me more seriously now. "How about some soda and saltines? Your dad got some when his stomach was bothering him over the weekend."

When I think of the saltines, I almost barf right on the spot. I press my stomach with the hand that's got the water bottle, and I hold my mouth shut with the other, and shake my head. Then, with wide eyes, I turn and dash into the bathroom.

"Keith!" my mom calls after me.

"What's going on?" I hear Dad grumble.

"Keith's sick," Mom tells him, as I stop in front of the toilet, placing both hands on my knees.

I'm still clutching the hot water bottle. But when it feels like the urge to barf is lifting, I take a moment to flop it up on the bathroom counter.

Deep breaths. Except that the air is still full of spaghetti smells. So, I reach over and push the door shut, and then flip on the fan. And slowly those breaths become easier without inducing nausea.

Reluctantly, I also then open the bathroom window for fresh air, even though that will make the room colder. And to counter that, I turn the bath faucet on. Just hot water until it's steaming.

That's *so* much better.

After a little while, naked, clothes pushed up against the bottom of the door, I start turning on the cold water, too. And gingerly, I test it. I know this is the wrong order to turn the water on, but I don't care.

I find I want it *hot*. Like, *almost* scalding. It's going to turn my skin so red.

Then I set the plug and wait for the water to cover the bottom of the tub before getting in. Can't let the cold metal suck the heat from my body. But, I lean over the tub, palms on the wall, to soak up the heat from the steam.

When its full enough, I get in, and then just lose myself in the heaven of it.

Some time during my bath, Mom knocks on the door and offers to bring in some soda water. I pull the shower curtain shut so I can have privacy while she does that.

Then, at some point, my brother has to pee. And I've left the curtain shut anyway, so, obviously, I let him do that. But we yell stupid, irritated things at each other the whole time.

And I guess the rest of the night goes like that until bedtime. I refresh the hot water, and my dad checks on me, complaining that I'm running up a bill. But I'm otherwise left alone until I can't stand it in there anymore.

Mom digs out an electric blanket for me, in case I feel I need that at night. But, honestly, I don't.

And that night, I dream normal dreams of being naked at school. And of my teeth falling out.



I wake up before my alarm, wondering if it's possible to get chicken pox twice, because I notice that I'm scratching myself all over before I'm even conscious.

It totally reminds me of that time Travis and I got chicken pox, too, because it hurts in places, even. But, when I desperately roll out of my covers and look, all I see are the marks left by my nails. I even check one of the spots that stings, but there's nothing there. Yet.

Great. I had cramps and a fever last night, and now I'm going to develop a rash! But I can't prove it, because I don't have a rash *yet!*

Also, now I'm so hungry!

I throw on jeans and a long sleeved denim shirt. Nice and thick, and rough enough to use to scratch my skin by just rubbing my clothes. Also, socks, because I don't have patience to come back into my room for them later.

And then I stomp out to the kitchen to think about what I should eat.

Cereal, my usual, is just *not* going to do it. The thought makes my stomach swim.

Everything else I can think of requires cooking. And, I'm not sure Mom would appreciate me trying to do that on a weekday.

There's lunch meat. I could just eat that.

Eggs would be really good, though. And fast to make, if I can convince one of my parents to do that. But I know Mom is going to tell me to eat leftover spaghetti, and I just can't.

I huff.

I'm going to make scrambled eggs. I know how to do that. And I know all the safety precautions of working on the stove. And I can just try to take up as little room as

possible. Stay to one side of the stove top, and stand close to it, so I'm out of Mom's way.

I do end up having to pick shell pieces out of the egg with my fingers, though. I'm not great at cracking eggs. And I *bate* having to do this.

I haven't even whipped them up yet when I'm washing my hands of the egg gunk.

Also, this whole time I'm working on my breakfast, I'm dancing and stopping to rub my arms, torso, or legs. Or to scratch with my nails. But, when I'm doing an easy part, I kind of forget to do that for a bit. Like it's *thinking* that makes me itch.

"Keith! What are you up to?" Mom asks from the dining room, as she passes through it.

"Breakfast," I tell her.

She actually smiles for once, and that confuses me a little. "Eggs? You know there's spaghetti for you."

"I need protein and *fat*," I explain.

"Oh, well that's definitely eggs!" she chirps. "Do you want some help?"

"This is the first thing Ms. Jennings taught us," I say, turning back to the stove top. "It's easy. And I know to keep the pan handle turned inward when I'm not in front of it."

"Oh, good! Can you make enough for everyone else?" she asks.

I frown at her. "I don't know. *Probably*. I'm scrambling them."

"I think I'd like scrambled eggs."

"Can you crack more eggs?" I ask. "I'm really bad at it."

"Sure, honey. I'll show you how I do it."

For a brief couple of moments, she just demonstrates her egg technique, all relaxed and happy. And I realize she's

pleased that one of her kids is doing something she loves, and I guess I feel kind of good about that. But, she notices my scratching, and looks over.

"Do you need some lotion?" she asks.

I wrinkle up my nose at the memory of the smell of that stuff, and say, "No?"

"You sure? Maybe calamine lotion?"

"Please, no."

She squints at me for a moment, and then asks, "Are you sure? You're acting like you're getting a rash."

"Yeah, I don't know what's going on," I tell her. "But, no lotion. *Please.*"

"OK... It's *your* itchy body," she says, cracking another egg, dumping it in the bowl, and placing the empty shells back in the carton. "If you didn't have school, I could draw up an epsom salt bath for you."

That sounds *so* nice, but I shake my head. I don't really want that much attention. I'm starting to feel really self-conscious, and I'm having lots of second thoughts about the hospital, or having to see any kind of a nurse. It'll be better if I can just endure this and make it through school.

Maybe I can convince Todd to actually beat me up, and then the bruises will take my mind off the itching.

"Let's just have breakfast," I say. "I'll be fine. This is probably just some annoying puberty thing."

Mom gives me an appraising look and then shakes her head. "You're still just a *tad* young for that, but alright."

The rest of the morning at home is pretty uneventful. Except that Travis *doesn't* pee his bed, and is all proud of that until he realizes *I've* made the scrambled eggs. He insists on cereal, so I eat his eggs.

When Dad offers to, I find myself glaring at him and saying, "No. I made them."

He chuckles and says, "Alright, son. The extra eggs are all yours. Did you even have dinner last night?"

I shake my head, and say, "Wasn't hungry."

He wolfs his food down, though, and is out the door with his coffee before my lunch is even made. And my lunch is so easy to make.

I just basically stuff a granola bar, two Pilot bread crackers, an apple, a juice box, and bag of lunch meat in a paper bag.

And then, backpack slung over one shoulder, I'm outside again, before Mom manages to wrangle Travis out of the house for his ride to school.

And now I've gotta do this shit all over.

At least I've got an idea for a name for my bounty hunter. Mrs. Early read to us about Greek mythology yesterday, and mentioned Artemis, the goddess of hunting. And that name seems *perfect*.



The day is basically a repeat, only this time we're more deeply into the game instead of just learning about it. During lunch, we argue about some of the rules, instead of pointing out the artwork, and talk about whether or not we want to run the sample campaign or do something original.

Heath is confident he can do something original, while Indigo is trying to convince him that it's OK to do the

premade adventure first, so he can really learn how to run it.

Jeffrey is staying out of it.

My itching has kind of settled a bit. It's still there, but I've learned how to ignore it most of the time. Which is good, because I really don't want anyone sending me to the school nurse, afraid I've got chicken pox, or something. Still no actual rash, though.

When it gets really bad, I open my mouth and take deep breaths through that, and it seems to help. Sometimes I need to close my eyes.

My guts aren't quite done churning, either. But it feels like a ring of aching. My dead middle is pretty calm, the center of a bullseye of pain, except for my sore stomach muscles.

I guess this is distracting me more than I realize, because it takes me a while to realize that J is staring at me.

"What?" I ask.

"You really doing OK?" he asks. "You look uncomfortable."

"Yyyeah..." I draw out my answer, almost sarcastically. But then think the better of it, and decide to turn his attention to something else that's bothering me, too. "No, actually. I'm so sick of Todd and Marcus. They won't leave me alone in the locker room. And they keep calling me Katie."

"They've got the same lunch we do," Jeffrey says. "We should go beat them up."

"What?" Indigo asks, blinking. "No."

"No, I. I'm actually serious," Jeffrey retorts. "Bullies don't stop until you *make* them stop. And we know teachers don't do anything about it."

"Yeah, but if we do that, we're going to get seventh period, at *least*," Indigo points out.

And, he's right. We would. Maybe even suspension, depending on how badly we beat up Todd and Marcus. But, also, I don't want to stoop to the bullies' level. I don't want to be a bad person.

Except. I'm also so *fucking* angry at them.

It's not fair. I've been having to put up with this for the past four years, and no one's done *anything* about it. Like Jeffrey said, no one *cares*. Even though it doesn't happen every day, and it's just, like, one encounter, it often makes me not want to go to school. It's *exhausting*. And when I actually stop to think about it, I do, actually, want to murder Todd, at least. Marcus, too, if he happens to be there. But murdering Todd would scare him away, at least.

"If I had teeth and claws..." I mumble.

Jeffrey hears me and laughs. "Ha! You *have* teeth, K! You'd have to, in order to eat that plywood you pack for lunch."

I hold up a half a pilot cracker and squint at him.

"What? This?"

"Yeah. *That*."

"It's good," I tell him.

"No it isn't!"

"Anyway, you know what I mean about teeth," I scowl. "Pointy teeth."

"Nah, humans have pointy teeth, too," he replies.

"Look! They call them canines for a reason." He leans forward, pulling his lip up to show off his own teeth.

"Yeah, pointier than that."

"Yeah, yeah, no. I get it." Then he leans back against his tree, and gestures at me. "But if you had teeth like that, would you eat him?"

I make a face. "No? He'd taste like hair spray."

"He'd still taste like that if you just bit him," Indigo points out.

"Guys?" Heath chimes in. "Can we get back to talking about the game? We've only got fifteen minutes left."

"Right," I say. "So, I'm thinking of naming my character Artemis."

"Ooh, that's goooooood," Jeffrey drawls.

"I like it," Indigo adds.

I end up not eating my granola bar at lunch, though. The smell of it really turns me off, even if I do find the Pilot crackers still edible.



Later, on the way to Home Ec, I duck into the bathroom to take a leak. But I go into a stall, because I have trouble peeing into a urinal. My urine has a hard time coming out normally, but it'll never show itself at all for a urinal. I think it's because I don't want anyone looking at me while I relieve myself.

I really don't get urinals. I don't know how other boys and men do it. It makes no sense.

I don't let my pants down, though. Not at first. I just open them up enough to poke my thing out and try to pee. But my inner thigh itches, so I take the time to reach in and scratch it.

And, without actually *showing* it to you, you will never believe what I feel.

*I* sure as heck don't.

At first, the skin on my thigh feels dead. Like, I can feel it with my fingers, but to my thigh, it feels like I'm scratching it through my pants. And the skin *wrinkles*. What's under it feels smooth, like it's moving back and forth over a layer of puss. But I can swear I also feel bumps?

And then, before I can pull my hand out and push my pants down to look, the skin tears, and my fingernails scratch what is underneath, and it's so tender, I hiss.

It startles me almost as bad as that popping sensation at the end of my dream yesterday morning.

I feel light-headed, and dizzy, and everything is tingling from the adrenaline rush.

Shaking, and terrified to see what is actually there, I gingerly run my fingertips over the exposed surface.

The flap of dead skin is substantial, and curling up in my palm. And, on my thigh, I can feel the texture of my fingerprint running over it in circles. My breath catches in my chest, it doesn't even make it to my throat. There *are* bumps, and they are hard.

Is this cancer? Is this some kind of cancer? What's happening to me?

Clenching my eyes shut, I somehow go ahead and pull my pants down to look, and carefully pull the dead skin flap away so that I can just bend over and see.

Breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, I open my eyes, and suddenly, I'm, like, in a movie or something.

There's just no way this can be real. I almost fall forward and bang my head on the toilet in front of me, but I manage to catch myself with my free hand, bracing it against the far wall.

"What. The. Fuck?" escapes my mouth.

The pebbly scales that are there are yellow and brown, and it looks like they're striped. Kind of like tiger stripes.

The patch is actually no bigger than my whole thumb. It's more of a strip. But that's a pretty big piece of skin to pull back. On the other hand, there's no blood. And it looks like the scales extend underneath the surrounding skin.

What the fuck? *What the fuck?*

There are no other words for this. Nothing else I can say.

Gasping, I reach and drop the toilet seat so that I can twist and sit down on it, pulling my pants down further. I just can't stay standing, I'm so dizzy with oxygen, I've been breathing so hard.

The skin around the patch doesn't feel ready to come off yet, but I can't have that flap just dangling there, so I spend a minute or so, I think, carefully tearing it. I stop every time I feel the sting of tearing nerves, and push down with the fingers of my other hand, behind it, so that I can control where the tear goes. It's scary work. Especially because *this doesn't happen to human beings*.

And if I'm not human anymore, then what *am* I?  
And...

More importantly...

*Now* what?

What's going to happen to me?

I can't believe I've spent the last two days joking about turning into a dragon, and now I've got actual *scales!*

I feel the same spot on my other thigh, to see if it's happening over there. And, I can definitely feel scales under that skin, too. But it's not nearly as dead feeling, nor loose and wrinkly.

Actually, running my hands over the rest of my bare skin on my legs, I can kind of feel scales underneath it all.

Holding my breath, I reach up under my shirt. But they're not under my belly. That's different. But around the sides, yes. Like, there's a ridge on either side where they start. However, right in the middle of my abdomen, it's just smooth.

Which is when I notice that there's something wrong with my belly button.

Since when did I have an outie?

OK. I'm going to see if I can pee sitting down while I try *not* to think about this. And if I end up staying in here through Home Ec, I'm just going to have to miss class.

Because I don't even know if I can be around people while this is happening to me.

I don't know if I can be around people ever again!

Reaching down, afraid of what I'll feel there, I push my thing toward the water of the toilet, so I'll pee downward, and then I wait. At least, it's normal. Ish.

It feels smaller.

I guess this is what they mean by hysterical laughter, huh?

I am so glad no one else is in this restroom. And that's when I hear the bell for the start of class.

Dammit.

The bell helps, actually. It's like it says, "You can relax now. You've failed. You are now officially tardy. Good work."

And *then* I pee.



Shedding, I guess it is, actually goes really slow. And, fortunately, for a while, it sticks to patches that are normally covered by clothes, *if* I don't go to PE. Which I definitely plan on skipping.

And since I now know what the itching is, I'm panicking less about it. But, every time I walk past a brick wall at school, I want to just rub up against it. And, sometimes, I catch myself doing that despite my efforts to hide what's happening.

I'm in too much of a daze to really interact with anyone, though, and find myself lurking on campus, hiding from the staff, until the end of class bell rings, and then I hurry away before anyone leaves any doors.

I keep to myself at home, and since I don't bother Travis, he doesn't bother me. And since it's a Wednesday, my mom is home when I get there.

I tell Mom I don't want to see anyone, and go hide in my room.

When I take another bath that night, I count the places it's started. But there's only the one. Though, I *think* I can feel where my human skin will come off next. A couple of those places are on my feet, which I usually keep covered with socks, anyway.

And now I'm starting to get *really* scared. Because, things that have scales—and lets face it, I'm pretty sure I'm turning in to a dragon for some reason—tend to have claws. And when my claws come in, I can imagine all sorts of horrific ways that might happen, thanks to Hollywood. And I have *no* idea how I'll hide them.

I might need to run away from home at that point.

And I realize I don't actually want to have to do that.

No more painting miniatures. No more gaming with my friends. No more hot food. No more TV or computer

games. No more hugs from Mom and Dad, though they don't really give me enough of those. No more annoying little brother who I think I actually kind of love in a weird, biologically induced way.

## Chapter 3 - Admit it

**N**O CLAWS YET.

And only a couple more hide-able patches of scales revealed the next morning. The other thigh, and one of my heels.

When I'm getting dressed, I knock my belly button off, though, to find a yellowish sheath underneath it, made out of something similar to my fingernails. Tapping it with a nail makes a ticking noise, and it's definitely not quite as sensitive as my scales. I think my scales have a thin layer of skin over them, with nerves in it, but this doesn't.

I'm going to have a snake belly, I think.

Losing my belly button was a sickening moment, though. That's just something that's not supposed to happen, even though I kind of expected it at this point. And, after I toss it in my trash bin, I grab some scrap paper lying around on my floor (old unfinished homework) and loosely crumple it before throwing it on top. Don't want my mom finding *that!*

I keep thinking this, but *fuuuuuuuuuuuck.*



I do eggs again, and pack two bags of lunch meat instead of a granola bar. I also sniff the Pilot crackers and decide I can't eat those anymore. Damn.

The apple seems fine, though.

As for interacting with people, I guess I've decided that since I'm not going to be human anymore, I need to soak in as much humanity as possible now. I find myself content to just sit and watch them. Actually pay attention to them for once, instead of hiding inside my own head.

Kind of even listen to them, too.

The way that Travis and Mom interact throughout the morning, even though they're constantly arguing, is comfortable? In a way? It's like they have an understanding. They've done this a hundred times before. They know each other. And every time Travis complains about what he has to do, and not wanting to do it, it's like he *knows*. This is just his routine, and he can trust Mom to react a certain way, and he doesn't push her *too* far. And same with her.

She's still loud and yelly. But she's directing it at him, not me, so it's easier for me to take as I swallow my eggs, a small fork full at a time.

The warmth of the eggs as they reach my—um, I guess it's my stomach—feels *good*. It's almost like they're stopping near where my heart is. Or was. And then slowly working their way down to my stomach. But it doesn't feel awkward or uncomfortable.

That's *different*.

I'm still dealing with all of the sensations of the past two days, just more widespread, and more diffuse. I'm getting used to it, so I'm not nearly as twitchy or scratchy. And I'm determined not to scratch too much. I don't want to accelerate my shedding unnecessarily.

When my dad breezes through the dining room, he apologizes for not being able to enjoy the eggs I made. He's going to have to skip breakfast.

Whatever. Even when he's home, I hardly see him these days anyway.

Oh, what?

Mom is holding up a shoe and asking Travis, "So, what's this in Spanish?"

Travis rolls his eyes. "El zapato," he says.

"Really?" she asks.

"Duh!"

She huffs and gestures at her own chest, "It's not like I know what they're called, kiddo! See, you're learning stuff!"

"Whatever," Travis grumps. "I still don't want to."

"Don't 'whatever' me, young man!" Mom shouts back at him. "Come on. Get ready. Get your zapatos on."

And I sigh.

He's *actually* learning Spanish. That's rad. I wish I could do that.



Heath tries to grill me about not being around after school yesterday, and I just tell him, "I was sick. OK? And I'm still not feeling great."

Which he accepts.

He turns around his attitude so easily, even, I think maybe I *will* show him my claws when they come in. But, like, after school, because on *that* day, I'm gonna be done with it. There'll be no going back.

I'm starting to think that that dream might have been *really* real.

I mean, I've been sort of thinking that since it happened. But it's sinking in that, no, this is not some kind of weird psychosomatic illness. Scales aren't psychosomatic.

I do have to go into the bathroom a couple times, when I can, just to double-check. To reassure myself it's actually happening. Even though my one heel feels weird inside my sock, I still can't quite believe it. I kind of forget it's happening sometimes.

And, like I said, I'm paying more attention to other people now. More than before, anyway.

The teachers, maybe not so much. I'm never going to be like them, anyway. But, while I'm never going to be like any of my classmates anymore, either, I at least have been *kind* of like them up until now. And the prospect of leaving them behind makes me want to wallow in what I'll be missing? I think?

I've been thinking I wanted to be a girl, and I still do, so I maybe pay more attention to them, especially.

None of them are Todd and Marcus, after all.

I think if I could have been born a girl, I would have liked to have been Megan.

I don't like her name, much, but she also doesn't look like a Megan to me. For some reason, when I think of a Megan, I think of a frilly haired, shiny faced girly girl in an argyle sweater and a fancy skirt. But Megan dresses in jeans, a t-shirt, and a jean jacket, and her dark, shoulder-length, curly hair is often pulled back in a loose ponytail. And her expression alternates between a half smile and a sneer, depending on who she's looking at or what she's thinking about.

Todd gets the bulk of her sneers, so I feel like she could be a friend if I just talked to her.

Todd seems afraid of her, too, even though he'll verbally harass her. The other girls bully her a bit as well. But, I could take that if I were her, I think. At least it never gets physical and she dishes it right back, anyway.

Watching her today, I notice she's reading a novel in class, hiding it below her desk. And when she temporarily closes it on her thumb to look up and pretend like she's paying attention for a moment, I can see it's one of the *Pern* books. Which makes me want to talk to her even more, because I *love* those books.

But, I'm also in less of a talking mood than ever, in general, so I don't.

Veronica, on the other hand, on the other side of the classroom from me and Megan, is one of the girl bullies. She's snooty and always dresses in really nice clothes, like what you'd expect her to have to wear to church. And, she kicked Bradley, one of my other lesser known bullies, in the balls in second grade.

Now, back when that happened, I remember feeling like she deserved to get away with it, because, even though Bradley hadn't started bullying me yet, he *had* been harassing her. He'd been a total dick, and definitely

been asking for it. Even though getting kicked in the balls fucking sucks. And, actually, you could maybe permanently hurt someone by doing that?

Thinking about that, I reflexively clench my pelvic muscles and feel everything down there shift weirdly. I wonder how much longer I'll be vulnerable to that. And, will they just fall off? Or will they get pulled inside? And what happens when I shed down there? The first patch of skin that came off was awfully close to all of that.

I can't help but cringe in class, but nobody notices.

Anyway, even though she's a righteous ballbuster and the scourge of all the boy bullies because of it, I could never be Veronica. She wears too much smelly stuff, and I think her parents even let her use makeup. Also, her clothes just aren't my style. It's like she's afraid to get dirty.

And she picks on Megan, and I don't like that.

Then there's Denise, who's trying to get Heath to show her his work without the teacher noticing. She's OK. Heath's relaxed around her, which is cool. If I had to be her, maybe I could still be friends with him. But, he's silently chuckling and shaking his head, and won't let her see anything.

Her style is somewhere between Megan and Veronica's. Definitely more relaxed than Veronica's. And probably doable for me. I like her denim skirt and brown knee high boots, anyway.

"K," Mrs. Early calls. "How do you spell 'venom'? As in, 'a snake bite is full of venom'?"

I look up at the ceiling to think about it and then say, "Venom. V-e-n-o-m. Venom."

"Very good," she confirms.

That was an easy one. I got lucky. This spelling shit is so annoying, though. I wish we didn't have to do it anymore

in sixth grade. It just never stops. But, on the other hand, some words still mess me up, like 'business'. I keep either trying to use a 'z' or I feel like there should be another 'i' in there somewhere.

Still hate being quizzed about it, though. Especially out loud like this.

Well. There's only so long I'll have to endure *that* anymore.



I do skip PE. I absolutely skip it.

There's *no* way I'm going into that locker room.

When my secret comes out, it cannot be at the hands of Todd and Marcus, or the likes of Bradley. It can't be under the eyes of Mr. George, even if he ignores what goes on in there. I have to find a way to make it on *my* terms. Not theirs. And if I take my pants off, they *will* see my patches of scales. If I take my shirt off, my missing bellybutton will be as obvious to them as it is to me now.

The timing is perfect, actually.

On the way toward the exit, there's a surge of kids in front of the restrooms to my right, and I tell Heath I gotta go and duck in there. I'll meet him for lunch at the trees, as usual. And Heath shrugs and waves. The teacher that's hanging out in the hall to watch everyone doesn't even care. Might not even see me amongst the crowd.

The boys room is busy, but I duck into a stall and just sit and wait. And it clears out pretty quick because, this

time, no one in there besides me wants to be late. Luck of the draw, really.

As soon as I'm alone, staring at graffiti of a monster eye next to letters scratched into the paint of the door that say "##### + Felicity K-I-S-S-I-N-G" (the first name is vigorously scratched out), my mind turns from what it would be like to be girl. It hits me once again that that is really *not* what's happening.

I mean, I knew that when I first saw those scales. It made me feel *sick* when my bellybutton fell off. But, also, I kind of just rolled with it? I ignored the fear and terror of it. It didn't seem real.

But, here I am, skipping class on purpose for the first time ever, not even sure I'll get away with it, because I can't show these things to my bullies.

Without thinking, my hand creeps up under my shirt to touch my belly plate, whatever that's called, through the hole where my belly button was. When my fingertips contact that slick, hard surface, I jerk them away.

I feel a chill spread through my body like ripples on a pool, after a rock's been thrown in it. And in their wake, my heart rate spikes, and I feel like laughing. I feel like I could maybe fly, somehow. It's a powerful feeling, despite my fear.

Underneath my skin, *I have armor plating.*

What am I going to look like, anyway? I know I'll be brown and yellow and sort of a dark bone, tan color. At least. I know the shape of my scales. Or some of them. The ones on my heel look more like what you might find on a chicken's foot, or a tyrannosaur foot. Something like that. While my thigh scales look pebbly, like a Gila monster. But, I hope I'm going to get wings. I hope there'll be a tail.

Will I have spikes, or what? Or am I just turning into a lizard, like a Komodo dragon?

I should find an encyclopedia and look up lizards. Maybe there's one in there with the same colors I have.

The warning bell rings and I don't move.

This is going to require some scary risks. Because, if I get caught, that might end with my secret being discovered early, too. And, I need to somehow check if the coast is clear in the hallway without being spotted.

I'm not even sure where I'm going to go to hide.

I suppose I could just stay here in the bathroom, but I think they check these places? They *know* kids will try to stay in here to avoid class.

And when the classes are in session, there *are* hall monitors.

In the whole nine months I've been here, I haven't seen one, actually. I've gotten a hall pass to use the bathroom a couple of times, and just didn't run into anyone checking. But the hall pass tells me they exist. Normally, teachers tell you to wait until the break to use the bathroom.

The tardy bell rings, but I decide to give it a couple of minutes to check. There's a clock above the sinks. But I stay where I'm at in the stall, lift my feet up, in case someone comes in to look under the doors, and start counting to sixty a couple times.

I hate doing this. It's boring. It's not exciting, like a good game of hide and seek tag. It's just scary and tedious.

The alternatives are worse, though.

Nothing happens while I'm counting. I give it another count to sixty, before I just *have* to move. My tail bone just hurts too much, curled up on the toilet seat like this, and I'm not even sitting on it. There's that big hole under my butt. It's the excess stretching that's getting to me.

Or.

*It's my tail growing.*

But, I've gotta move. The longer I sit here, the more terrified I am that some staff member like the janitor will come in and find me. Gotta stay on the run now.

Tentatively, I lower my feet, my Vans touching the piss stained painted concrete with a sick tacking noise. As slowly as I can manage, I stand up, as if simply bending my joints might make a sound. And, I don't know, maybe they will now. Then I touch the stall's door handle to unlock it.

Nothing happens.

My tail bone still aches with every movement, and I'm trying to decide whether to be annoyed or excited by that. But, I've got better things to worry about.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and slowly, excruciatingly unlock the door and pull it open. Just a little way. Enough to lean and poke the top of my head around the edge of it and open my eyes.

I can't see the whole bathroom, but nobody's in sight.

The next few steps are slightly less terrifying, and soon I find myself passing the urinals, wrinkling my nose. Maybe this will be the last time I have to use this place.

That thought gives me a little rush. It's enough to propel me forward to the door, which is recessed from the hallway and behind a privacy wall. It's also propped open by a garbage can. So, all anyone has to do is step out and go to class. Only, that's not what I'm going to do.

The next two corners are the worst, because each one is closer to where a hall monitor is likely to be. And I take them like I did the stall door. But, each time, I find that I'm home free, and let out a quick breath.

The hallway is completely empty.

Which isn't *great*, actually. It would be better if I saw the hall monitor walking away from me, because then I'd know the coast would be clear for longer.

And dammit. To the left, toward my core room, is a visible exit along the wall. But opposite of it is another hallway, and someone might be walking down that hallway toward me. And, to my right, there's another exit from the building, just straight ahead, but it's at an L in the hall, another direction a witness might be coming from. I have to choose which is the better bet.

Well, there's also what's outside, and how far it is for me to get to a hiding place out there. Maybe even just completely off school grounds, though I bet they're watching for that. And if I *don't* miss my other classes, there's less of a chance my parents will get a phone call, I think.

God, I'm *so screwed*. I really have no idea what I'm doing.

OK, so, there are four buildings. I'm in the main one. If I turn right and go out that door, I'll end up between the main building and where the Science and Music rooms are, which is also connected to the big gym and cafeteria. And to my left from there is the small gym, which has its own locker rooms and is where my friends have PE. Way beyond the Science and Lunch building is the Art and Shop building.

I haven't really figured out what these buildings are actually called. I haven't been paying attention.

But, I'm thinking, I need to avoid the teachers' parking lots, and any thoroughfare. Also, any classroom windows, which I can do by crawling on hands and knees underneath them, if I have to. Maybe there's a dumpster I can hide behind near the Shop room.

Just hiding behind the small gym would work. But only if both PE classes stay in their gyms.

Yeah. I'll go out the door to my right, take a jag to my left, and crawl under the windows along the sides of both those buildings until I get to the Shop dumpster.

And, once I'm outside, if I get caught, I'll just run.

Maybe I've got some new dragon powers that will help me. Or, at least, I'm pretty sure Komodo dragons are scary fast. I think I remember that from a *Nature of Things* episode.

So, anyway, yeah, this plan, too, goes without a hitch, which just makes me even *more* nervous.

Like, I'm sure that class is almost halfway over by the time I give up crawling on hands and knees, and just get to my feet, crouching precariously below the height of the classroom windows, so I can basically run. But what's the point if I don't get to enjoy at least some of this class period sitting on my ass in a quiet hiding place?

The final stretch to where I remember the dumpster being is windowless. Just a short bit of wall, really. But it lets me stand up and catch my breath.

Obviously, the dumpster is near a door. It's not great. But it doesn't really get used during class. And it's just around the corner from a smaller parking lot. I've thrown wood in there, so I know there's a place where I can hide, at least for a little bit. And, on this side of the school, there's a stretch of trees and hedges between the school and the road, so passing cars aren't likely to see me.

On the other hand, my luck has just been too good, and I fully expect Mr. Andersen, the Shop teacher, to be leaning against the wall there, arms folded, tapping his arm while he's waiting for me to show up.

He's not.

As I'm peeking around the corner, checking all the places a teacher or student is likely to be, I catch a bit of movement right below my eyes, right in front of me.

I *almost* yell and jump back, but I recognize that hair and book!

Right around the corner of the building, leaning back against the concrete and brick wall, knees up, *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern* open about two thirds of the way through, Megan Darling is sitting there, flipping a page.

I take a breath.

Her head turns.

The bland expression on her face expands and changes.

"Holy shit, Keith?" She slaps the ground next to her like she's trying to scare a cat. "God dammit, you startled me!"

"Sorry?" comes right out of my mouth.

She squints and frowns at me as I sheepishly step out from around the corner of the wall. "Why are you skipping class?" she asks.

"It's PE," I say. I can't really bring myself to explain more than that, though.

She rolls her whole head as she rolls her eyes. "Oh, fuckin' *tell* me about it. Well, this is *my* spot."

"Sorry," I stammer. "I – I can't go back to class. And I don't know where else to go."

She scowls up at me, waiting for me to decide what to do, apparently unwilling to acknowledge my explanation. This is her place and she's not planning on sharing it with me, obviously.

I point. "I'm gonna... I was going to hide behind the dumpster. Can I do that?"

She shrugs and scrunches up her lips, shaking her head. "Fine. Whatever. Knock yourself out. I'm reading."

As I make to step around her, I say, "Oh, I *love* that book."

"This?" she holds it up with her thumb between the pages to flash the cover at me. "It's *OK*. I like the dragons, at least."

I make it a couple steps toward my destination before I have the urge to respond. She's ignoring me otherwise, gone back to her reading. "I've read all of them. The dragons are the coolest part."

"You'd say that," she says, without looking up from her book.

I stop. "What do you mean?" I ask.

"You're a boy," she says, creasing her brow in my specific direction. "The dragons are the *only* reason boys would read these books." She wrinkles her nose and looks at the book from different angles. "Anyway, the romance in it is all kinda samey, and the plague is blah. So I guess I'm reading it for the dragons, too. Which probably makes me a boy."

I was about to turn away again, but that brings me up, and I tilt my head to the side at her. "I mean. I liked Lessa a lot, as a character, in the earlier books. And Moreta is cool. And there's less romance in that book."

She squints up at me. "Sure?" She dogears the page and puts the book down by her right hip. "Alright, then. F'nor or F'lar?"

"Pfft!" That's easy. "F'nor."

"So, you'd do F'nor?"

"What?"

She just raises her eyebrows and licks her lips and smiles.

I take a step back and scowl down at her. "No, his dragon is cool. I mean, Mnementh is a better name, but Canth is *cool*. And so is Brekke."

She takes a breath as if to say something, but decides the better of it and picks her book up to start reading it again.

She's bullying me, and I know she is. And I hate even this verbal kind of bullying, but for some reason coming from her it doesn't sting so much. It's not as scary or infuriating. It reminds me of how my cousin banter with her dad. And I just wish I could manipulate a conversation the same way.

But, also, I know I'm turning into a dragon, and it just doesn't matter anymore.

"OK, which one is *your* favorite book?" I ask, just making a move to keep the conversation normal. I know I'm interrupting her reading, but she can just tell me to go away and I will.

She stops and looks up to her left for a little bit, and then shakes her head. "It's not a *Pern* book."

"Your favorite dragon book," I concede. I want to know her taste in dragons, I think.

She takes a deep breath and runs her tongue around her teeth, then looks up at me again. "Why do you want to know?"

"I don't know," I say. "You seem really cool, and I guess I like dragons, too."

"You *guess* you like dragons?"

"It's sort of a new thing," I say. I mean, like, I've always kind of liked them, same as any other guy. But, ever since Tuesday morning, the word itself just makes me feel all sorts of good feelings. Like, *dub!* Of course, I don't say this to her.

"You've read all the *Pern* books, but dragons are a new thing for you?" She nods incredulously.

"Well..."

"Tell me you've read *Talking to Dragons*," she interrupts me.

"Never heard of it," I admit.

She dismisses me with a wave of her hand. "OK, go read that and come back to me, then." Then she goes back to her book.

OK, *that* hurt. Being brushed off like that is so rude. Patronizing. Though, it's kinda funny that's the title of her favorite book, considering what she's doing right now. Talking to a dragon.

Well, a soon-to-be-dragon.

Knowing something she doesn't know, I decide to wallow in that knowledge for a bit, and just sit down in front of her, cross-legged. Which both hurts my backside and feels really good, stretching it out. I wince as I settle down.

Without looking up, she asks, "What's wrong? Somebody kick your butt? Maybe you shouldn't sit on it."

Oh, it's *so* tempting to show her!

Why is it tempting to show her? I don't want anyone to know yet.

But, it would be my choice, I guess. And maybe if she saw that I was turning into a dragon, she'd stop bullying me. Of course, that's just fantasy. She'd be terrified or grossed out, or both. It'd be bad.

I don't watch her, though. Reading isn't a spectator sport, and I'm not *trying* to bother her. Much. I just shrug and look at the ground while I pick at the grass in front of me.

I can't help but smirk, though. She has absolutely no clue! No one does!

She slaps her book down in exasperation, though. "What?"

Not the reaction I was hoping for, but I guess I should have expected it.

I cringe and grimace at her, waving my hands upward. "I don't know what to do. I'm just waiting for the lunch bell. You can keep reading if you want."

"Ugh!" she grunts in frustration. "I can't read while you're here! I don't like boys. Go away!"

And then I realize we're both staring at each other. I'm not sure *why*, but she looks startled and kind of embarrassed. And in a second, she tilts her head ever so slightly, like she's listening for something, her lower lip dropping just a bit.

"Sure, I'll go behind the dumpster," I say, starting to get up.

She frowns and shakes her head as I go.

But then, I don't actually get any further than the nearest corner of the big green metal box when she turns to me and hisses impatiently, but *not* with anger, "You're *actually* gay, aren't you?"

I turn back to her, feeling hurt. I'm definitely not gay. Not that I know of. We're *sixth* graders! "What?" I ask, frowning.

"You don't care that *I* am, so, *obviously*. Right?" she replies.

I still don't get it. But I do get that she's not insulting me. Still don't want her telling the rest of the school I'm gay just because my favorite dragon rider is F'nor. But this doesn't feel like bullying. It just feels scary and incorrect.

I start to piece together what she just said, too.  
"You're—"

"I *just* said I don't like boys," she interrupts me.  
"Whatever. Nevermind. *Forget you heard that.*"

Really? Wait. She doesn't like boys. Is she *gay*? I didn't even know girls could *be* gay. Mind you, it took me until the end of fifth grade to learn what gay actually *meant*. All the guys were calling each other 'gay' and 'gaylord' at lunch, and nobody would explain it until I asked our student teacher.

OK, I'd heard about homosexuality already. With the AIDS epidemic, you *can't* not hear about that. I just somehow never made the connection that 'gay' meant 'homosexual'. But nobody ever told me that homosexuality could apply to both men and women. They only ever talked about men.

I wonder what she'd think about the fact that I'm *supposed* to be a girl. Not that I want to date Megan, we're in *sixth grade*. Dating's an eighth grader thing.

And, sort of, I guess that while I'm feeling like I'm dreaming, my frustration, smugness, and my stupid inability to lie all just come together, and, to my utter horror, my mouth says the Thing.

"Well, I think girls are cool. And I'm not going to be a boy much longer."

"*What?*"

Then I watch in abject horror as my body seems to go on automatic pilot and tries to explain to her what's going on, *proudly*. Like it's a thing anyone would understand. With every word, I feel myself pulled further away from everything I can feel, here, see, smell, and even *think*. To the point that it's like I'm experiencing life through a tunnel.

"I'm actually turning into a dragon," my mouth says, like a stupid third grader, even if it's true. "And I think I'm gonna be a *girl* dragon. And I can show you—"

"Ew! Don't!" She puts her hand up and cringes back as my hands start to lift my shirt to show her my lack of belly button.

*I don't want to do this to her*, but I'm doing it anyway. It *is* just my belly.

Fortunately for the both of us, the end of class bell rings before I do show her.

"God!" she exclaims, rolling over to her hands and feet, book still in hand, and then dashing around the corner of the building to get way from me.

## Chapter 4 - Ectothermic or bust

**I** STAND THERE, IN shock, behind the shop building, until I can't hear Megan running anymore. Maybe a little bit past that.

I get it. All of it.

I want someone to know. I want it to be OK. And once I guess I decided she was probably safe, she doesn't know any of my friends or family, and she was OK with the idea of me being gay—even if I'm really not—my stupid brain just went on automatic. Like it does sometimes. And all the time in dreams.

But, of course, *she* didn't want to see whatever gross thing she thought I was going to show her. Even if I told her what it was, she probably wouldn't want to see it.

Who *would*?

There's a part of *me* that doesn't like looking at it. But only a part.

I turn away from any direction a person might possibly see me from, and pull up my shirt the rest of the way, and bend over to look at my belly.

Yep. Still very slowly shedding there. A bit more of my old skin has pulled away. It's pretty thick, too. Which is

probably why I haven't changed color as my scales have been growing in underneath all the rest of my skin.

Though, if I look at my arms under the sunlight, I can *kind* of get a hint of where all my stripes are.

Wow.

Seeing that feels so amazing, I almost forget the terror of having been awful to Megan.

I lift my head, dropping my shirt. Then I breathe as I close my eyes and shudder.

The next thing I know, I'm running across the field to the trees in the far corner. I'll be there when the guys make it out to lunch.

Except half way, I suddenly feel sluggish and weak, and *hungry*.

My lunch is back in my locker, but I'm not going back there just yet. There are too many people, and Megan's that way. I'm just going to have to endure my hunger until after school, or something. Maybe we'll get to eat some cooking in Home Ec.

Maybe I can trade with the guys, eat some of their lunches in trade for, well... None of them like what I eat.

Breathing deeply and as heavily as I can, slow big breaths to counter my beating heart and try to slow it down, I trudge on to my destination. It is amazing and worrisome how drained I am. My body has never quite felt like this before, not even on family hiking trips. And I'm certain I'm going to fall asleep the second I sit down.

My arms and legs feel like they've been stuffed with lead, or bled of all their blood, and it's hard to believe they're still moving or that I can feel anything with them. My chest and gut feel so hollow and I'm getting dizzy. But as I slow *way* down and keep breathing, it starts to lighten up.

About twenty feet (or something) from our usual lunch spot, I just stop and turn around to look back.

Heath is halfway across the field, running toward me, with lunch in one hand and WARHAMMER book in the other. Jeffrey is a few paces behind him, also running. And Indigo is way behind the both of them, walking normally, relaxed and watching the sky.

I just stand and keep breathing as I watch my friends approach.

"Yo! What's up?" Heath calls as he gets close enough to just talk.

I have just enough energy to shrug.

"Where's your lunch?" Jeffrey asks.

A keening groan makes its way out of my throat.

"Dude, are you alright?"

I guess I kind of shake my head just a little bit. What I really want to do is sink into the ground for the rest of time.

"Did you forget it?" Heath asks. "I've got an apple I don't want, you can have that. It's probably mealy, though."

Actually, *yes*. I *hate* mealy apples, but I *need* that. I seem to have become a meat and fruit monster in the last couple of days, and I reach out with my hand in a claw shape to accept the apple.

Heath laughs and says, "Hold on." Then he stuffs his book under his arm and starts rummaging around in his lunch bag.

As Indigo catches up, he asks, "What's going on?"

Jeffrey answers in an announcer kind of voice, "Blue K needs food badly."

I look down, and sure enough, I'm wearing mostly blue. I hadn't really paid attention.

"Oh! I've got an apple you can have!" Indigo brightens up.

"I'm already giving him one," Heath laughs.

But my other hand gets shoved out toward Indigo, grasping at him, and Jeffrey loses it.

"I've got one, too. You want it?" he asks.

I slowly nod.

"OK, *after* you've eaten the other two, alright. Let's go sit down."

But I stand and wait until I'm holding two apples before I head over to the trees to join him.

And I'm too busy eating for the first several minutes of lunch to answer any questions. By the time I'm chowing through the third apple, going right through the core of it as well, the guys' expressions are shifting from amusement through awe to mild horror. Not true horror, like I've felt too many times before, but the kind that lets you know you'll never live whatever is happening down. Ever.

I don't care, though. It really doesn't matter anymore.

Then, when I'm done, I find myself returning their stares.

They haven't been silent this whole time. They've been asking me questions that I didn't answer, and making commentary to each other. But we're all silent now. And I do feel like it's on me to provide some kind of explanation for what just happened to those apples. *At least.*

I also *really* want to let them in on everything. Well. Almost everything.

I'm experiencing something unbelievable and amazing. And even when things go horribly wrong, whenever I think about it, I get *really* excited and happy. And these guys deserve to know that magic is *real*.

"Um," I say, deciding to do it very differently this time. "I want to show you guys something, but it's kind of scary looking and gross. But there's no blood."

I get a different weird look from each of them. Just, each of their faces morphs in expression, almost simultaneously, into a completely different face. Indigo looks like he's duly impressed that I might have something that matches that description. Heath is just grimacing. And Jeffrey has turned his face away, raised an eyebrow, and twisted his features into a look of incredulity.

"How gross?" Indigo asks.

I'm starting to feel a lot better now that there are the remains of three apples in my—um, do I have a gizzard? Is that a gizzard they're sitting in before they go to my stomach? I haven't had the urge to eat any rocks or anything like that.

I lift up my hand and waggle it. Then say, "Lizard gross. But it's startling."

"What do you mean?" Heath asks.

"First I have a question," I say.

Jeffrey gestures at me, "Sure."

I drew in a breath. "Have I been acting weird the last couple of days?"

"You've been kind of spacey," Indigo replies. "But you're always kind of spacey. More now, though. Definitely."

"I'm always spacey?"

"Oh, yeah," Heath nods. "You're usually really slow to respond to things."

"Weird."

"Eh. It's just you."

"What's going on?" Jeffrey asks.

"So." I sit up straight, feeling my energy and wakefulness surge as the sugar from the apples really hits my blood stream. And then I adjust my posture from kneeling to cross-legged. "You remember that dream I said I had Tuesday morning?"

I get a couple of confused or searching looks, but Indigo nods and points at me. "The goddess transformation bargain, right?"

I point back. "Yes!"

"Right!" Jeffrey lights up.

"OK," I say, reaching to take my right shoe off. "This is *not* a joke. This is *not* makeup. This is *really happening*. And if you promise not to tell *anyone*, I want you guys to know about it."

Then, with my shoe half off, I pause and glare meaningfully up at them. While I do that, I'm also making sure no one is headed out this way to see what's going on or bother us.

There's a group of kids on the other side of the field playing some kind of chasing game, but they aren't bothering to come this direction. And everyone else in sight is completely ignoring us, as usual.

"Well, take your shoe off!" Jeffrey exclaims.

"You have to swear," I say. I can't believe I'm saying these words, but I know I have to say them anyway. "I don't want to end up a science experiment. I *mean* it."

"Alright, I swear," he responds.

The other two nod, and repeat words of swearing and secrecy. And they all seem sincere enough, I decide to go ahead and show them some of my scales.

My hands are shaking as I pull my shoe off the rest of the way, and then start fumbling with my sock. I find it

interesting that it seems that dragons also shake. Or, at least, dragon people. Or whatever it is I am now.

The sock is really troublesome, and it feels like it's catching on some of my dead skin.

Sure enough, when it finally does come off, the patch of scales is bigger.

It's about the size of a trading card, irregular in shape, just barely showing mostly yellow scales with small brown stripes along the back of my heel and the bottom of my foot. The stripes are horizontal, like cut marks across my tendon. It's gonna look so cool when it's all done. And these scales are flat and overlapping, and arranged to follow the contours of where I've got wrinkles. Like, I said, just like a bird's leg and foot.

"What the *fuck*?" Jeffrey swears.

"It's just as sensitive as my skin," I say quietly. "I can feel anything with it just like anywhere else. But you can touch it, if you want, right here." I point at the back of my heel, where it won't tickle. Then I look up at them.

Indigo, who's furthest away, is leaning forward with a dramatically discerning look, like he's an expert who can judge whether or not what he's seeing is real.

Heath looks like he's beholding a chest full of jewels, eyes wide, head held high and back, slowly and ever so slightly turning his head away in disbelief.

Jeffrey is completely agog.

"I think," I say. "I am *actually* turning in to a dragon. When I swallow food, it stops right here for a while before it goes to my stomach." I point to the middle of my breastbone. "And, I need a lot of heat way more often than I used to. Like hours in a really hot bath." I tug at my coat. "This jacket isn't really doing much for me, either. I'm glad it's not winter."

"I mean, you are wearing it open. Zip it up!" Jeffrey scolds me.

Indigo frowns. "Are you saying you're becoming ectothermic?"

Heath turns to look at him in confusion. "What does that mean?"

"Cold blooded," Indigo explains.

"I don't know," I say, starting to really believe in everything now that I know my best friends can see it. "Maybe until my fire comes in, or something. How does that work?"

Indigo squints and looks up at the tree behind me for a minute. "It doesn't? I mean, you don't just turn into a dragon. That can't happen. And, like, ectothermic means that you need to get your heat and your cold from the environment. So, when you get too hot, you have to find a way to cool off. And visa versa. So, if you're ectothermic and you produce heat from some kind of internal fire, then you're going to need to constantly lounge on cold things, or move to a cold climate. *Or*, your body can just endure higher temperatures. But there's never been any dragons, so nobody knows."

"Well," I gesture down at my foot. "We're going to find out!"

"Are you sure?"

Jeffrey scowls at him with startled disbelief, "What kind of question is *that*? Look at his foot!"

Hm. At the sound of the word 'his', I feel a hitch in my chest. That's just another layer of confusion I do *not* need to deal with right now, though.

"I'm just saying..." Indigo starts.

"Dude. K has scales!" Jeffrey interrupts him.

"Can I—?" Heath asks, leaning toward more tentatively.

"Yeah, right there." I point.

I feel two of his fingers curl around the back of my foot and rub back and forth for a moment.

"Dude," he breathes, "that feels just like a chicken leg. Like, you're not even warm."

"Huh." Indigo makes a thoughtful face.

"Here." I pull off my coat and slap my right forearm, holding it out. "If you press hard enough, you can feel the scales underneath. But, also, is my arm warm?"

Heath courageously grasps my arm and squeezes. Then gives an appraising look. "Yep!" He presses it with his thumb and all four fingers and rubs them back and forth, pulling on my skin a little harder than I'd like. But nothing tears yet. "Yep! There's bumps under there. And just as cold as your ankle. Dude, it feels like I'm touching wood, only soft. But not as soft as your arm *should* be."

I nod.

Indigo's scowl deepens. "May I?"

"Of course." I nod my head at Heath to get him to scoot back and make room.

"Dude, you are so fucked," Jeffrey says. "There is just no room in this world for a big human sized lizard, let alone a *dragon*."

"I mean, Komodo dragons are—" I start to say, but he's solemnly shaking his head. And, he's right. If I become a Komodo dragon, I'd be fine if I were on the right island. Komodo island? I'll have to look it up. But here? No.

Also, I don't think Komodo dragons are brown and yellow tiger striped. I still don't know what is.

"I should have said 'yellow K needs food badly', though, huh?" Jeffrey asks.

"What?" Indigo asks back, momentarily distracted from feeling my heel and arm.

"Nevermind." Jeffrey waves him off.

After they've all had their chance to see for themselves how real my scales are, they all start arguing about what it means. And I just sit back and listen.

I don't really care what they're saying. I mean, I do. But it's not happening to them. It's happening to me. And I'm just going to be the one to find out which one of them is right.

I've got some energy back from the apples. And they're sustaining me well enough. I can hold my own in a conversation now, but I'm still feeling sluggish. Maybe more so, in a way. I feel the need for more heat. A *yearning* for it, right in my gut. It's a kind of ache, a little different from feeling cold like I used to, but instinctually understandable, I think.

Anyway, Indigo is somehow remaining skeptical of everything, relatively speaking. Like, he believes what he's seen and felt, but refuses to speculate on what it really means.

Jeffrey is all doom and gloom, and enthusiastically trying to talk about all the bullshit from the government that's about to come down on me, once this gets out.

And Heath is just excited. Like, I'm now way cooler than WARHAMMER to him. He's kind of in a loopy daze, except for when he feels the need to bring either Indigo or Jeffrey down from their convictions. Of the three, he also seems to be the one looking out for my own feelings the most. But he's not very good at it.

Whatever.

Just before the bell rings, I interrupt their deliberations to say, "I think I need a hot water bottle from the nurse's office. Or an electric blanket."

Indigo squints. "Digestion?"

I shrug. "Yeah, probably. That's what it *feels* like."

"Weird."

The bell rings.



"My stomach aches. Like muscle cramps," I tell the nurse. It's not really lying, actually. It pretty much feels like that now. It's a faint pain, but the yearning for heat is intense. "Do you have a hot water bottle? I can take it to class."

Ms. Childs gives me a sad smile. "I'm sorry. We don't carry those. You need to boil them for a while to heat them up, and then they're not very safe in a classroom setting. Are you *sure* you need it? Can you just stick it out until the end of school? Maybe your mom can help, then?"

I make a face like I *really* don't think so.

There was one other student here when I walked in, but she rushed off before the tardy bell rang. *I*, however, am now late to Math. This is definitely going to start showing up on my attendance record. But, at least, I'm here telling the nurse I feel kind of sick.

And, also, my mom knows I wasn't feeling well on Tuesday night.

But, this does mean my little house of cards that was my human life is starting to fall apart. At some point, it's all going to come down.

Will it be when something obvious grows in, like teeth, horns. Or when my eyes change color or something? Or will it be when the rest of my old skin falls off? Who knows?

Every time I ask myself these questions, I get more perversely excited. And I know that's definitely the wrong reaction.

"I think," I say, "I need something now, or I won't be able to pay attention in class. And it feels like I need heat."

She turns her head away, narrows her eyes, and looks at me sideways. "Not ice?"

I shake my head vigorously. "No, I feel too cold!"

She frowns. "I've got a hot pack and a microwave. It's like a nice big beanbag. But I've gotta wrap it in a towel, in case it's too hot."

"I think that'll work," I tell her, hopefully. I can't believe I'm getting away with this, and it seems to be working. She's being so reasonable. Adults are never like this. Except when Mom's in a good mood.

"OK, I'll be right back. Please take a seat while you wait," she says. "It'll be five minutes. I'll also give you a note for your teacher."

"Thank you." I sit down in a nearby chair that's set aside for waiting students.

The office seems blue. Like, none of the actual colors are blue. It's mostly browns and cream colors, with some brass and chrome on the chairs and lamps. There's a black plastic phone on the nurse's desk. And a big green writing pad next to it. Unlike the secretary, she doesn't have a computer yet, though. But, anyway, it's sort of a property of the light, or shade, in here that it seems blue. My memories of this room are going to be blue. And that's the main thing I guess I'm thinking while I wait.

Then I hear the ding of the microwave in the other room, and I know I'm going to have to head to Math class. But, at least, I'll be able to digest my apples easier, I guess.

I wonder what I'm going to do about this tomorrow. Eat a bigger breakfast? Bring my own hot water bottle?

Or, oh, eat really well at dinner. Digest my food all night, and then just eat light for breakfast and lunch. Maybe.

I'm just guessing.

*I really* don't know how this works. I need room to experiment.

Tomorrow's Friday. One more school day, and then it's the weekend.



The rest of school goes smoothly, for the most part. The note and the hot pack both help. And I keep the hot pack under my jack, and my jacket zipped up, to make the most of it. I only return it before going home. It's the same temperature as I am, by then, but it still felt worth holding onto until the last minute.

With my friends following me home, because that's just what we do, and there's no way they're letting me out of sight now, I'm stalled at the bottom of the cow pasture. I'm staring at one of the cows.

We are three blocks from 'downtown', and there are cows. I've grown up with this, but I *still* think it's pretty funny. Like, I've been 'into town' before, which means going into the next city over. The *actual* city, where

the buses come from. And I've talked to kids there, and I know that cows in the middle of town is ridiculous because of them.

"Come on. Let's go around," Jeffrey says, gesturing.

"Yeah," Heath urges me.

Indigo is hanging back and watching, I can tell. Even if I can't see him.

My eyes are locked with the cow's. When we made eye contact, it stopped chewing its cud and stood rock still. I don't think I've ever seen a cow do that. I'm also having Thoughts.

I know that, usually, when one of the cows is in the way, you can just slowly walk around them. They might follow you to the other side of the pasture, until you climb over the fence that's there. But they're basically big, slow puppy dogs and they're totally used to us.

Or they used to be.

I can tell that *this* one is scared half to death, though. Paralyzed.

"Come on," Jeffrey repeats, and then starts leading the way around to the right of the cow.

The cow pays him absolutely *no* mind.

Heath starts to follow him.

Indigo stops by my side and furrows his brow as he looks at the side of my face. He's just far enough forward that I notice that out of the corner of my eye, despite my focus.

"Hey, K. Are you stuck?" he asks.

"Nnnno," I tell him, not entirely sure.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know," I say. Then, to try something out, I start to sway side to side. Wider and wider, as I notice that the cow sways with me. "I think I've hypnotized it."

"What are you *doing?*" Megan's voice shouts right up my back from the sidewalk. Just a couple steps away.

I whirl to face her, and the cow dodges away, gallumphing away from me and humans as directly as possible. To the back corner of the field to my left when I had been facing it. My right, now that I'm facing Megan.

I find I can relax.

She's on the other side of the wooden fence from me. There's also an electric fence attached to it, but it's easy enough to avoid when climbing over it. Our neighbor made sure of that, so that kids could use his field to get to school, I think. I hope.

I gesture over my shoulder with my thumb. "My house is that way. You know I always go this way when I go home, right?"

"Yeah, but you were terrorizing a *cow.*"

I look back at the cow, which is now trying to hide behind the other cows. "Yeah. I guess I was. Sorry."

"*Why?*"

I look back at her, and I have the worst explanation. "It just happened?"

"It's true," Indigo tells her. "I watched it."

"Oh," Megan says, with a face of disgust and indignation, gearing up to deliver what she thinks is a whopper. "So, are you playing dragon, then?"

"I mean—" I say, before stalling out, not knowing how to respond.

Indigo looks confused.

"How does she know?" Jeffrey asks.

Megan points at me. "He *told* me."

"Oh, good move, K!" Jeffrey yells at my back, and I cringe.

I turn my cringe at him. "I thought she'd be cool with it!"

Indigo asks just loud enough for me and Megan to hear. "Did you show her your scales?"

"What?" Megan shouts. "No. He tried to pull up his shirt, but whatever it was, I didn't want to see it!"

Indigo looks *very* oddly and asks, "What's under your shirt?"

"I'm not pulling that up here," I tell both him and Megan. "Not where strangers might see it."

Indigo shrugs and says, "OK." Then he turns back to Megan, pointing back at me. "*Something* is happening with K. We don't *really* know what it is. But all we can do is wait and find out."

"Fine, whatever," Megan says. Then she scowls harder at me. "Just stop being a creep about it."

"Yeah," I say. I really can't think of anything else to say, so I just apologize. "I am really sorry about that."

Megan points across the pasture, "And apologize to the cow!"

I glance that way, opening my mouth and cringing at the same time. After a quick intake of breath, I say, "I don't think the cow wants anything to do with me."

"Smart cow," Megan growls, and then stomps on down the street, pointedly not looking at us anymore, focused on where she's going.

I really wish things had gone better with her. It would have been nice to be friends with her for at least a day, before I can't really be friends with anyone.

I can't seem to hate her for reacting badly to me, though. I just hate myself for it. I feel sick to my stomach.

Though, that might also be the need for more heat.



"I'm sorry guys." I turn to my friends, with my hand on the front doorknob. "I really need to eat more lunch meat, and then sit in the hottest bath I can stand. I am *so* hungry."

"I mean, that makes sense," Indigo says.

"Transformation has got to be using up a lot of calories. Though, it'll probably go faster the more you eat and keep yourself warm. And slower if you slow that down. On the other hand, it might not be healthy to go too slow."

"Slow is probably good right now, though," Jeffrey says. "Like, take it easy. We've gotta figure out a plan for you, right?"

Heath just nods.

"Yeah," I say, thinking about this for a moment. "If I don't show up at school tomorrow, it'll probably be because I couldn't hide it anymore from Mom. And if I don't sneak into the trees to meet you at lunch, you should come right here afterward to find out what happened, OK? And if I'm not here, but I still get away, I'll try to make it to Pioneer Farm. There are some good hiding spots there."

Indigo looks very concerned and Jeffrey sucks air in through his teeth.

"I'm sure it won't come to that, right?" Heath asks.

"I hope not?" I ask back. I'm not really sure. I hope it doesn't. Ideally, yeah. I want to see my friends as much as possible and have the weekend to make a getaway, if I have

to do that. But, um, I'm also super excited to stop having to deal with, like, all of this.

I mean what's left of my human body and all the obligations that go with it.

I wonder if I can cry anymore. Or if that's something that's going to go away.



"What was that all about out there?" Mom asks, as the door closes behind me. "Aren't your friends going to stay for a bit?"

"I hope not!" Travis shouts from the rec room.

"Travis!" Mom shouts at him. Then she turns back to me with a questioning look.

I shake my head, not looking her in the eye and start moving toward my room to drop my backpack off there before I go raid the fridge. "Nah. I'm not feeling great, still. I'm *really* hungry, and I'm also really cold. I think I need to eat something, lie under that electric blanket for a while, and then eat something more at dinner."

She looks skeptical. "You're taking to this teenager thing fast, aren't you? Didn't you *just* have your birthday?"

No, it was almost a year ago, and I'm still twelve.

"I mean, you would know, right?" I ask.

"Don't sass me, young man," she responds.

I sigh, slumping my shoulders, and turn to look at her with upturned brows. "I wasn't trying to be mean, or talk back, Mom. I just thought you'd think that was funny!"

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not in the mood," she tells me through a frown. "But, you are feeling OK, right?"

"I don't know," I tell her, hearing the whine in my own voice. "I just know what I need. Is that OK?"

She considers that with a scrunched up mouth. "Well, don't spoil your dinner."

I shrug, hands wide, totally exasperated about food. "Mom. I'm me! You know how I eat."

"Well, I thought I did, but now you don't like spaghetti!" she yells back, matching my exasperation and pumping it up a notch. "I don't know how to cook for you anymore!"

I close my eyes and lean away from her, mumbling as firmly as I can. "I can eat meat and fruit. And I've had three apples today, and ate all my lunch meat from lunch on the way home. I *almost* ate a cow, I think."

She scoffs. "Well, I can't serve you a cow for dinner. I can't afford that, anyway!"

"I'm not asking for one!"

"OK, well, we're having meatloaf, then. I know you don't like it, but it's meat, and you'll just have to deal," she declares.

"Fine. Thank you. I'll eat it," I tell her, yearning to take care of my things.

She pauses, watching me, I think. I still haven't opened my eyes again. I'm swaying a little bit.

"You should go lie down," she tells me, in much quieter tones. "You've got that blanket. I'll bring you some dried apricots. No more lunch meat until tomorrow, though. You're almost out. You'll get plenty of meat if you eat dinner."

I don't have the energy to argue or to fight for more. Despite the meat loaf and its terrible textures and crunchy

bits of onion, it actually sounds like a good plan. I mean, as long as no one is disgusted by just how much meat loaf I eat and *how* I eat it.

"OK," I say. "Thank you."

And then I turn to stumble to my bedroom.

I'm still thankful that my mom seems reluctant to take me to the hospital. That would be a disaster.

## Chapter 5 - Fight, flight, or freeze

**I**T WOULD BE COOL if I had another dream in which I get to talk to that goddess, or whatever it was, and learn about what's going on and why. But that doesn't happen.

Instead, I dream that my friends and I are on a train, and we're all standing around singing "Blame it on the rain." And we sound *amazing*, even though I don't really like that song much. It's OK, it's just not my favorite music. Until that dream.

I wake up in the middle of it, feeling great, to realize that it's playing on my alarm clock radio. And I lie there just listening to it, and it still sounds good to me.

So weird.

Dreams are weird. Especially when they linger after you've woken up.

After some DJ yammering and a bit of news, the next song is "Who's that girl". Which is, like, half Spanish, and I wonder if Travis will get to understand it.

In the light from my window, I hold up my hands to look at my fingertips, and I still don't have claws yet.

That is, definitely, a good thing.

I throw off my blankets, and look down at my body to count the patches of scales not covered by my underwear. And then I feel my face, and the back of my neck.

The oldest patches are bigger, and there are a few more here and there, but in safe places. And, everything still itches. It hasn't stopped itching. I've just gotten really good at ignoring it. It is really getting to me again, though.

It might be why I was so impatient about things yesterday.

I demolished the meatloaf last night, Mom only having to tell me twice to chew my food. And my stomach still feels fairly full. I woke up late, so I don't really have time to make eggs. So, I'm going to try to see if I can eat peanut butter, and I'll just have a few spoonfuls of that for breakfast.

If I can't, then I'm going to end up eating the rest of the lunch meat.

It's possible today is going to *really* suck.

I'm going to skip PE again. And I don't know if I can get away with it. I have a sense that the staff have got to be alert to my attendance shenanigans by now, and will be keeping an eye out for me specifically, since I've missed or been late to a handful of random classes this week. And I've never done that before, and I know that other kids get in trouble for it.

No one's mentioned anything to me directly, but they're going to eventually, so long as I'm still going to school.

The problem is, I still don't know what I'm going to do when I don't go to school. I don't know where I'm going to go when I run away from home. I have some vague visions in my head, but I can't imagine that they're safe or even make any sense.

I don't know where any caves are around here. Supposedly, the city to the south is riddled with coal mines underneath it. But, if I go there, what will I eat?

My appetite and ability to even eat food at all is changing. It's possible I'll actually like *fish* by the end of the month, at this rate. Maybe even raw fish.

That will be *interesting*.

But, honestly, the most mouth watering thing I've seen this week was that living cow. And I've still got to walk right through them on the way to school.

No, really, I could go around. I should go around. It's just way longer to do that. Like, a whole block.



OK.

So.

This is a really big conundrum, and I've never really thought about it before.

What if I'm the only dragon on the planet? When I'm a dragon, that is. And I'm a girl dragon. A female dragon. I'm pretty sure that's what's happening. That's what I *want* to happen.

What will that even *mean*?

So, I'll be able to lay eggs. I might even *have* to. Like a chicken, whether they're fertilized or not. Only, they won't be fertilized, because there won't be any male dragons. Not that I want to have anything to do with them. But, there won't even be any male dragons to reject.

And, like, humans will kind of care whether I'm male or female, because I know they argue about the sex of animals all the time. But only if they don't want to just kill me. And a lot of them will probably want to do that.

This is going to sound really sad and morbid, and more than a little crass, but there are only two things I actually want in life before I die, at this point.

I'd like to spend at least some time living without a penis and a pair of balls hanging from between my legs. And, I'd like to fly under the power of my own wings.

Everything else, I don't care about.

I still don't want to experience death. And the idea that someone will try to hunt me down makes me angry enough to want to kill them back, I think. I feel it as a fast and all consuming rage whenever I touch on that thought. But if I get to experience those two things before I die, I think I will die happy.

Or, as happy as I can be about dying, anyway.

The world is going to blow up some day, anyway, probably at the hands of human beings, so I don't know how much I care about living long enough to see that.

"Hey, *Katie!*"

Shit. That asshole.

He has always avoided me before and after school if Heath or the other guys are with me. And, like I said, Heath misses me about half the time while walking to school, but not this week. We're walking together, in silence, hands in pockets, looking at the ground.

"Hey, fuck off Todd," Heath says.

"Ooh, make me!" Todd shoots back.

Marcus is with him, too.

It's two on two.

We're not even on the school property, yet. He's come down from the school bus stop to intercept us here. This is city property. The sidewalk.

It's *my* territory, and he's on it.

I snarl. Literally snarl. "Todd, I will eat you. Get the *fuck* away."

Todd, Marcus, *and* Heath are used to me swearing. But Heath looks startled at my use of the word anyway.

Todd looks unimpressed, and Marcus just laughs.

"You can't eat me. I'm not a lesbian, like you are," Todd quips.

I feel like my eyes are flaring rage, as I show my teeth. And I step toward him, hunched, and raising my cla—my hands. "I mean *literally*, Todd."

This isn't going to work, is it?

But he blinks, staring at my eyes, and backs up. "Woah."

"What was that?" Marcus asks. He's *such* a toadie.

And I straighten up in confusion, blinking. Concerned about what they mean.

That seems to break the spell, because Todd lets out a breath, and squares up. "You better skip PE again today, *Katie*. If you know what's good for you."

Heath is looking back and forth between me and Marcus, who is still backing away. And then he mutters, "Do the cow thing."

Todd hears him, though, and sneers, "'Cow thing'? What? Are you a *cow*, Katie? Are you a cow, like Melinda? Are you cows *together*?"

Normally this would infuriate me. That he's bothering me, blocking my path, yet again, and stretching for inane insults that really, actually don't hurt me. Just over and over. He doesn't stop. It's not what he says that hurts, it's that he keeps trying, and then backs it up with fists and

feet when there are no adults around. When he thinks he can get away with literally assaulting me. And he's always right about that, too.

But, today, suddenly, it's just *so funny*.

I snort. "No, *you're* the cow, Todd. I'm the *dragon*." I know that's a thing a younger kid playing make-believe would say, but it's also the truth, and there's something there that he just sensed earlier. So, as I say that, I draw myself up and widen my eyes as much as I can while staring him right in the pupils. And then I pull my lips back, twitching them in the process.

His eyes go wide, too. And he freezes on the spot.

Marcus turns and runs.

As I'm doing this to Todd, Heath *cackles* and dances forward, his backpack bouncing on his back. Then he shoves Todd

And the bully falls over like a sleeping cow that's just been tipped.

*Shit!*

Two things about that.

Before I know what I'm doing, I pounce on him, gripping the front of his shoulders with my hands like claws, snarling and hissing, knees in his gut. And I know I'm about to lunge for his throat with my teeth.

And, he hits his head on the sidewalk.

Oh, a third thing. There are a bunch of witnesses. More than I've noticed, I'm sure.

Fortunately, Heath is right there, and he basically tackles me, a mix of a croon and a shout coming from his own throat, "Hey, K! No! No! Let him be. He's down."

I wasn't braced for that, so I go over pretty easily. And because he's my friend, and I know he's right, I'm able to overcome my urge to snap at him. Also, a part of me is

worried about Todd, of all things. I guess I'm still human in there somewhere.

I know my dad told me once that a person falling over on the sidewalk and hitting their head can just kill them, outright. He said it to convince me to wear a helmet while riding a bike. But the image stuck with me. Heath pushing Todd over like that maybe just *killed* him, just now.

Which made me *hungry*.

Or, rather, I was already kind of hungry, and it reminded me that I'll be hungrier soon, and eating right now would be good.

And Todd is a *human*.

I'm more than a little confused and dazed, staring up at Heath's face, as he pretends to hold me to the ground.

When I don't struggle, he glances at Todd. I have no idea what Todd's doing. I'm not looking at him. He's not on top of me, making a show of pinning me to the ground. But I do sense some movement from his direction, and I hear him hiss and groan.

"I'm sorry, Todd, but you're a fucking *dick*," Heath shouts at him.

The sound of vomit hitting the pavement is just a little too close to my head.

"Oh, god, get away," Heath yells. "Go away, Todd. Run. Go to the *nurse*, you shithead. Throw up at *her*."

The smell of human stomach acid and bile is... it's weird. It doesn't hit me the same way it used to. It's not *enticing*, but it's not nearly as unpleasant. And it triggers a weird curiosity that I stamp back down along with my other troublesome urges. It reminds me of a childhood I never had.

But, then I hear Todd wordlessly start to stumble away. He doesn't seem capable of running, but I feel his

footsteps thump in the ground through dirt and concrete. And my lips pull back from my teeth again as my eyes try to roll back to follow his movement. My back arches to help with that, pushing Heath upward with my torso and hips. I don't even know what happened to my backpack. I'm not wearing it anymore.

"Holy shit, K! Chill! Chill!" Heath yells as I roll and topple him over onto the grass beside me. "God damn it, let him *go!*"

'Go' is probably the wrong word to emphasize right now.

"Keith!" I hear Megan's voice again from down the street behind me.

Great, she's seeing me go feral again.

But there's a rival in front of me, and he's acting like prey, and I can be done with him once and for all, and it's *so hard to stop*.

He threw up. I bet that's a concussion. And if I take him down again, he could get hurt more. Even on grass. It's what Mom says about football. But I'm already lurching for his back, and I'm *so* much stronger than anyone near me.

It's so weird to be nerding out about this during accelerated time as I'm in the process of murdering my classmate, but I've listened enough to Indigo blabbing about thermodynamics and biology to get a sense that I shouldn't be able to do this at all. Even *if* magic is involved. I haven't eaten enough, and I haven't soaked up enough heat. My transformation is taking way more energy than I've consumed. I shouldn't be this strong and fast this soon.

Especially since I didn't seem to feel it happening, I don't think. My muscles didn't ache like my internal organs did on the first day.

And Todd is going down again. But I'm hugging his ass more like a linebacker than some kind of hunting lizard. And when I notice that, I make a choice. I don't know if it's the right one.

Mostly, I need to get him away from me. I need to make the conscious decision to give him up. To reject him. So that I don't hurt him anymore.

So I twist, at first gripping him hard so that he twists with me and I end up beside him before we even hit the ground together. And then I shove him away, further uphill on the grass, toward the school.

It means he doesn't have as far to fall, but also his velocity is no longer down so much as sideways. He can roll, in theory, while I land on my shoulder.

At least, that's what I'm telling myself moments later as I bounce in the grass, and watch him tumble.

"Jesus Christ!" someone shouts.

I'm still trying to decide how much I care. Todd has been *relentless*. The amount of persistence he puts into just trying to torment me, whether he's successful or not, is unbelievable. And he's taken up so much of my time and attention. I can't think of a time in the past four years of my life where I haven't just wanted him *gone*. And the injustice of nobody doing anything about it is infuriating. I keep going over this, but I don't know how to emphasize it enough. And yet, I just saved him from myself.

It reminds me of when I hit my brother and then feel sorry for him, except I think I really do love Travis in a way. He's my little brother. He matters. Todd *doesn't*.

And, if I let myself, I know I would *eat* Todd. The thought of tearing chunks out of him and swallowing them whole, washing my face and claws in his blood is *satisfying*. Soothing. And I'm going to need that food.

But when I saw his head hit that concrete, it was like I felt it in my own brain. It was shocking. It's the kind of thing I don't want to see happen to anybody.

A couple of hands come together right in front of my face with a loud clap.

"Hey! K!" Heath shouts.

And I come slamming back into regular time, my awareness expanding out to fill the space around me again.

Somebody's helping Todd stand up. I think it's Bradley. I didn't know they were even friends. One of the girls, Jodi, is stepping in to look at him, too. Beyond them, I see several people have run toward us from the bus loop, but are slowing down now that it seems like the fight has broken up, and Todd is walking, sort of.

Heath has placed a hand on my shoulder, but isn't holding me down. And Megan is coming in to crouch in front of me and block my view of Todd, her face an angry frown.

That's fair.

I can feel and hear a handful of other kids around me, but I don't know who they are, and they're keeping their distance. Marcus is nowhere to be found.

It's another stormy day without rain, the sun breaking through the clouds at that moment.

"What was *that*?" Megan asks.

But the first words out of my mouth are, "Where's my backpack?"

"You didn't have it," Heath tells me from behind my head.

I'm still lying on my right shoulder, and I just turn to look up at him. He looks concerned. A milder expression than Megan has.

"Keith! What the hell was that? What were you doing?" Megan repeats.

I flinch at my name and look at her. A grimace hits my mouth, but it doesn't feel like a snarl. It's a more human expression.

"Seriously," she says.

"He's been bullying me since second grade," I explain, pushing myself up to a sitting position, so I can have a little dignity while I talk. Also, it gives me a view of how Todd is doing.

He's holding his head and staggering under the helping hands of Bradley and Jodi. But then Megan repositions herself to put her face in the way of my eyes. She's bravely searching me expression, looking for something.

It makes me rub my forehead and face, searching for tears in my skin. Nothing yet.

"That was fucking bad a—" someone nearby starts to exclaim, but Megan puts her hand out at them.

"Shut up," she glances at them. Then turns to me, "I saw everything that happened. He didn't even hit you. And you, Heath, you could have *seriously* hurt him."

"What are you? Somebody's Mom?" Heath retorts.

Megan hisses as she draws in breath to respond to him, but I interrupt.

"Stop," I growl. "Megan. You're right. Yes. I think he *was* hurt bad. That's why I let him go just now."

She looks exasperated with me. "You 'let him go'? Keith, you *threw* him!"

I look at the other kids that are gathering around us. For some reason there *still* isn't an adult present. It's criminal

what they let us get away with. If we'd been on school property, we *might* have had a teacher on us in seconds. But, I can't have this conversation here.

But, I guess I'm having it. Or part of it, at least. "I had to get him away from me. I'm too angry."

"*You're* the one who tackled him!"

I stand up, and shout down at her. "Yeah? *That's* what I'm talking about! I shouldn't have tackled him, but I couldn't stop myself! So I threw him away from me!" My fists are clenched, and I feel like my old nerdy self again. This is so *stupid*. "Do you have *any* idea how much I want to *kill* him?"

"He's a total asshole," someone on the other side of me contributes.

Megan closes her eyes and breathes slowly through clenched teeth. "OK. Yeah. I get that." She shakes her head and looks at me. "But how did you *do* that?"

"What?" I ask.

"Make him freeze up like that," she says.

"Yeah, you were scary!" another kid pipes up.

"Remember the cow yesterday?" Heath asks Megan. He's behind me, still.

"Guys?" I interject, and then gesture with my head at the other participants of the discussion.

"What?" one of them asks.

"Ah, shit," Heath responds. Then he turns to them, "Go on to class. We need to have a private talk here."

"Well, I'm telling the principal about this fight."

Heath snaps, "Whatever. You do that."

Megan seems to agree with Heath's declaration and starts stalking at the surrounding witnesses in turn until they all walk off. She gets protests and snide remarks, but

she's successful at it. Then she turns to me and Heath and says, "Come on over here, away from everyone."

So the three of us enter school property, and walk around to a corner of the main building that's further away from traffic. But we're not exactly hiding, either, so it doesn't look like we're trying to cut class.

"Alright," Megan says, in a more hushed tone. "Yeah. Like the cow. How are you doing that?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I tell her. "It's a new thing."

"K's turning into a dragon," Heath just blurts out. But quietly enough, at least.

Megan rolls her eyes, "That's what he told me yesterday, yeah. And that thing he's doing is a dragon thing, too. I *do* know dragons, Heath."

"Hypnotic gaze," I mutter.

Megan points at me. "Yeah. That. But you shouldn't be able to do it."

"You're going to have to show her your scales, K," Heath says.

"J thinks that's a bad idea, H," I tell him.

"Dude, she's already in the know," Heath replies.

My breath escapes my chest, and I find myself backing up, holding my hands up. "Woah."

"I mean, she is!" Heath responds.

Megan raises her eyebrows and bobs her head to the side, twisting her mouth in agreement.

"No. Wait," I find myself saying. On top of the whole becoming a dragon thing, I'm *not* ready for this now. But I also just can't keep enduring it, either. It's just so confusing, and too much. But that hurt, and I've gotta say something. So, I do. "I think I need a stop to all the 'dudes', 'bros', and 'mans', H."

Both Megan and H frown at me.

“What’s that got to do with this dragon thing?” Megan asks.

I wave my hands. “It... I can’t explain it. It’s just a thing I need.”

Heath’s look at me suspiciously

But Megan says, “Fine. Anyway, yeah. I guess I’m ready to see those scales.”

*Shit.*

“Not here,” I tell her.

“Well, further around the corner, then.” She looks around furtively, and gestures us back.

Stepping after her, my breath catches in my throat for an exasperated sigh. And I let it go. “I can’t... They’re in bad places. I have to take off my shoe.”

“You were pulling up your shirt yesterday,” she hisses at me.

“Well, that’s not scales,” I protest.

“What is it, then?”

“Um. My belly button fell off.”

Both Heath and Megan exclaim, “*What?*”

I shrug. “Dragons don’t have belly buttons.”

I get weird, incredulous looks.

“OK, so, maybe it’s *a* scale under there. A belly scale, like on a snake. And there’s no blood. It’s just dead skin shedding and revealing... scales and stuff. Right?” I explain. And, here, I’m saying something I’ve heard so many times in movies. But, it’s just what you say. “Just don’t freak out, OK?”

“Of course not,” Heath says.

“I can’t promise anything,” Megan tells me. “But I do want to see it.”

I sigh, and then turn this way and that to see if anyone is coming our way, and where I should stand to block any

accidental views. We're still pretty safe where we are. So, with my back to the road, and an access walkway between the building and a bunch of bushes in front of me, and Megan and Heath there to watch me, I lift up my shirt just far enough to reveal my patch of belly scale.

It's like watching a couple of cartoon characters, as their eyes bug out and their mouths open into O shapes.

They both reach out to touch it, but Heath stops and gestures for Megan to go ahead.

"It's not as sensitive as my other scales," I say. "It's like armor to me. So, whatever."

She rubs her fingertips across it. It doesn't feel nearly as embarrassingly intimate as it looks.

"Wow," she says. "Can I touch the skin around it? Is that OK?"

I take a deep breath and nod, "Go ahead."

She does. And, for about a quarter inch around the patch, I can't feel much. That skin is pretty ready to come off. But further out, it's as sensitive as before. And I pull my stomach in and step back when her fingers reach that.

She pulls her hand back. "Sorry."

"No, it's fine," I say. "It just tickled." I'm *actually* lying, there. Because I realized that I *liked* her touching me. And I don't know what to think of that, especially experiencing it in front of Heath.

"That's *so* convincing, though," Megan says.

"I think it's real," Heath interjects.

She looks at him. "No, it's *obviously* real." Then she looks at me. "Can I knock on it? I want to see how hard it is."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah. Me, too. Go ahead." And then I arch my back and present my belly to her again.

Her knuckles make a tacking noise on my belly scale, and I definitely feel it. But, it's kind of like being tapped on my breastbone. Not exactly, because it still gives, and I seem to be reasonably flexible, but I know snake bellies are thinner and softer than that. It's like, as firm as clenched muscle, and it feels like she's hitting me through a layer of clothing.

"You've got *armor plating!*" Megan exclaims. "When do you get to breathe fire?"

"I don't know!" I tell her, dropping my shirt and lifting both arms up in a big performative shrug.

Heath looks a little disappointed.

I look at him. "When I'm full dragon, I'll let you poke me all you want. OK?"

"Really?"

"No. I don't know. *Some*, at least," I tell him. "But I'm not going to stop being your friend, OK?"

"OK, but why were you trying to show *me* this?" Megan asks. "Why am *I* so lucky?"

I look at her and open my mouth. Then I demonstrably glance at Heath for her, and close my mouth meaningfully, with a tight-lipped grimace.

She nods, then looks at Heath, pointing at him. "Are you cool? You're cool, right? You're all OK with this." She gestures up and down at me. "But you're *bad* at keeping secrets."

He looks at her and blinks. "Oh, I know you like girls. What of it?"

Megan looks startled and then relaxes. "Well, the rest of the school hates me for it," she says. "And so do my parents."

"Shit. Yeah." Heath nods. "Well, I don't care."

"Why not?"

“I just don’t.”

“Are you gay?”

“I don’t know.”

“What kinda—”

I interrupt, “Anyway. That’s why I told you, Megan. I wanted it to be fair. I wanted somebody else to know and see, because it doesn’t feel real.”

She looks at me, pursing her lips, and then nods.

“Jeffrey and Indigo would probably be OK with you, too,” Heath says to Megan.

“Oh, great!” She rolls her eyes, “The alpha-gang likes me.”

“That’s not what we’re called,” Heath protests.

“H-I-J-K! Right!”

“Keith Michaelson?” an older man’s voice calls out right behind me.

*Fuck. Here it comes.*



“He’s been bullying me since *second grade*,” I manage to say again during a lull in the accusations.

There are five of us kids here. Todd and Marcus are to the farthest right, with Ms. Childs standing behind Todd, who’s holding an ice pack wrapped in a towel to the back of his head. Megan and Heath are between me and them, and I’m on the far left. We’re all facing the Principal, Mr. Canning.

Behind us, standing at the door, is Mr. Wolfe, one of the core teachers. He’d been the one to come get me.

Mr. Canning reminds me of the boss guy on *Airwolf*, except without the eye patch. He's got a mustache, and a pair of wire rimmed glasses, sandy hair, and he's kinda thin. And he looks a bit like he could order someone's assassination on behalf the U.S. Government.

A few days ago, he would have physically scared me. But, my feelings are telling me that I could take him one on one. And that's what's actually scaring me at the moment.

Well, that, and this is official business after a fight, and it could maybe somehow lead to physical examinations.

Also phone calls to parents.

Mr. Canning did hear what I said this time, and looks at me, brows furrowed. Then he says that thing that adults always say. "Unfortunately, we don't have any evidence of that. No one has seen it. So all we have to go on is what everyone saw today." He doesn't bother reiterating what that was, because we've already all been over it.

Todd musters the strength and wherewithal through his pain to look smugly at me. Marcus sees him do that and imitates him, just without the pain.

"And since Todd here is going to have to go to the hospital for an examination, to make sure his concussion isn't serious, I'm afraid we're going to have to get the police involved," Mr. Canning adds. "Just to take everyone's statements. For now."

Todd grins.



So, now we're all sitting quietly in the waiting chairs of the school's office, staring at the floor, waiting for the police to arrive.

I'm just screwed.

Obviously, I was screwed the second I had that dream.

I really shouldn't have made that bargain. But it was a dream. I had no idea it was real. I wasn't even acting consciously! You just do things in dreams, right? Whatever makes sense. Whatever you're destined to do.

And I guess I was destined to make that deal with the world.

But what was it, though?

Maybe that's pretty obvious, too, now that I think about it. I wanted to be female. Not a girl, necessarily. I don't like girly things all that much, but I needed relief from having to be a boy. And that goddess, the world, whatever it was, must have said, "OK, I can do that for you. But, in exchange, you have to be a dragon."

And, *of course* I said, "Yes!" Like a fucking dumbass!

But my transformation is happening too slowly, and I'm going to get dissected before I even get a chance to feel what it's really like.

I look over at Megan.

Of the five of us, she was the one who wasn't involved in the fight at all.

Based on her performance with Mr. Canning, it seems like she's taken my side. Like she really has my back, as much as Heath does. She even seems smarter about it than he is. But I'm still afraid of what she's going to tell the police. Talking to the police is a completely different can of worms.

But, the fact of the matter is that everyone knows that, after Heath shoved Todd, I leapt on my bully. And then,

after Heath pushed me aside, and Todd got up and was clearly injured, I went and tackled him again.

Worse. Even though I know I saw Todd's head hit the pavement *before* I leapt on him, there's no way to prove that. And that's not how he remembers it. Or says he remembers it.

And I was the obvious aggressor.

My parents have been called now. But they're both at work, and the police are probably going to get here before they do (the police station is closer, even).

I'm in deep shit, either way.

In my daydreams, I can just tear my skin off all in one go, like a bad costume, and go full dragon, spreading my wings to leap through the school's office window and fly high and far, far away. Maybe eat a police officer on the way out, or something.

But that's not happening. I mean, aside from most of my skin still feeling very attached, I'm just not even *trying*.

I'm scared. The feeling of defeat is weighing heavy in my gut, chilly and curled around a full half of my mom's meatloaf. And I know that if I lash out in any way, I'll just dig myself deeper.

On the other hand, my mind also can't stop going back to that moment I threw Heath off of me to get at Todd.

He hadn't felt half as heavy as Travis.

It had been like throwing a pillow off my chest. Almost gently, more of an afterthought, to get it off before moving. I hadn't hurt him, apparently. But, he'd noticed, too. And I realize, despite how cool and supportive he's been since, he's been shaking the whole time.

Sitting next to me, he's *still* shaking. It comes and goes.

When the door opens, admitting a couple of police officers in dark navy blue uniforms, and heavy black

leather belts full of pouches, equipment, and guns, I look their way.

We all do.

It wouldn't take me much effort to go right through them. Possibly faster than they can draw their weapons. But, I wouldn't make it very far before they ran me down. When I decide to get away, I'll have to incapacitate anyone trying to stop me.

## Chapter 6 - What everything else wants

“**W**HAT WERE YOU THINKING?” Mom asks during our two-minute drive home.

We’re, like, half a block away from our house. And, of course, she’d ask that. Every single mom in the universe would ask that. I’d ask that if I were my own mom. I’ve already asked myself that question endlessly since this started.

It turned out that talking to the police was boring. It was just like talking to a teacher, or the Principal. They just asked me questions and I answered them as truthfully as I dared, leaving out the details of what was going on with me biologically. Or psychologically, even. I mean, besides my history with Todd. I did mention that, of course. But not, like, as an excuse. I tried to make that clear.

It was actually easier with them, in that regard. They just listened and jotted down some notes.

I have no idea what anybody else told them, because they saw us one at a time in another room.

Other than that, the whole experience was just one suspenseful moment after another, building and building until the Principal informed us all of what was happening next. By the time Mr. Canning was dismissing us, Todd

had been picked up by his parents and was on his way to the ER.

So. I've been suspended, of course. The idea being that I need to be kept away from both Todd and Marcus until some better arrangement can be made, or final punishment decided upon. Or maybe that would be the end of it. Heath, too. We were both told that we essentially had the day off, and that we had to go back home. And that next week was still up in the air and would be decided on by the end of the day.

Of course, there might be legal action, after Todd's family got his medical bill. Especially if it turns out that his head injury is worse than it looks. Ms. Childs reported that he didn't have any broken skin, and that his skull seemed to be OK, but he should probably get X-rayed anyway, just to be sure.

That's still scary to me.

Half of me wants him to be in my stomach, dead and digesting. And what's most disturbing about that is how *not* disturbing it feels.

The other half of me wants him to be totally OK, and yearns to just keep apologizing to him. And I feel like I have to fight that side *harder*, because he *deserved* it. But he really didn't. Nobody deserves a head injury.

It's hard to pay appropriate attention to my Mom's dangerously simmering anger when I've got all those thoughts warring in my head.

But then, in the midst of all of that, after my mom arrived to pick me up, the subject of my attendance record for the week came up. Which, of course, leads to my Mom's next question, delivered during the next car length of travel toward our house.

“Seriously, what has gotten into you? What’s happening to you, Keith?” she asks. “I need to understand.”

I take a deep breath and say the thing I keep saying to everyone, “He’s been bullying me relentlessly *since second grade*. I’ve been telling this to *everyone* since second grade, and nobody does *anything*. What did everyone *expect* would happen?”

“Don’t talk back to me, young man,” she just says like an angry robot, following the Mom script.

Instantly, I’m screaming at her. My rage is boiling over and pouring out my vocal cords, turning my words into a distorted screech that hurts my own ears, “*You asked me a question and I’m answering it! Just listen to me! GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!!*”

I don’t think Mom’s heard me cuss before.

It’s a good thing she slammed on the brakes, during my yelling, before glaring at me in the eyes, because we’re now both frozen in place, and we might have crashed otherwise.

I’ve got my mom in a prey lock.

She’s acting just like that cow. I don’t know if she’s even capable of thinking. Todd reported not remembering that moment at all, when I’d done it to him. And if I move one way or the other, Mom sways a little with me.

Except that, she’s not prey to me. She’s not food. She’s my *Mom*. She’s bigger than me. She’s more powerful than me (not stronger, anymore, but I mean that’s how I think of her still). And my instincts are telling me that *she* could eat *me*.

But she’s not, and I can get away.

I slowly unbuckle my seatbelt, and then, without breaking eye contact, reach back and open the door. With

great deliberation, I move the seatbelt around myself and let it fall behind me. It passes in front of my face only briefly, and I blink at that moment, and Mom blinks too, but then the lock resumes.

I wonder what my eyes look like when I'm doing this. But short of trying to do it to myself in the mirror, I have no way of finding out. And I'm pretty sure that wouldn't work, anyway.

I kick the door open.

And then I back out and run.

Across the intersection, into our yard, around the side of the house, through the carport, into the backyard, over Mom's rear flower beds, and into the wooded lot behind our property.

I can't hide in there forever. Mom can't go everywhere in there that I can, but she knows enough of the trails she can find me anyway, and she can send my brother in to get me. It's a little bigger than a whole block in and of itself, and it's on a hill. Almost a cliff in the middle of it. More than a couple of those trails go down that slope, and I'm aiming for one of them.

There's a hollow in the brambles at the bottom of the slope where I can sit and rest for a bit. If she goes far enough into the lot, she'll be able to see me in there, and yell at me from where she's standing. But she won't be able to touch me.

I still don't really know what I'm thinking. Mom has her car. She can just drive around to the road on the other side and wait for me there. And back again, if I double back. But I need a break, and so does she. And I need to communicate to her how desperate I am.

And I need to *not* look her in the eyes like that again.

So that's where I go.

The ground is muddy, and it squelches under my feet. My shoes don't have great traction, either, so I nearly slip and fall before I even get to the steep part. But it's not just nettles on either side of the trail, there's also trees with trunks about as thick as my biceps. Not all that big, but just sturdy enough to hold my weight. So, I start reaching for them as I go.

It smells green. And even though it's been hours since it rained, here it smells like it had just stopped. Like, right after a storm lets up. The sun's peeking through the thick, roiling cloud cover again, shining wanly through the sparse early Spring canopy. I can also just smell mud. Mud has a smell.

There's a discarded piece of men's underwear in here, a couple paces to my right, draped over some blackberry vines. Gross. Especially with how close that is to our house.

Litter in this lot is usually pretty sparse, but there's still a crushed beer can here, or a cigarette there, or... something else. I know the place where I'm going is gonna have some disturbing junk in it. One time there was a full baby diaper. But the middle of it is usually pretty clean.

Neither I, my brother, nor any of my friends have run into anybody else while playing in here, though, so I'm not really afraid of that. At this point, I don't think I would be if there really was a danger of that, anyway, though.

This would be such a great time to accelerate my transformation, though. I'm now outside, and in need of a better escape. My life is falling apart, and I don't feel like I can go back to any of it. And just becoming a monster and flying off into the wilderness feels like the best thing to do next.

But with every step, I can feel nothing significant happening. Other than, I'm actually pretty distracted from my itching, right now. It'll probably get worse once I hunker down, though. Like it was back in the Principal's office.

And it's still kind of chilly out, and I'm yearning for a hot bath again. Or the electric blanket.

If I did go full dragon now, and ran off, how would I get my heat?

Would I need it all the time? Or could I just kind of lie still in a hiding spot for a while until the sun comes out? Or, will some kind of inner fire keep me warm, then?

There's only one way to find out, and I just have to wait and survive long enough for it.

I finally hear Mom's car circling the block.

For a moment, I stop, halfway down the steep part, clinging to a tree. I quickly try to rethink what I'm doing. If she parks and gets out, that means we're going to be shouting at each other from wherever we end up out of reach of each other. My hiding place, and wherever she feels she can get to.

I can probably just ignore her for a while, if I have to. Maybe try apologizing or something.

Before it's too late, and she gets the chance to intercept me, I resume my pace, climbing down that hill. My iron grip on the trees easily keeps me upright whenever one of my feet slips. My own weight is nothing to me now. It's amazing.

Something about the combination of my primate anatomy and my draconic strength makes me feel kind of like a chimpanzee. Give me some sturdy claws, and I could climb *any* tree without much effort. A good tree, and I wouldn't need the claws. Maybe I could figure out a sheer

pole anyway. I've seen people shimmy up one without equipment before, I've just never tried it myself.

There are no trees in this lot worth climbing, though.

When I get to the bottom of the slope, the path branches, and to my right it goes through the blackberry bushes, which make a low tunnel over it. It's easy enough for me to crouch and duck-walk through there, though. Thorns catch on my jacket here and there, but they let go easily enough after some tugging as I keep pushing through.

In the drier, summer months, it's possible larger adults get in here by crawling on hands and knees, but I definitely do not imagine my mom trying that today.

After several quick steps, it opens up to the mud and moss clearing I knew was there, and instead of standing up now that I can, I fall to my knees and crawl to the middle of it.

Cold, squelchy wetness soaks my knees and then my butt as I get to my place and turn around to sit and... ouch, actually! Sitting in chairs still works, but not the ground. Holy crud.

Ho boy, that's going to make getting into a bath hard and awkward, too. *If* I ever get a chance to do that again.

At some point, pants themselves are just going to be a lost cause.

So many things will.

I rearrange myself again so that I'm kneeling. And I put my muddy hands on my thighs and slump forward. That's considerably better.

I'd take some time to scratch myself in a few places if I had the energy. But as I hear my Mom's parking brake get pulled into place, and her car door open, my heart rate is

dropping fast. My chin drops to my chest, and I close my eyes to pay attention to what my body is doing.

And I guess I fall asleep.



It would be really convenient if I dreamt that I had a conversation with that world-goddess-thing right now.

*It would, wouldn't it?*

Just super great timing.

*You are heard. You are seen. You are felt. You are known.*

This isn't working. I'm stuck. I'm going to be killed.

*That happens to everyone, yes. That is life.*

I won't get a chance to be myself, though.

*That is the risk.*

Everything is happening faster than my body is changing.

*You already have everything you need to survive in the wild.*

I'm not in the wild, I'm cornered in my backyard. And when people learn what I am, they'll get me. But I don't want to hurt them.

*And when your metamorphosis is complete, it'll be all the more obvious.*

But then I'll be myself, even if it's just for a few seconds!

*If you want to speed it up, you will need to eat far more and stay warmer than you have been.*

How?

*Find food and warmth at all costs, just like any other living being.*

Shit.

*If it goes faster, it will hurt more.*

Everything already hurts so much anyway.

*It does, doesn't it?*

Why is this happening to me?

*Because it is.*

That's not a reason.

*It's the only reason that existence ever has.*

What do you want from me, anyway?

*What everything else wants.*



Mom has been swaying back and forth to get a good view of me while calling my name for I don't know how long now, because I've been asleep. She's starting to sound worried.

My eyes aren't open yet, but I can still tell what she's doing, how she's standing, the expression on her face, by the sound of her voice. And my memory of how she acts.

It distresses me. I hate making her feel like this. Even though she often makes me feel worse.

I do love her. Maybe because she's been my main source of food, shelter, and comfort for as long as I've known, and it's just my place to love her for that. But it's still true.

I can't imagine how much she's going to hurt over the coming weeks.

My body is feeling so heavy and sluggish. It's like that time a couple days ago when I ran out of energy at lunch. Coming here was a bad idea. Especially since I apparently

forgot my backpack with my lunch in it at home, I was so distracted by everything. There's nothing to eat here.

Though, my main problem is that I'm just not warm enough to properly digest the remaining meatloaf in my stomach.

"Keith?"

It would be nice if she called me K.

A really deep breath helps me to gain the energy to lift my shoulders and move my head a little. And I open my eyes to look at the ground in front of my knees.

There's a beetle crawling across the mud in front of me, struggling to climb over a twig. It's opalescent black shell glistens in the daylight, despite how dull the sun is through the clouds. It's probably still morning.

"Keith! Please, are you OK?"

Another quick but deep intake of breath, and my heart starts pumping harder. OK, I think I was just not done waking up.

I look up in her direction, and through the gaps in the blackberry bushes, I can see her forehead and one of her eyes.

"No?" I reply, my voice sounding reedy and weak to my own ears. I mean, I think that's what reedy means. I've read that word used for voices in a few books, and this is the sound I imagined.

"Can you come out of there so that we can go home?" she asks.

I find myself frowning. "Not yet."

"Keith. Come on. Now," she commands me.

I've got to blind side her. Bargaining with her and explaining things won't work. I need to hit her with something that'll make her listen. And there's only one thing I can think of that might do that. And I can't believe

I'm asking her this, but everything is so fucked. "Mom. What if I was a girl?"

"What?" But she falls quiet for a bit, holding her breath, so I don't answer her. Then, "What do you mean?"

All I can do is ask the question a different way. A bit more to the point. "What if I need to be a girl?"

"Oh, Keith. Girls don't have it any easier. You know that," she replies, after a moment to process the question.

"No shit," I say. And before she can chide me for cussing, I admit, "We all bully them at school. All of us. Even the other girls."

"Well, I'm glad you've recognized that, Keith," she says. "But we really need to go home, so you can get warm, and we can talk properly. OK?"

"Not yet," I repeat, firmly.

"Why not? What are you trying to tell me?"

"I need you to promise me you won't take me to the hospital."

I can tell she's frowning with concern. And she says, "I don't think I can promise that. If you need to see a doctor, you should go."

"I'm serious. If you take me, you will lose me. Forever," I tell her, staring hard at that beetle, so I don't have to see her face. So that I can keep my determination.

"Don't—" she interrupts herself with a choked pause. "What are you saying? Don't say that. Don't make threats."

"Mom! I'm not making a threat. I'm being threatened," I insist. "I can show you why, too. But you have to *swear* not to take me to the hospital, or a doctor, or anyone."

"Keith."

“You have to. Please!” I look at her through the blackberry leaves, to let her see just how distressed I am, but I stare at her forehead. I will *not* make eye contact. Not with her. Not ever again.

I do not look forward to seeing her face when she sees my scales. But I *have* to get her on board if I’m to survive much longer. I can’t see any other way.

“OK, Keith. For whatever it is you’re going to show me, I swear I won’t take you to the doctor, or anyone like that,” she tells me. And she sounds sincere, but I feel like she could be lying.

“Mom. This is going to scare you half to death. It’s going to make you change your mind,” I tell her. “I’m *terrified*.”

“Well, I need to know what’s going on, Honey. And I can’t keep you from getting hurt if you won’t tell me,” she says. “I promise I won’t let you get hurt. OK?”

She has said that before. Especially early in my life. That she won’t let me get hurt. In between all the arguing and cajoling. The attempts to get me to eat food I couldn’t possibly swallow. The shouting at me to do my chores. The scolding about my homework. Yelling at me and my brother for fighting. She’s also hugged me, and keeps doing so occasionally. And she’s promised me she’d keep me from getting hurt, even when she can’t really make that promise.

And I miss when I trusted that.

But she never stood up for me or did anything for me whenever I told her about my bullies. Just like every other adult, she just made excuses for them.

*Well, I bet their home life is worse than yours.*

*They’re just jealous of you.*

*They're just trying to get a rise out of you. If you ignore them, they'll eventually leave you alone.*

It's like adults somehow forget what it's like to bully and be bullied. They just can't accept that it's *what you do* when you're a kid. You pick on the weak, relentlessly, because that's the order of things. And if you join in, then you don't look weak, so that you get picked on less. Only it doesn't really work. Because there's always someone who thinks you're just the worst, and that it's just their job to make your life hell.

And *everyone* is doing this. And it's just *wrong*.

I want to tell her this. But I know she won't listen. Not even now.

And, anyway. I'm probably not going to school ever again. I'm free of that.

What's going on with me now is kind of like the worst skinned knee ever. And she's always been pretty good with skinned knees.

It's the draconic puberty that's happening underneath it that's going to really throw her for a loop, though.

But, her first. Then Dad. Then my brother.

"Keith?" she asks.

"Yeah, I'm coming out," I say.

What choice do I have, really.

I don't shake as I crawl out from where I'm at. I feel like I should be shaking, but it seems like my body doesn't do that anymore. I'm just cold and slow.



It feels wrong that she's made me hot chocolate in order to have this discussion. But, I'm wrapped in that electric blanket, and I've got the biggest mug of very hot chocolate, and I'm sitting across the table from her.

She'd felt my forehead when I'd walked up to her in the woods, and her eyes had flown open wider at what she'd felt. She'd grabbed my hands, and touched me on the side of my neck, and decided that I really super did need warming up and fast, getting hypothermia in Spring.

She wanted to put me in the bath right away, and I'd told her that she was *not* ready for that.

It was a bit of an argument, but I managed to get a hot drink and the electric blanket as a compromise, so that I could talk to her first before showing her what was going on.

And now that we're settled down, she asks, "What are you going to show me? Is it some kind of a rash? You've had your smallpox vaccine. You've had all your vaccines."

I shake my head. "No. Just." I take a long sip of my drink, staring at the middle of the table. "Mom. This is going to sound melodramatic and make-believe, but I promise you, it is not. OK?"

She shakes her head. "What do you mean?"

I shrug and put it as simply as I can. "I'm shedding."

"Sweetheart. Everyone sheds. It's called exfoliating. That's why I use a scrub—"

"No. Like a lizard," I say.

She blinks. "I don't understand."

I'm so glad we're the only two of our family in the house. Travis is at school, and Dad had to stay at his job. He always does. He owns the business, and being a business owner means he works overtime, all the time. He can't get away.

It's the local bookstore, which makes most of its business by selling romance novels to truckers. But, like, it's not a *big* business. He has three employees, not including Mom, who works part-time there as the receptionist and bookkeeper. So, that's why she managed to get away, while he had to stay. Whatever. It makes sense.

This is good. Or, easier. Talking to Mom alone means that I can focus on how she reacts to me, without any distractions. And my family won't feed off of each other with alarm.

"It looks *weird*," I explain. "Like, impossible weird. And I want you to know that before you see it. Alright?"

"OK?" she responds. "Where is it?"

"My heel is the easiest to get to," I tell her. "But it's kinda patchy, and all over. I can answer your questions when you see it, too. Like, I think I know why it's happening. Sort of."

She considers that explanation for a moment, then shifts like she's ready to move. "Do you want to go into the bathroom to show me? I can start running the bath. Maybe some Epsom salts will help?"

I sit up straighter and almost forget not to look her in the eye, my gaze settling on her right ear. "Oh. What do Epsom salts do?"

"They're soothing, and they help clean your skin," she says. "If you soak in them long enough, they make it easier to rub off your dead skin, too. And they can help with rashes. Though, if it's like chicken pox, baking soda would be better."

I can't help letting out a laugh. "Let's just take a look at it and see," I suggest. "But, I think the Epsom salts might be good."

And as we get up to go into the bathroom, where the first aid supplies are, and the medicine, and the bathtub, I feel floaty and weird. Mom lingers in the dining room to unplug the blanket, which she makes me leave on the chair. But she joins me just as I'm sitting down on the toilet, and turns to reach into the bath stall to turn the hot water on.

Then she turns around and sits down on the edge of the tub.

I feel exposed with the door open, so I look at it.

She nods. "Closing that will help trap the heat in."

So I reach over and push it shut. I've still got my hot chocolate in one hand, but I can't really take my shoe off while holding it. So, I put the mug on the bathroom counter.

Then I pull my foot up onto my other knee, and pry my shoe off without untying it.

"You know you wear your shoes out faster when you do that," Mom says.

"I know, I'm sorry," I tell her. "I'm just nervous, OK?"

"I understand."

Then I grab the top of my sock to pull it down, but pause and look up at her. "Mom," I say. "Magic is *real*."

She furrows her brow, and I pull my sock off.

She looks down at my foot.

She gasps.

And then it's basically just a replay of every other time I've shown this off. Like, it surprises me just how unpanicked she is. It's like she's just too flabbergasted to act like my *Mom*. Instead, she's just another bewildered human being seeing the impossible and terrifying for the first time.

She's definitely scared for me. But I think, like with Heath just after I threw him off of me, she's in shock. And, as a result, she's focusing on getting more information, like a child poking at a weird and scary bug.

She doesn't know what to do.

So, I methodically, clinically, show her all my other patches of scales, including my missing belly button, which stuns her into silence.

That was, after all, where the two of us were connected a little over twelve years ago. And it's just gone, without a trace.

I've still got my underwear on, and I really don't want to take that off while she's still in the bathroom. But she's not moving.

I know she's seen me naked before. And, it's not like my male *human* puberty has really started yet. Or like it ever will. And I know that if something's going wrong with any part of me, I'd be willing to show her that, even if it was my junk, before showing it to any nurse or doctor. But I'm feeling extra self-conscious about my last bit of privacy, for some reason.

Partly because I know it's been shrinking, like I want it to.

In this pause and moment of silence, I reach back to feel my tailbone, to see what's going on there, because it really hasn't stopped aching.

And that makes me freeze in place, myself.

There's a little nub there.

Mom moves a little bit. She's noticed I'm startled, and she's trying to look me in the eyes. But I give her an apologetic expression and turn my face pointedly away.

"What is it?" she manages to ask.

"Um," I say, cringing. "I'm, uh, growing a tail."

Her laughter is probably what they mean by ‘hysterical’. It’s small, and nervous, with an edge to it, and uncontrolled. “So, you’re turning into a lizard man?” she asks.

“God, no!” I blurt.

“But—”

“Mom. I had a dream last Monday night, OK? And that’s when this started,” I tell her. “And I’m *not* turning into a lizard man. Not if that dream is true. I’ll never be any kind of man.”

“What do you mean?” she asks again. She keeps asking that, of course. How can she not? “Keith. Why won’t you look me in the eye?”

I let my gaze fall to the floor, where I stare at the grey checkered tile pattern. “Because that’s what I did to Todd today. And that’s how he got hurt.”

“What—”

“That’s also how I got out of the car and got away from you,” I tell her. “If I make eye contact, you’ll freeze, and you won’t remember it.”

“What—”

And I interrupt her again, and in a monotone voice, sort of droning mechanically, I tell her about my dreams, even the one I just had in the woods while she’d been yelling at me, and how I’ve always hated my body and how it felt, and I repeat how I’ve been bullied and bullied and bullied and no one would do anything about it, and I just needed to be something different and to get away, and now it’s happening, and I can’t stop it.

And it feels so *stupid* to say it, but I plow right into the words anyway.

I tell her I’m turning into a dragon. A *girl* dragon. For some reason, I even confess that.

And she protests.

So, I say, “Just watch.”

And I gesture at where my belly button was.

Then I point at the bath, and say, “That’s getting pretty full.”

She brushes her forehead with one hand, slowly pushing her bangs up. “Oh, yeah. Um, I’ll get the Epsom salts out.”

As she stands up and moves to the counter under the sink to do that, I stand up and lean over to turn off the water, shaking my head.

“You see why I don’t want to see a doctor, though, right?” I ask.

She lets out another hysterical laugh.

“Mom?” I ask, standing back to let her pour the salts into the bath for me.

But she just stands there, shaking her head. “Yeah, no doctor.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I don’t know *what* we’re gonna do.”



It’s been a little while. Like, some hours.

Getting into the tub had been just as awkward as I’d expected. I’d had to kneel, and then twist to my side. And then skootch down to lie flat. But once I was on my back, with my feet up on the wall on either side of the faucet, my tail felt fine.

I've redrawn the bath, and I've got the shower curtain pulled shut, and I've pushed myself back up, curling my spine to keep my pelvis flat on the bottom of the tub while I rest my shoulders on the rim of it. And I'm holding that big mug, but cleaned out and with tea in it now. Mom is sitting on the toilet, spending time with me, and we've been talking. About school. About my brother. About her childhood, and her puberty, actually, which surprises me. I didn't ask for that, but she feels the need to volunteer that information.

She doesn't go into truly gory details, but I learn a bit more about what it was like. How her classmates treated her, and how her first period was dismissed by her teacher.

Actually, for all that we've been talking, we haven't said that many words. There's been more silence than discussion. Lots of pauses and thinking.

And now I just feel the need to ask, "What would you have named me if I'd been a girl?"

"Um," Mom says. "Well, it's kind of funny."

"Yeah?"

"I know how you and Heath call each other H and K," she says.

The heat has got my stomach working more efficiently on that meatloaf, and it's maybe mostly digested now, and I'm thinking so much more clearly. But I still don't quite make the obvious connection to predict where she's going. "So?"

She giggles a little bit. "We would have named you Kaye."

*Oh my God.*

"Can you just call me K from now on?" I ask. "Like, you know, my initial? Or even the girl's name?" I laugh. "No one will know the difference, anyway."

“Why?”

“I don’t like being called Keith. The name feels like it belongs to someone else. It always has.”

“Oh, Honey.”

“Make dad do it, too. Please.”

There’s some more of that quiet, and then she says, “I’ll try.”

I notice a bit more of my old skin coming off, and there are some big flakes of it floating in the bath water.

Huh.

The fingernail of my left index finger is loose. Like a tooth that’s ready to come out.

## Chapter 7 - Cassandra's kitchen

**T**HE DOORBELL RINGS.

I slide into the living room in my socks, to stare through the stained-glass window of the door to get an idea of who it might be. The timing is about right, and I see what looks like a couple of bodies moving out there. Maybe three.

“It’s my friends, Mom! And they know already! Can they come in?” I call back to her room, where she’s been lying down and reading a murder mystery.

“Of course,” she calls back. She knows they know, because I told her that much already, and what surprises me is that I’m allowed to have them over despite all the other reasons.

I go to open the door.

It’s Indigo, Jeffrey... and Megan.

Heath’s probably at home, grounded like me.

Well, I’m kind-of sort-of officially grounded, but really I’ve just grounded myself. I don’t want to go out right now. It’s scary out there.

I mean, I might still be in really big trouble, if Todd is seriously hurt. And Heath will be, too. But, Mom's in a very different mood about it all now.

"Come in," I say, and step aside. I'm wearing Transformers pajama pants I normally never wear, a t-shirt, and a super fluffy pink bathrobe, to keep the heat in. And my head is wrapped in a towel for the same reason.

I'm not quite sure if this is really what cold-blooded creatures need to be doing to stay functional. I think there's something about overheating, too. But it feels good right now, so I'm going with it as what my body needs.

And also because Mom insists.

"Is that your mom's robe?" Jeffrey asks.

"Yep!" I say, grinning. "It's warm."

"Tres chic," Megan says as she steps in behind him, snickering at me. Then she looks around. "Your house is nice."

Mom apparently heard that, because she calls, "Thank you!" from her bedroom.

"That's Mom," I tell Megan. "No one else is here right now. Travis, my younger brother, will be done with Spanish in a half hour or so."

"Rec room?" Indigo asks.

"For now? Sure," I shrug.

"Thank you for letting us visit, Mrs. Michaelson!"

Megan calls to my Mom.

"Sure thing!" Mom calls back. "I'll be out in a little bit to make sure you have snacks, if you want them. I just want to finish this chapter."

I murmur, "She knows now, too. I think she needs her book to reset her brain a little."

Everyone looks at me in awe.

I shrug again and gesture at the kitchen, and then end up having to lead the way through there to the rec room.

Above the door to the rec room, there's a hand painted sign that says "Cassandra's Kitchen." That's Mom's name. Dad doesn't get to own it. Whatever.

Through that door, there's pantry shelves on the dividing wall to the right, and a sink and the laundry stuff to the left. And we have to go all the way back to turn right to walk into the rec room itself. Which looks like a poor echo of a living room, actually. There's a TV on a stand next to a card table with an IMB AT/370 with an 8088 chip and a twelve-inch color monitor, and an office chair pushed under it. On the other side of the room from that is a love seat, with a bigger sofa pushed up against the wall between the two, making a U-shape. Usually, when my brother and I are watching cartoons, one of us lies on the sofa while the other sits in the love seat. Who gets what is first come first serve, with maybe a bit of wrestling and pounding on each other to settle disagreements. Though, these days, I've been letting him have the run of the room alone while I hide in my bedroom or the bathroom.

When friends are over, if we're not doing gaming stuff on the dining room table, we're playing out in the woods. But I happen to know it's gross out there right now, so we're not doing that today.

I gesture at the couches, and grab the office chair to turn it around and sit on it.

Megan goes for the love seat, plopping down right in the middle of it. So, Indigo and Jeffrey take opposite sides of the sofa.

"So, you showed your Mom," Jeffrey says.

"Yep," I confirm. "Um. I sort of couldn't *not*."

And then I catch them all up on what happened after she took me home from school, and why I think it went down that way.

Though I leave out a few specific details and turns of conversation, because I think maybe I'm not ready to reveal that wrinkle yet.

I do tell them about my second dream, which is still very vivid in my mind.

"So, if I want to, you know, survive this thing that's happening, so that I can just see what it's like, I need my parents to help hide me from the rest of the world," I tell them. "And, you know, feed me, and stuff. Like they already do."

Indigo nods slowly. "Because the in-between stages make you really vulnerable."

"No, dumbass," Jeffrey says. "It's because as soon as anybody finds out, he'll be hunted down like E.T. no matter what stage he's in. And he wants to put it off for as long as possible!"

"Please don't call me dumbass," Indigo replies calmly and way more politely than I would.

"She," my mouth says.

"What?"

That came from Jeffrey, and Indigo is now blinking at me. Megan tilts her head quizzically, but smiles. I think she's been paying attention.

I guess I'm really doing this now. "Jeffrey, I'm not just turning into a dragon. I'm turning into a girl, and being called a boy feels wrong now."

That's sort of the thing I'd say in a dream, sure of myself, and bewildered at my own words, wondering what my subconscious is trying to tell me. But, that's like, my life now.

He scowls really hard at first. And then he lightens his expression a little, looking like he's decided to be angry on my behalf. "Was that the bargain? That you could be a dragon, but you have to be a girl, too? A female dragon?"

"You know, some lizards can reproduce without sex. They don't need males," Indigo says. "It's called parthenogenesis."

"Um," I say. But I stall out trying to elaborate.

"What is it, K?" Megan asks.

I pretend she said Kaye, and it makes me feel much calmer. Happy. Which tells me lots of things about what's going on in my head. Still, everything feels more real now than it ever has before.

"I like hanging out with you guys. I like being your friend and doing what you do. And I hate smelly shit and all that," I tell them, to which Megan rolls her eyes. I continue anyway, "But I've always wanted to be a girl, Jeffrey. Like, a tomboy, but definitely a girl. I think the dragon part is the trade-off."

"Really?" Jeffrey asks. "Why?"

Megan answers, incorrectly, but it's kinda funny anyway, "It's *boys* who are smelly. Being a girl rocks."

Indigo wrinkles his nose. "*Middle schoolers* are smelly. Have you *been* in the sixth grade hall?"

I look at Jeffrey, though, and try to figure out how to answer his question in an honest way that's not super embarrassing or gross. The truth is, up until I heard Megan say that being a girl rocks, I really thought it was entirely about my anatomy, and how much it bothered me. And, maybe I'd been thinking a bit about how being bullied as a boy really sucked, because you get beat up instead of just verbally tormented. Though, I mean, my mom has told me a couple horror stories to try to impress

on me how hard girls *actually* have it. But when Megan said that, I was, like, *yeah*, actually!

Maybe, since it's just happening now, whether anyone likes it or not, I can let it go.

"It's just who I've always been," I end up saying, ignoring the talk of odors.

Jeffrey's ignoring that part, too. "What? So, does this mean you're gay?"

Megan narrows her eyes dangerously at him.

I squint, and say, "No!"

Megan turns her glare at me, and then just breaks out laughing.

"What?" I ask, completely confused.

"If you're a girl, you are *super* gay!" Megan keeps laughing. "It takes one to know one."

I have to admit, I'm floored by that. Honestly, I don't think I'm all that interested in *anybody*. But, if I had to have, you know, a partner, I'd want her to be a girlfriend. Another tomboy, ideally. But, that's because that wouldn't be... wouldn't have been gay if I was a boy.

Huh.

And now Jeffrey's looking at Megan with alarmed suspicion.

"You tried to show me your belly button after talking about *the Dragon Riders of Pern*, K," Megan tells me, completely ignoring Jeffrey while she snickers. "You are a big fat lesbian!"

I look down at my belly, "I'm not—" But I'm interrupted and distracted by the sound of the rec room door being opened.

"You're gay?" Jeffrey asks Megan.

"And you're some kind of bigot?" she asks him back.

“Hey,” Mom’s voice comes from around the dividing wall pantry shelves, and we all look in alarm. She steps into view with one of those parental *Looks*. “Let’s not call each other names in my house. If you’re going to do that, go outside where the rest of the neighborhood can hear you.”

I don’t know what to say. I wasn’t calling anybody anything. And it was just a conversation, anyway.

My vision is held by the crease between my Mom’s eyebrows, so I don’t see them, but my friends seem to be at a loss for words, too. Breaths are held.

Mom softens her expression. “Also, I want you to know, K, if you *are* gay, that’s OK. As far as I’m concerned, that goes for all of you.” She lowers her gaze at Jeffrey in particular. “Is that clear?”

Jeffrey holds up his hands. “Nope. Yep! That’s fine! I was just trying to understand!”

Something in my chest relaxes, but the rest of my muscles are still pretty tense, and I’m still trying to understand, myself. Am I *gay*? Am I *allowed* to call myself a lesbian? Do I *want* to be?

I mean, OK, cool. So, Megan’s a cool lesbian. And my parents—or, my mom anyway is an old hippy and a cool liberal. But I also know that, in terms of who the shit rolls down on the hardest, being *gay* is one of the worst things. Being a transsexual woman is *worst*, of course, which was why I wasn’t ever telling anyone about it.

But, I’m not exactly human anymore, and less so by the day, and we’ve been over this. No one’s going to care if I’m a transsexual lesbian dragon, if I’m a dragon.

Once again, it feels like the world is unraveling, and the frayed ends are in the center of my being. I’m the problem.

Meanwhile, Megan is turning with a scowl toward Jeffrey, but Mom interrupts her.

“OK, so, K’s brother should be getting home any minute,” she says. “So you’re all going to have to put up with him, and be nice. And I don’t want to ruin anybody’s dinners, but I won’t be a bad hostess, either. Can I get you any snacks? Fruit rollups, maybe? Granola bars? We also have juice or water. Or milk, but no cookies.”

“Do you have something salty?” Indigo asks. “That might go well with the juice.”

“I do have crackers,” Mom replies. “Saltines, Ritz, or Triscuits. Would you like cheese with that, too?”

“Ooh,” he responds, intrigued by cheese.

“It’s just cheddar.”

“Oh, that sounds good, actually,” Indigo tells her.

Jeffrey and Megan both look and nod at her.

I think about these things for a bit. The fruit juice seems good, still. Don’t want the crackers. I used to love crackers. The salt would be really nice, but the crackers themselves sound like something terrible that will sit badly in my stomach. And the cheese?

“Do we have any salami?” I ask.

Mom gives me a look that tells me she remembers what I did to the meatloaf last night. “You can have *some* of it.”

“Cool. I’ll have some of the juice, too,” I say.

“Help me serve it?” She raises an eyebrow.

I open my mouth to object. I’ve never had to do that before. But she *asked* instead of ordering me to do it. It wasn’t even a bargaining tone. More like an invitation. And I realize I feel like I *want* to.

“Sure!” I end up saying, and get up to follow her. I’m more aware now for some reason that I’m still wearing her bathrobe and a towel around my head.

“OK, maybe K *is* a girl,” I hear Jeffrey say. And then there’s a smack.



The towel is no longer on my head, and the robe is loose and open, revealing my T-shirt and pajama pants combination, because I'm feeling warm enough now. I think Mom turned the thermostat up for me, which is *weird* of her.

She's staying out of our hair, distracting Travis in the dining room with his homework, much to his many loud complaints.

And our snacks are gone.

It's about time for everyone to go home, and Dad should be arriving for a nap and dinner. And then there are conversations with him that I'm hoping will go at least as well as with Mom. Better, even. But I don't expect them to.

I've been looking at the band-aid that's on my finger.

And finally, Jeffrey points and asks, "What's going on with that?"

I hold it up, eyebrows raised, and say, "Claw."

"And you didn't show us that *first thing*?" he exclaims.

Both Megan and Indigo are now leaning forward expectantly, too.

So, yeah, I unwrap the band-aid to show them.

It's funky.

Where my fingernail used to be, the nail bed has a little slit in it, making it into kind of a sheath. And, now visible where it wasn't before when I put the band-aid on, is the very tip of a black little talon, poking out of that slit.

And now that I see that, and know what to look for, I can see hints of that sort of thing developing underneath most of the rest of my nails.

I hold it out for them to look at, and say, “It wasn’t like that when you got here. You couldn’t see the claw, just the slit it’s growing out of.”

“Is it going to be retractable, like a cat?” Megan asks.

I wiggle my finger. Then I do it again while holding the tip of it, pressing on my talon with my other index finger.

“I don’t think so,” I tell her. “It feels pretty solidly stuck there.”

“It probably depends on how the rest of your hand changes,” Indigo points out. “A cat’s claw is part of the last joint of the digit, too, just like that. There’s just a bunch of fat and fur around it, when it’s relaxed.”

I give him an appraising shrug. “Retractable would be cool. I don’t have any sense of how it’s going to turn out. Any of it.”

“Then how do you know you’re also turning into a girl?” Jeffrey asks.

I look at him, but not into his eyes. “Because I *want* it. Jeffrey, when I think about turning into a dragon, despite how much it’s actually going to *suck*, I feel *good* about it. And when I think about turning into a girl, despite how much *that’s* going to suck, too—sorry, Meghan, but you know why—I feel *excited*. And *both* things remind me of my dream.”

“Right.”

I look down at my little talon and wiggle my finger some more. “I wish I could think of a good dragon name. Because, being called K is OK as a boy *or* a girl. But, while I, um—” I find myself choking up at what I’m trying to say, and I bite my lip and squint, looking down at the floor.

“While I can still talk, I want to be able to tell people what I want to be called. Because, whatever happens, I don’t want to be Keith anymore.”

“You think you’re going to stop being able to talk?” Megan asks.

“I don’t know! But I *could*,” I tell her.

But, as Megan and Jeffrey compete to react to that, while Indigo furrows his brow in thought, I see through the rec room window my dad pulling his Toyota into the driveway. The look on his face is stern as he looks right at me and pulls up on the hand brake. Since I can see him clearly through the window, I don’t know if he can see me. But, still, his mood looks scary. And he’s home a bit early.

Everyone notices my own expression, and they look, too. And we all watch in silence as he stares down at the ground while he trudges to the front door of the house.

“Oh, shit, man,” Jeffrey breaths.

“Not a man,” I murmur.

He glances at me and just says, “Sure. Sorry.”

“We should probably go,” Indigo says. But he doesn’t get up from where he’s sitting.

Instead, we all listen while we hear Mom get up from the dining room table, telling Travis to focus on his math, and then walk to the door to meet her husband there. Then, they have a low, rumbling, quiet conversation that we *all* know is about me. We can’t make out any of their words, but their voices are just loud enough that Travis almost certainly can.

The front door closes, and the conversation continues.

We look at each other as we hear Travis’ chair scoot briefly on the floor. And, Mom doesn’t notice or care, so it’s not long before my little brother is peeking around the edge of the back wall of the rec room.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“We’ve just been talking,” Megan answers for me. “It’s OK.”

“What about?” Then he looks at me with wide eyes, and says, “You’re in *big* trouble.”

“I know,” I say. Normally I’d argue with him or something, but he’s just right. “It’s gonna suck.”

“What did you do?” he asks.

I look at my friends, and they look back at me, but don’t have anything to offer. So I ask Travis, “Did Mom tell you what’s going on?”

He shakes his head.

I make a face. “Do you want to see something gross? It’s kind of scary, but it’s also really cool.”

Travis almost steps into the room to come see, but he hesitates, frowning and pursing his lips to the side. He’s very suspicious of me, because we both prank each other with gross shit all the time.

“I’m growing claws,” I tell him.

“Nuh-uh!”

“No, I’m serious!” I hold out my left hand to display my index finger to him.

Reflexively, he leans forward to look, despite himself, then rears back, clenching his eyes shut, when he sees it clearly. “Ew!”

And then Dad steps into view behind him. Oops.

“OK, everyone,” Dad says. “I need to talk to my eldest now. Preferably alone. So, it’s probably time to go home. Travis, go talk to your Mom. She has some things she needs to tell you. OK, Kiddo?”

And, I guess we’re all too cowed by the *concerned* and *serious* adult to even really say goodbye to each other, or

exchange looks, and my brother and friends start filing out of the room.

Except, before they make it out of sight, Jeffrey turns back at the last second and says, “There’s a cool movie that came out today. Willow? I wanted to invite K to see it with me, Indigo, and Heath.”

From the look on my Dad’s face, Jeffrey had to have a lot of balls to say that. Maybe as mine are shrinking, his are growing.

But Dad just turns to look at him and says, “We’ll see. It might have to be next weekend.”

I want to object that next weekend might be too late, but Jeffrey nods, and Indigo pulls him away. And then my friends are gone and headed toward one of the doors to walk to their own homes.

And now I’m alone with Dad, and I *almost* look him right in the eyes.



Dad’s calm in a really unsettling way, but all he’s doing right now is examining whatever it is that I’m willing to show him. It started with my claw, with him poking and prodding at my fingertip, to see how it is attached to my bone and truly a part of my body, and not something like a splinter. With each patch of scales, he gets *more* serious. But he’s gentle enough. The belly button thing is disturbed him the most, and that’s what he’s looking at now, sitting on the office chair while I stand in front of him, shirt up.

The patch is about twice as big as it was when I'd started my bath, and the lower edge of the belly scale above it is now visible.

"That sure does look like a scute," he says, finally. Then he rubs his thumb over it and across the edge of my skin until I pull my stomach in from the feel of it. "And that tickles, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," I admit.

"Hm."

"Yeah."

He takes a deep breath and looks up at my face, scooting back in his chair a bit. "Can I please take a closer look at your eyes?"

I hiss, and look away. "Maybe? If you look at them from the side?"

"That's what I want to see, anyway," he says. He reaches back and adjusts the lamp that's clamped to the computer desk. Then he points at the corner of the dividing wall. "Look over there."

I'm curious about what he's going to see, so I do that. And he scoots forward and sits up more straight, so he can see into the side of my head. He reaches up to turn my head, but points with his other hand at where he wants to me to look again. I let him do that.

I smell a tuna fish sandwich and coffee on his warm breath, left over from lunch. It's faint, but when I open my mouth, the stench gets stronger. And it makes me hungry? Kind of in the same way that Todd's vomit did.

I don't want to think about that.

It also reminds me that he's my parent, and I feel like I should trust him, and also fear him. Stronger versions of the emotions he makes me feel all the time. So, I sort of freeze, almost like my mom did when I transfixed her

with my eyes, but softer. It's like my muscles are ready to twitch, to help me bolt away if I need to.

He's so silent again. In fact, I think he's holding his breath.

It takes some time for me to force myself to talk.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He grabs my shoulder and reaches for the other one, like I'm a little kid, and twists me to face him. I can't help but glance at his face, and my gut clenches tight.

I've never seen him look so *scared* before.

He's shaking as he opens his mouth and works his jaw, trying to figure out what to say.

And this is worse than if he was still angry with me. It makes me want to vomit. My esophagus convulses, threatening to make that happen. But I manage to hold it in.

"I don't know what to do," he admits. And to my ears, it sounds like *he's* the child, complaining to his own parent that he doesn't know how to fulfill their requirement of him.

I've never heard my dad sound like that, and it's the worst thing in the world. I want to run and curl up and hide in the smallest space I can find.

He swallows. "Your Mom is right. We can't take you to any doctors. This is beyond that," he says. "We can't trust anyone else with this. But..."

"It's going to get harder to hide," my squeaky voice finishes for him.

He nods. And then he *sniffles*, and takes a shaky breath. "Nothing like this was supposed to happen to you. You were supposed to grow up and help change the world. Or, I don't know, just... Have a better life than me."

Something about that confuses me. "Dad?"

He leans forward and wraps me in a hug that I can tell is as strong as he's trying to make it, his muscles trembling, his huge arms enveloping me. But, I know I can just break free and walk away if I need to. I don't, though. I want to know what he means by 'supposed to'.

"I'm so, so sorry, Keith," he rumbles right next to my left ear.

I gently hold him back, worried I might hurt him, and ask, "For what, Dad?"

He shakes his head while tightening his grip. "This is just impossible, and I don't know what to do."

OK. Look, actually.

This is happening to *me*. *I'm* the one who is experiencing this. And it's what I *want*.

Not only that, but I have the force of the entire world, the personification of all of life, or something like that, giving me this gift. She, or it, is behind me all the way. It wants this to happen, too. So it is.

I need my parents to help me stay safe while I'm changing, and to help me get the food I need. But I don't need them to make sense of it. I don't need them to tell me it's OK. And I definitely don't need them to try to figure out how to *stop* it. There's nothing they can do. Either of them. It's just going to happen.

I inflate my lungs to their capacity and shift my arms and stance under my father's grip.

"Dad?" I croak. "I'm stronger than you."

"What?" he asks, pulling back.

I tell him, "I'm stronger than you. And I will *never* hurt you. OK? But I'm way, *way* stronger than you now."

It's obvious this is not something he ever expected to hear from me. But I think I need him to understand this.

If he knows that I can take care of myself, maybe he won't be as scared.

"Arm wrestle?" I ask. "On the dining room table? I want to show you."



The whites of my eyes aren't so white anymore. My irises aren't the same color they used to be, either. They're starting to look metallic, and coppery. And they're bigger. My pupils are changing shape, too, with divots at the top and bottom.

It's all very subtle, still. I have to lean into the bathroom mirror and really stare closely to see what's going on.

Also, I think my prescription is changing? I've worn glasses long enough that I often forget I have them on. I put them on and take them off without even thinking about it, leaving them in regular places. And, I've taken them off to examine myself in the bathroom, because I'm nearsighted, and they get in the way for that. But it's a relief to remove them? And the farthest wall doesn't look as blurry as usual.

It's not like I need to read the blackboard anymore. Why wear them at all? I don't think I've ever liked how they make me look, either.

I lean back and look at my face without them on. Still a little blurry when I'm at a reasonable distance, but definitely not as much as it used to be. I don't have to squint as hard to see details.

I'm... Oh.

I can kind of see my stripes under my skin. The shape and contour of my neck is different, too. Smoother, rounder, thicker, and with no Adam's apple. And the stripes go up on either side. The front of my neck looks more yellow than usual.

It's how they're starting to show on my face that's really striking. Particularly down the length of my nose.

It's still just a hint, and I don't know if anyone could see them at dinner, even. Nobody commented.

Though, everyone was still very stunned about how I'd shut out my dad at arm wrestling. It had been absolutely no contest. He couldn't make my arm move in any direction I didn't want it to go. Not even a fraction of an inch. Not even with both hands. And when he put his whole weight into it, he moved *me*. So, we'd all focused on eating Mom's pot roast, while I *tried* to leave some leftovers, and talked about Travis' day at school and what he was hoping to do this weekend. And also a bit about Dad's work.

It was kind of nice to not talk about me.

It's pretty stressful to constantly worry about my immediate future and how people will take it. I'll be glad when there's no more question about what's happening. When it's all said and done, and I just get to be myself, regardless of how short-lived that might be.

I have this urge to run away again, when I think about it. But, that's not a good idea.

I'm using my thumb to wiggle the nail of my right middle finger, and it takes me a couple seconds to realize that it's just as loose as my other nail was just before it came off.

My heart rate rising, breath catching in my chest, I check my other nails.

All of them are looser, to varying degrees.

I lift up my foot and pull off my sock, then hop back and put that foot on the edge of the counter. Then I check its nails.

I do this for both feet, and they're the same as my hands. The pinky nails are already gone, in fact, stuck in my socks or something.

I reach back and feel my tail. The aching there hasn't stopped, I've just been ignoring it. Living with it.

It's already longer. Still less than the length of one of my thumbs, but longer than earlier *today*.

Holy shit.

If I'm going to see *Willow*, I'm going to need to wear my hooded sweatshirt and a pair of gloves. And maybe some sunglasses.

And, I'm going to have to go *tomorrow*.

But as far as I know, I'm still grounded.

No word yet from the school district about my suspension, though.

That worries me, too.

## Chapter 8 - Family time

**E**VERYTHING *HURTS*.

It feels like every single joint in my body is being pulled apart and the gaps are being filled with magma.

I'm on a medieval rack, and Mr. Canning, the Principal of my school, is the torturer. And he's lecturing me about school policy while he casually cranks the wheel, turning the worm and stretching my joints incrementally far beyond their ability to function ever again.

I hear *cracking*. And I can't stop myself from screaming. Only it comes out as a screeching hiss, like a falcon or hawk transforming into a gator mid-flight. And there's a stuttering, thumping rumble as I take in another breath to do it again. And again, and again.

My body wants to curl up to get away from the agony, but it can't.

The two police officers from yesterday watch and take notes.

And then the door to the chamber opens, and my mom enters the room. At first, I think she's here to gloat, but she just comes over to put her warm, warm hand on my forehead.

“Kaye?” she says in the voice of the world. “Hey. Hey. Kaye. I’m here.”



For all that the agony of that nightmare continues into the morning and the shower that blooms around me in steam and rain, soapy loofa scraping away at more dead skin than I’ve ever seen before, it is incredible how little about my body has changed.

Standing *sucks*. But so does lying down. Especially on the hard, enameled metal floor of the bathtub. I’ve tried kneeling. Several moments of hands and knees under the deluge of the hottest water I can stand, breathing heavily. All that can be done is to endure. I’m still on that rack.

The shower was Mom’s suggestion, when I whined that I didn’t want to miss my Saturday morning cartoons. She said the heat would help with my joints, and that she didn’t want my flaking dead skin all over the house, since my shedding has accelerated dramatically.

And she was right. This is better than not being in the shower. And my scales feel *so good* where they’re free of the confines of my dying humanity. Those are the places where I don’t itch.

Mom also strongly encouraged me to use her apricot scrub, which made me wrinkle my nose at the thought of it. But once I opened the jar experimentally, the smell made me want to use *all* of it, immediately. Such a different reaction than from before.

I also find I want to eat it.

Why do I, as a person who is turning into some kind of mythological reptilian monster, want to eat meat and *fruit*? Isn't it usually one or the other?

As sort of a nervous habit at this point, I pause in my scrubbing to reach back and feel my tail.

It's the length of my hand, from base of palm to tip of middle finger.

I have no fingernails left, no toenails. It's all short little nubbins of talons. Dad reminded me they're called talons last night.

But, I'm still standing upright, when I've got the willpower to do it. I've still got two arms, two legs, and a human shaped head. Five digits on the end of each limb. Hair. My head still has hair, and facial skin. But I did look in the mirror on the way to the shower, and my eyes are now, fully, completely *my* eyes.

No need for glasses anymore. At least, not in the house. Kinda excited about that.

But I feel like one of those toys, where it's some kind of creature made of beads, standing on a little black plastic puck, and when you press the button on the bottom it collapses. I should be completely collapsed and useless.

It's amazing I can move at all. But, it does feel marginally better when I do.

There's one other notable change, but no one's going to see *that*. It beat the punch to my shedding, at least in that area. And every time I reach down to scrub it, the lack of *wrongness* makes me want to cry.

I can't seem to make tears anymore, but something else weird and soothing happens with my eyes instead. I close them without closing them, causing everything to take on a yellow tint, and I stare up at the shower head, letting the drops hit whatever it is that's covering them now.

Someday soon, I'm going to have to go swimming again.



OK, I might adore the smell of the summer sausage and bulk bag of raisins I've dug out of the kitchen, but the smell of my brother's Froot Loops is making it hard to eat. Every time I open my mouth to take a bite, it sneaks in, all perfumy and fake and mixed with *milk*.

But, as yet another rerun of *Gummi Bears* plays out, I twist my head to look in the direction of my brother. From where I'm lying, he's too far back for me to see more than one of his feet sticking off the edge of the love seat. But I can hear him smacking his cereal. How do you smacker cereal?

It's almost too much. Between the fire in my joints, the lead in my muscles, the lingering tickles and itches, the ludicrous volume of the TV, and the stench of his cereal, that added cacophony from his tiny mammalian mouth, crunching and liquid slapping noises like a cat eating a mix of dry and wet food, would push me over the edge into unbelievable violence. But that oasis of calm and safety that I've never felt before in the front of my pelvis pins me to the sofa in contentment.

Sure, my tail is pinned under me. But the cushions hug it gently enough, and give me just enough play, leverage, and pressure to occasionally shift and stretch those muscles. And my Mom's pajama pants fit over it fine.

The smacking stops long enough for Travis to say, “Oh, I hate this episode.”

Of course, neither of us gets up to change the channel. Nothing else on is good, yet. But, I know for a fact that he’s watched this one countless without complaint before.

Duke Igthorn is saying, “What is *that* on my castle tower?” And he’s pointing at a flying sea monster that Sunni and Cubbi rode there with the power of a magic whistle.

It’s one of the simpler episodes, but it’s cute enough.

I scowl as I take a small bite of the summer sausage with the few teeth I have that don’t ache, and swallow it without chewing. The lump going down is kind of soothing, actually, as slow as it goes.

“Why?” I ask. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s dumb,” he answers. “But I want that whistle so I can make you do what I want.”

“What?” I laugh. “If *you* blow a whistle, I’ll just take it from you.”

“No you won’t. You’ll have to do whatever I want.” He sounds so smug.

“I’m not a sea serpent,” I point out.

“How do *you* know?” he asks. “You’re not done changing!”

I twist enough to hold out my right-hand claw at him, flexing my digits to display them. “I’m growing talons, dumbass. That wouldn’t happen if my arms were just going to shrink or fall off.”

“Nuh-uh! You don’t know. It could happen.”

Ugh. He’s just insisting on that, because he wants his fantasy to be real.

Honestly, I get it.

Saturday mornings are the one time we have a truce. More so in the Fall, when new episodes come out. But this is when we watch everything together and even compromise. It's like a ritual of peace. Something that keeps us a pair of siblings instead of mortal enemies. I'm not going to ruin that and fight him over this. I let him have it.

"You know how this one ends, right?" I ask him.

"Yeah. The whistle gets bent and it summons a different creature," he replies.

"Right," I tell him. "So, what you have to do is get a whistle and bend it just right, and then I attack and destroy whatever you want me to."

"Oh, I'm going to make you do my homework!" he retorts.

"OK! *If* you get the whistle right," I concede, grinning. "Otherwise, I might eat the house instead."

"What? Why?"

"It's like in the show. If you don't know the right code, you don't know what I'm gonna do."

"Oh, yeah. Well, we can go to my school to try it out first!"

"Ooh, good call. Maybe I'll eat that for you without you even telling me too," I cackle, then take another chunk of meat and follow that with raisins.

"But you have to do what I tell you," he protests.

"We'll figure it out," I reassure him. "And then no one will be able to stop us!"

But he's quiet for a few moments, watching the end of the episode.

Finally, he says, "I want to turn into something."

"It hurts a lot," I say.

"I don't care."

“Yeah. Neither do I,” I admit. “I get it.”

More silence. Then in the middle of a stupid commercial about a dumb toy, he complains, “It’s not fair.”

“It isn’t,” I agree. “But when it’s all done, you can take me to show and tell, and you can point out your bullies to me.”

“We don’t have show and tell in fourth grade,” he tells me.

“What?” I make a point of twisting onto my hip and propping myself up on screaming joints to look at him. “That’s so wrong! I had it in *fifth* grade. Your teacher is dumb. I’ll come to your class anyway, and make her do show and tell!”

“Pfft!” he snorts. Then he gets really quiet. Much more subdued and kinda sulky, he asks, “Are you still going to be my brother?”

“Nope.” I drop back down and pop another couple of raisins. “I’m your older sister now.”

“Nuh-uh!”

“I am,” I say. “I’m literally a girl. I’m not even kidding.”

I think. What’s there now is definitely inside. But the slit goes sideways. Well, it’s sort of this weird T-shape. And dragons might have inside bits, whether they’re male or female. But I’m not telling *him* that.

“Prove it!” he demands.

I sit all the way up to stare at him with a brow that just doesn’t want to wrinkle the way I’m used to anymore. “*No!* What are you? Some kind of pervert?”

He looks so confused, but he shouts back, “*No! You’re* the pervert!”

I shouldn't have brought up that word. He's just shooting it back at me. "Travis," I try to tell him as calmly as I can, "I am *not* going to show you my junk."

He screws up his face. "Ew!"

"How else do you want me to prove I'm a girl?" I ask him.

"I don't know!"

"Well, then you're just going to have to take my word for it," I conclude.

He wrinkles his nose. "Why do you want to be a girl anyway? Girls are gross."

I hold up my left arm and grab a flap of peeling skin to wiggle it at him. "This isn't gross?"

"Ew!"

"See? I'm totally a girl."

"You should wear long sleeves."

"Later."



Dad ends up making waffles for us, like usual, but only he and Travis eat them. I just can't anymore, and it sucks. They were my favorite Saturday morning thing. But, Mom and I share a scramble at lunchtime. It's got bacon and bell peppers in it, and I find I don't care. Everyone stares at me in disbelief as I eat my share.

Despite all this, though, my parents both look like they're wandering around the house in a daze, unsure of where they are or what they're supposed to do.

Mom has spent all morning coming in and checking me like I've come down with a weird flu. Most of the time, just peeking in and raising her eyebrows at me, because Travis and I are engrossed in the TV. But sometimes she asks if I need anything, or how I'm feeling.

I can tell she wants to tell us to go out and play in this nice sunny day, because she usually does. But she always stops short when she sees my patchy arms and their shiny, colorful scales, and flaps of dead skin.

And I do my best not to check my face and scalp too often. I'm not quite ready yet for those to shed, and I don't want to accelerate that by rubbing or scratching. But, if anybody gets a good look at my fiery metallic green eyes with their slitted pupils and the way they blink all wrong, it's a dead giveaway, anyway.

And then, whenever our parents are in another room together, sometimes I can hear them murmuring to each other, just loud enough to feel it in my bones over the blaring TV.

We're getting into the Saturday afternoon *Matinées*, with some movie I don't know the name of about a jewel heist in Europe and really dorky music, when the phone rings.

I need to hear whatever I can of their conversation, but there's no way I'm getting Travis to turn off the TV. So I just get up and creep out to the kitchen, just in time to see Mom make it to the phone, which has been ringing apparently, and pick it up.

It's on the wall between the microwave and the back door, and it's still one of those phones with a cord, so she stands there, holding it to her ear.

"Yes? This is she," Mom says after a second.

I hear the *hint* of a voice on the other end.

“OK,” she says, then looks knowingly at me. It’s not exactly a stern expression, but her brow does crease. “Yes. I understand.”

I cringe and give her an apprehensive and apologetic look. Or, at least, I hope it is. My face isn’t moving nearly as much as I’m used to. Especially my forehead and eyebrows. I can still smile and snarl and do things like that.

“Of course. Thank you,” she says. “Well, I don’t think he’ll be returning to school next week anyway. He’s not feeling well, and I think it might be best not to expose his classmates to whatever he has. So, I think that’s for the best anyway. ... Yes. I understand. Yes. Thank you. Have a good day.”

Then, as she hangs up the phone, she gives *me* an apologetic look. “Todd has a concussion, but his X-rays were clear. His family are choosing not to press charges on either you or Heath. But, you are still suspended next week until you each can talk to a counselor about what happened, and find a way to promise it won’t happen again.” Then she giggles. “But, of course, I don’t know how you’re going to go back to school at all!”

Dad steps into view behind her from the living room, reaching out to touch her arm. He’s watching the both of us as mildly as he can.

“Um,” I say. But, I decide it’s not a good time to bring up movies and friends.

“I feel like I’m supposed to yell at you, K,” Mom says. “But, that doesn’t work, because it isn’t your fault, is it?”

I sigh. It’s annoying that it’s taken shedding my humanity visibly and messily for her to admit that, when it comes to anything having to do with Todd. And, I still don’t think she’s quite grasped what’s been going on. She means it’s not my fault because of my new instincts

and inhuman strength. Not that I've just been defending myself this whole time.

But if I say that, we'll get in a big argument, I'm sure.

In the silence between us, the TV shouts from the other room.

"A little further to the right!" some guy says. "Now, hold out your arms. Like that. Yeah! Perfect. Stay just like that!"

Then there's that wacky music, the sound of a car driving by, and a big splash. A woman cries out in furious indignation.

"We should do something normal," my dad says. "As a family. Get out and do something K might not be able to do next week. How does that sound?"

Mom looks at him incredulously, then at me pointedly, then back at him.

"I can wear a hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses," I say. "And I can keep my hands in my pocket."

To which my dad says, "And a movie theater is pretty dark, with something big and distracting in front of everyone."

Shit. What? Really? Are we *really* gonna?

"We could invite K's friends, too," Dad suggests.

Mom scowls at him, then looks thoughtfully at me.

"Can you restrain yourself when we're out?" she asks.

"Not everyone is Todd, Mom," I tell her.

She rolls her lips inward and bites them. "Do you have Megan's number?"

I shake my head. "Jeffrey or Indigo might, though. They were all talking about that when they left yesterday. Um, her last name is Darling. But I don't know her parents' names."

"Darling?" Dad asks.

“Yep!” I raise my eyebrows.

“That’s Darling,” he says, and Mom and I groan.

Mom sighs. “I’ll call them for you,” she tells me. “Your voice is sounding weird ever since this morning. Maybe you shouldn’t talk too much.”

It is true. I’ve been a bit raspy. Really, it probably just sounds like I’m going through puberty early, but with everything else going on, it makes all of us think of what’s really happening.

“Call Heath, too?” I ask.

“OK, but I don’t think his parents will let him go out,” she says. “Technically, you should be grounded, too.”

“I know.”

For the rest of the afternoon, though, I feel like I have the absolute coolest parents in the universe, and I’m jumpy and on edge about it. This shouldn’t be happening.

Travis gets excited to learn we’re going to a movie. Gets confused at the title. And then gets excited again when Dad shows him the ad for it in the paper and explains what it’s supposedly about.

I’m excited to see Val Kilmer, since he was so cool in *Real Genius*.



My regular glasses feel fragile in my hands as I fiddle with them in my sweatshirt pocket. I might need them in the theater, still, so I have them handy. But I lost the case a few months ago, because I never use it, so they’re unprotected.

What I'm wearing right now is a pair of black aviator style sunglasses that Dad grabbed at the store for me when he went and bought burgers and fixings for dinner.

After dinner, we had to drive into town to the Viking Twin theater. It's a dark, tall, double story building, with a trapezoid for a roof, and two screens in it. It's where Dad took me to see *Empire Strikes Back* when it came out.

The line to the box office is six people long. Not too bad.

We're here for one of the later showings, 10:20pm, hoping that the crowd will be smaller. But my mom is talking about going to church tomorrow, so she doesn't want us up too late. While I'm trying to keep an eye out for any of my friends who could make it.

It should be Megan and Indigo. The movie was Jeffrey's idea, but something made his family keep him home, and I feel bad for him. But there's nothing to be done about it. Heath, of course, is definitely grounded.

Mostly, what this means is that I'm keeping my parents and brother between me and the bulk of the other people here, while I scan the lamp lit parking lot for anyone I might recognize. Wearing the sunglasses is not making this easy. God, I must look like such a poser, wearing a purple hooded sweatshirt, with the hood up, and a pair of dark sunglasses. Like, who do I think I am, right?

And I freeze.

There is someone I recognize, skipping ahead of his parents on his way around a big white van. Well, not really skipping. He's sauntering fast, with an ugly smug look on his face. But he does hop a couple times in happy anticipation of the movie. And there's no one else behind us right now, so he's going to line up *right behind me*.

It's Marcus.

No, Marcus. This is *my* territory. *My* movie theater. It has *my* food in it. You can't have it, you indolent turd.

I don't really know what the word 'indolent' means, but I've read it a few times in a couple of books, and it carries the emotion I feel.

But, no. I *can't* face him. That's too dangerous here. It's not actually my territory, and I'm trying to be human for my family right now. I just need him to not recognize me.

As soon as my muscles relax enough to move, I turn and push through, between my mom and Dad, so that I'm standing in front of them.

"Excuse me," I mumble to them. "Marcus is coming up behind us. I need to hide."

"Really, K," Mom breathes with exasperation.

But Dad twists to look, and then steps to put his hand on my shoulder and block the view of me, protectively.

I actually feel reassured by that? But I'm also sure he can feel how tense I am.

This is gonna suck, because if Marcus is around when Megan or Indigo meet us in the lobby, they'll call my name, and he'll know I'm here. There could still be a scene.

As he lines up behind us, he's talking to his parents.

"He was such a dick in *Top Gun*. But that movie rocked."

"Mark! Language!"

"Well, he was! And he was good at it, too. A total badass. He was my favorite."

"Marcus!"

"Anyway. This should be OK. Maybe he'll actually get to kill someone. There's swords."

"Yes, that's what swords usually do, son."

"Duh."

“Don’t talk back to your father. We can just go right back home.”

“Mom...”

“Just behave yourself. Please.”

“Fine. Whatever. I just want to see the movie, so OK.”

“Thank you.”

God, it’s almost like he’s bullying his own parents. And every time I hear his voice, I want to reach into his throat and remove his voice box so he can’t use it anymore. Like, right through the front.

Of course, I don’t do that, even though no one could stop me, because that would be murder, and I don’t *really* want to kill anyone. I just have the urge to.

I take a step to the side to put my dad more directly between me and Marcus.

“I’m glad that faggot Keith is grounded,” Marcus declares. “Otherwise, if he was here, I’d have to kick his butt.”

Dad tightens his grip on my shoulder.

“Edward,” Mom warns, low, quiet, and tense.

I feel Dad’s hand start to shake.

And, Marcus’ parents proceed to say *nothing* at all regarding what he just said. They don’t get after him for his language. They don’t tell him to tone down his violent thoughts, or to speak ill of his classmate. Nothing. I just hear a bit of shuffling feet behind me.

I’m gritting my aching teeth as we all step forward again, to get closer to buying our own tickets.

Seriously?

He’s seriously going to get away with saying that?

What does he even think’s going to happen?

“Do you know what happened?” Marcus asks his parents.

“Yes, son. You already told us,” his dad says.

“No, a different time. I mean earlier this week,” Marcus clarifies.

“Maybe you can tell us la—”

“When he tried to fight Todd in the locker room, he got the cramps,” Marcus said. “It was *so* funny. That kid’s a freak.”

*Did he actually recognize me or something?*

My dad grips my other shoulder with his other hand, as if to try to keep me in place. But really, he’s just rooting himself to me and whatever I choose to do.

“Mark. Later,” his Mom chides him. But it sounds more like a reminder. Then she says, “It doesn’t work like that, anyway. Boys don’t get cramps.”

“Yeah, but *he did*,” Marcus corrects her. “Maybe he’s not a boy.”

*I mean, he’s right.*

“They shouldn’t let people like him in school,” Marcus says.

“Well, he is suspended, isn’t he?” his Dad points out.

This hot hissing noise comes out of my throat, through my suddenly open mouth. It’s so sudden, short, sharp, deep, and loud, that everyone falls silent for a moment. A couple people even jump away from me, and look around, including Mom. Dad’s hands briefly lift up from my shoulders. But I remain stock still and don’t acknowledge anything, and just breathe, calming myself. I just don’t have the urge to do more than that. And apparently nobody can believe I just made that noise or something, so no one even asks.

It’s an odd and tense moment, but it does shut Marcus up for a bit. He’s silent for long enough for us to get to the front of the line, so Dad can buy our tickets. I step aside,

but remain facing the box office, and look up at the listings on the board behind the clerk.

The clerk looks at me weird, but doesn't say anything, and instead asks my dad if he can help him.

"Yes. I'd like to buy four tickets for the 10:20 showing of *Willow*, please. Two adults and two kids," Dad says.

The clerk rattles off a total, and my dad starts to cut a check.

"Who wears pajama pants to the theater?" Marcus sneers.

And again, his parents don't say shit.

I start to turn around to face him, but stop myself just in time to prevent him seeing my face. But he does see my reaction.

"*What?*" he asks.

My dad turns around, and I hear him say, "Sir. Ma'am. I'm going to have to ask your son to leave my children alone."

"Sorry about that, Sir," Marcus' dad says. Then there's a pause. "Edward Michaelson? You and your family here to see *Willow*, too?"

And... I leave. I turn just enough to head toward the entrance, stride over to it, and push my way inside, keeping my head down.

Of *course* he knows my Dad. Almost everyone in town knows my Dad. He runs the only bookstore in town, and he's behind the counter more often than not. And *Marcus* knows he's my Dad!

"K!" I hear my mom call behind me as she doubtlessly moves to follow, clinching my fate.

*Ugh, fuck. Whatever.*

“Hey, there she is,” I hear a familiar girl’s voice hiss from up ahead of me, over near the popcorn line. “K! Over here!”

It’s Megan.

I hunch my shoulders, glancing up at her and her parents. Her older sister? I think? Is also there. She looks like she’s in college. Indigo and his parents are right behind them in that line, and Megan was tugging on Indigo’s sleeve.

So I hoof it over to them.

“Marcus is right outside,” I growl.

“Want some popcorn?” Megan asks.

“My parents are here. They’ll get some,” I tell her. I pointedly don’t look over my shoulder, just sort of twitching that way to indicate my family that are probably coming in the door.

“You’re Edward’s kid, right?” Megan’s dad asks.

Remembering I’m not actually supposed to be talking much, I just nod, sort of glancing at him.

“What’s with the sunglasses?” he asks. It doesn’t sound like a taunt at all. Like he’s just curious. “Eye exam? I hate when they use the drops.”

I just cringe, and he seems to accept that.

“You sound like you’ve got a cold,” Indigo observes. “Are you feeling alright?”

I cringe harder at him, showing my teeth, and then shrug. I try whispering, instead, “I’ve just got a frog in my throat. Only, it’s more of a dragon.”

I feel really proud of myself for that one. It’s like something someone in a movie would say.

Indigo gets it and gets an impressed and contemplative look on his face.

“So, the three of us should try to sit together,” Megan says.

“Yeah,” Indigo agrees, just as I feel my Mom’s presence as she steps up behind me.

“I want an ice cream sandwich,” Travis declares.

“They don’t have those here, Travis,” Mom tells him. Then she reaches past me to offer her hand to one of the nearest parents. “Hi, I’m K’s Mom, Cassandra. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ah, yes. I know you from the bookstore,” Indigo’s mom says, reaching to shake her hand. “You’ve worked the counter a couple times, and you answer the phone.”

“That’s right?”

“It’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you!”

“Yes, I recognize you, too,” Megan’s dad says. “I’m Jason. This is my wife Rachel. My eldest, Danielle. And, I believe you’ve already met Megan.”

“Well, there sure are a lot of us!” my mom laughs. “I hope we can find some seats near each other. But if not, it’s OK by me if Megan and Indigo come sit with us. I’ll help them find you after the show.”

There were agreements all around that that would be OK, and then Mom tells me she and Dad are going to go to the end of the concessions line.

“I’m not going to eat any popcorn,” I tell her in a horse whisper. Then I look at the candy display and frown at it. Then the pop. What I *want* is more dinner. Another hamburger or three. Turning back to her, I say, “Maybe just a lemonade?”

“Hey, Kiddo,” Dad says to me, stepping up next to Mom. “Come on, let’s go get in line for the food.”

“OK,” Travis says. “Then I want Woppers!”

“I don’t know if they have those,” Mom tells him.

Too much is going on, now, and I can’t decide what to do.

“Yes, they do!” Travis exclaims. “They’re right over there!”

“OK, well, then we’ll get them for you.”

I look at Megan, then Indigo, wanting to show them what my eyes look like now, but this is absolutely the wrong place and time to do that. Then, realizing that it doesn’t matter now, since he knows I’m here, I turn around to look for Marcus, who’s probably entered the lobby already.

Yep.

We find ourselves watching each other as his parents lead him right past the concessions line and toward the same theater we’re going to.

I daydream about, like, going full dragon in the theater and then hunting him down by tasting the air with my tongue as everybody runs screaming. I bet he’s the only one that smells like that hair gel he uses. It’s distinctive, and the most annoying of everyone at school. Also, I’ve noticed, when he got too close to me once, his body odor smells a lot like Fritos. Maybe he just eats them all the time.

Just before he steps out of my sight, though, Marcus lifts up his chin and draws his finger across his throat, sneering at me.

The sunglasses are doing a remarkable job of keeping my hypnotic gaze from transfixing him.

Megan and Indigo are both watching, so they see that. I don’t know where everyone else is looking. And I feel my chest rumble.

Indigo narrows his eyes.

And Megan’s sister asks, “Did anybody else feel that?”

Nobody seems to know what she's talking about.

"It was almost like an Earthquake," she says.

He parents shake their heads.

I turn to my parents and ask them if I can stand with Megan and Indigo now that Marcus isn't around, and they reluctantly agree.

And then from there, it all just kind of goes OK.

I don't get asked too many questions. And I don't say much. But I do smile more, and nod happily enough when it seems appropriate.

It turns out the that adults present know me as a boy, and neither Megan nor Indigo correct them, which is probably good. I am wearing my Mom's pajama pants, though, and they look kinda girly, and that gets commented on. But not in an insulting way, and I just shrug and whisper, "Mine are in the wash."

Which they are.

And I'm starting to realize that the theater seats are going to be really uncomfortable for me.



So, we see the movie, and I did need my regular glasses. But it's really good!

Sorsha is the best. I want to be her. I want her red hair so bad. And her armor. And I'm kind of mad she's made to fall in love with Madmartigan, even though he's Val Kilmer. But there's no girl her age for her to fall in love with in the movie, anyway. This is just how movies go, I guess.

Whatever. Megan and I agree that she's a total badass. And I relate to her rebelling against her Mom, too.

But there's this one scene in the movie. And I don't know what to think about it.

It reminds me of other scenes in other movies I hadn't really thought much about before. Like in *Crocodile Dundee*. But those scenes didn't feel good. I felt kind of sick when watching them, and now I know why.

But this one doesn't? Not exactly. It just leaves me wondering.

It's more like a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

Madmartigan has to disguise himself really quickly as a woman to avoid being beat up by a jealous husband. And even though he does it kind of badly, it works! Probably because the guy is really drunk, but maybe because it's supposed to be more convincing than it looks to the audience.

And then Madmartigan has to fend off the drunken guy's advances as he tries to feel him up and get him in bed. And then Sorsha and her mother's goons show up, and line everyone up to ask them questions, and Madmartigan fools even her for a moment before she uncovers his disguise.

And, aside from the drunken husband's reactions, it's not *really* played up for laughs? And when he finds out that Madmartigan is a man, he attacks the *goons*. And he does it, I think, not because he'd been fooled by a man, but because it meant that a man had been with his wife, and he's jealous.

I don't know.

It's not a part that any of us talk about besides my Dad. And he just makes one comment about it not needing to be in the movie.

The thing is, I'm not a guy pretending to be a girl. I never would have been. So, it kind of doesn't have anything to do with me.

Or, at least, that's how I think I feel about it.

But then, when we've all gone to our separate cars, and I'm waiting for my dad to get in and unlock all the doors, Marcus yells at me from across the lot behind me.

"Hey, *Katy!*" he shouts. Then, when I look, "I know where you live!"

*Mom* gets up on her toes and shouts back at him. "Don't you *dare* threaten my family, young man!" Then, more quietly, to Dad, "Jesus Christ. Some people's children. And you *did* talk to them, Edward."

"Yeah," Dad says. "Unfortunately, there's only so much I can do."

"What is wrong with him, anyway?" *Mom* asks.

I whirl on her. "Mom. That's *Marcus*. He's been bullying me for the past four years and nobody cares about it."

"Well, I do," she says.

"You *haven't*," I tell her.

"Well, I do now, K," she affirms, sounding angrier.

My chest rumbles silently again as I exhale, and something in the car rattles. "Well, *now*, it's too late," I mutter.

But she's too busy looking at the car in curiosity to pay attention to what I just said.

## Chapter 9 - The death of a name

**C**HURCH IS A THING Mom keeps insisting that we all go to, at least until we're adults and can decide for ourselves what to think about that education. And Dad plays along, even though he's said he long ago decided that he's a non-believer.

At least, we don't go to any of the weird evangelical churches that surround our neighborhood. We normally have to leave the house early to head to this liberal Lutheran church on the east side of the city to the south of us.

I like the pastor there, but the Sunday school is *really bad*. It's like constant Kindergarten. So, I like to use any excuse I can to attend an adult sermon, during which I'll just sit quietly and watch that pastor talk out of the corner of his mouth like the Godfather Pizza guy.

Well, today, there's a wrinkle in that usual plan.

Like, I've woken up early enough, that's for sure, thanks to more nightmares and physical agony. But, uh, there's this problem with my face. And hair.

And my tail is longer, and so are my talons. In fact, the talons on my feet are making it so I can't wear my shoes.

Possibly the worst part is how painful it is to stand upright. I can't exactly go around on all fours, either. So, I'm creeping around the house like a crone, hunched over, and leaning forward a little bit, legs wide apart, holding onto anything I can.

That is, after my shower, where I shed a bunch more dead human skin.

To say that this horrifies and rattles both of my parents is a painful understatement.

Mom makes a comment about needing to go to church even more, but like she's reluctant to do so, because that means leaving me at home. So, Dad suggests she just go with Travis, while he watches me.

*Watches* me, he says. Like I'm some little kid, or untrained animal.

Except I can't really complain about that. My behavior in the past couple of days probably needs watching, especially with all the urges I've been getting that I haven't been acting on. And it also hurts to try to talk.

But, Dad also goes to make everyone a massive omelette to share, while Mom gets herself and Travis ready. And eggs are really what I need right now. Lots and lots of eggs.

I don't even bother to complain about the veggies he's putting in it. I'm not going to be chewing on them. And it's become so easy to just swallow my food. Which I *have* to do because my teeth are about to fall out.

Until the food is done, I go and hide in the rec room, curled up on the couch, butt and tail in the air under my Mom's bathrobe, knees and elbows under my torso, and my face pressed into the cushion, eyes clenched tight.

I'm naked from the waist down, but the robe is long enough to hide that. At least from the sides. And this is the most comfortable I've been in two days, doing this.

The last time I went to the bathroom, I discovered something disconcerting.

I just have one hole down there now. Also, it's just scutes, as my dad calls my belly scales. No more skin in that area. And, while it works just fine, and everything comes out easily, cleaning it feels *weird*.

Mom gave me advice for how to wipe as a girl, since I'd told her that things down there had been changing like that. But, I can't bring myself to tell her that I can't really follow her instructions. I mean, I can, technically, except that my tail's in the way, and it *just doesn't matter*.

Oh, yeah, I have to sit sideways on the toilet and lean forward, because of my tail, and that's not going to work much longer, either. So, I'm either going to have to start going out in the woods, or get a freaking litter box!

These are things I don't want to have to think about on a Sunday morning. Or any morning. But here I am, because it might be relevant as early as tonight, and I have to figure out how to break the news to my parents.

I hear my dad step into the room. "Hey, Kiddo. Breakfast is ready. Probably let your mom and brother have the bigger portions, if they want them, and I'll make you more eggs afterward?"

I groan, and sort of nod my head into the cushion.

"We got a couple extra cartons, because you seem to like them the most right now," he says.

I move my hand out from under me so that I can reach out and give him a thumbs up. Which, of course, means that he can see just how long my thumb talon is. Also, my thumb's starting to develop a weird animalistic shape. Like, it's knobby, and longer.

It takes him a moment to respond, then he says, "It's happening so much faster now, isn't it?"

So, I turn my face toward him, and rasp, “I. Am. *So*. Hungry.”

Then I open my eyes and see him flinch. It visibly takes him a lot of work to pull himself together and calm down at the sight of me, which hurts my heart.

“Yeah. I bet,” he says. “Your body is doing a lot of work. That’s gotta be burning so many calories.”

“Mmm,” I acknowledge. I sound a little bit like Yoda making that noise, so I cough and try it again and end up rumbling silently instead.

Dad takes a sharp breath and leans back, hands on the walls beside him. “Well, come on. Let’s go eat, OK?”

“Yeah,” I hack. Then whisper, “coming.”



I spend the rest of the day curled up on the sofa, alternatively lying on my front, my side, and my back, with the electric blanket covering me and turned all the way up. I’ve read the tag on it, and it’s not supposed to even be plugged in that long, let alone set that high for that long. But I do not care, and nothing happens.

Dad hangs out with me during the morning, while Mom and Travis are at church. And I let him talk about whatever he wants. Mostly it’s memories of his own childhood, and his relationship with his parents and siblings, which I do like hearing.

I remember when I was younger, he used to play with me a lot more. He was still very busy with his shop, but he’d take the time on the weekends to take me and Travis

to swimming lessons, or out to various parks, and to show us how to make balsa wood airplanes from little kits and fly them. When I was small enough, I used to ride around on his shoulders all the time, too.

Sometimes we'd drive into the city and go to one of the bay side parks there, and I'd climb around on the rocks, and we'd skip rocks, and lift up barnacle covered stones to see all the crabs underneath. Which we really shouldn't have been doing, because it hurts the crabs, Mom says.

Feeding bread to seagulls.

Eating at Wynn's Inn, and Venus Pizza.

Going to the big bookstore there, and hearing my dad critique their business practices and selection, and tell us all the differences between their clientele and ours. And also, what he thinks he's learning from what they're doing right.

He's said that they really weren't in competition. Not only were they in a different city, but also books and book readers aren't really a limited market. The more readers that that bookstore could drum up through their advertising, the more book readers there'd be for his business as well. And visa versa. He says that's why he's part of the Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Association, because all the bookstores can work to help each other, and it raises the rate of literacy in the area.

That's an old story in our family, but I like hearing it again whenever he says it.

I also used to spend more time in the back of his shop, reading after school. I guess I stopped doing that as much when I made enough friends to terrorize the neighborhood with, for our games of tag and hide and seek. Or walking around and planning our role playing games.

And, yeah, he did similar things with his Dad. But, also, he had three brothers, and they would get into all sorts of shit when no one was looking.

“When you got older,” he says, at one point, “I figured it was good that you were getting more independent. I didn’t want to take that from you, you know? And Travis liked the extra attention we could give him. Being a younger brother is kinda hard, you know.”

“Mmm.”

“This has *got* to be so scary for you.” I’m not looking at him, but I hear him choke down something, and move his arm a bit. It sounds like he’s rubbing his face. “I mean, I don’t even know.” Another pause for that. “They don’t give anybody a user manual for a kid, you know. I’ve said that before. But *this*?”

God, I want to cry so bad right now. But all I can do is stare at the couch cushion that’s pressed up against my nictitating membranes that are covering my eyes (Indigo told me what those are after the movie last night). I can also rumble, but that doesn’t feel friendly to me. Instead, I manage to make a weird clicking noise in my throat, in a place that’s just below my voice box, which isn’t working right anymore. *That’s* pretty sad sounding.

I feel Dad’s hand press on the middle of my back, between my shoulder blades, and then he starts to rub me back and forth. Which feels *good*. Then he moves his hand further down my back, as I rattle some more, and his hand hits a spot that’s been aching a *lot* today. And stops.

I felt that.

He did too.

“What’s happening there?” he asks.

It felt almost like his hand caught on a couple of ribs sticking up above my spine. And, there are muscles

around those bumps that feel really sore. When he presses on one or the other, that ache shoots all the way around that side to my sternum.

I manage to make a sound that's a lot like, "Um."

"Those are kind of spade-like," he says. "With nubbins at the tops of them."

I press with my hands and lift up my head, to open my eyes completely. "Wings," I hiss.

"Jesus Christ, you're right," he hisses back. "Holy shit."

"Mom..." I try to remind him about bad words.

"That's supposed to be impossible," he whispers.

"It. All. Is," I rasp.

"Um," he says. "Your Mom says we should just be calling you K, now. Or, I guess, Kaye. Like the girl's name, not your initials. Is that... Is that something you really want?"

Oh, fuck. I can't take this right now. It chokes *me* up so much, and I already have a hard time talking. So, slowly, creaking, aching, and stretching, I roll to flop on my side, so that I can at least look at him.

He tilts his head, and I can see his face is full of tears. I don't think I've really seen my dad cry before, and it scares me. But also, I feel good for him. He *should* cry more, I think. Then it'd be less scary.

"Um," I gulp. Then I tuck my chin to look at the computer. I could sit sideways on the chair and type on that. Just right into the DOS prompt.

Dad watches me as I try to get up to go over there to do that. Then, when it's obvious I'm having a lot of trouble, and he figures out what I'm doing, he gets up to help me.

We fire the thing up and wait for it to go through the boot sequence and auto.bat file before it displays the blinking cursor that means we can give it commands.

Then I type:

C:> I don't know. I'm your daughter, even as a monster. But Kaye isn't a dragon name.

I pause a while before typing 'daughter', though. Also before 'monster' and 'dragon'. By then, he's got the gist of what I'm saying. But he doesn't say anything.

Then I look at him.

"Um," he says. "What's a, uh, good dragon name?"

I shrug.

I don't want a name like what's in *Dragon Riders of Pern*. Those are good names, but they don't feel like my kind of dragon. And most other dragons in any of the books I've read have been male. The ones that were female didn't *have* names.

I sort of laugh. Sorsha would be pretty fun. That name's kind of draconic. But it feels like I wouldn't be taken seriously if I asked to be named that.

Ooh, wait. There's Taimat! But, in D&D, she's evil. And a Babylonian goddess, and I don't want to claim to be her.

Not able to think of anything else, I give up and turn back to the computer to delete what I just wrote and type out the best of what I've got.

C:> Sorsha?

Dad bites his lip. Then he looks at me. I'm careful not to make eye contact when he does that. I kind of wonder how he can even look at my face.

"You know?" he says. "There's a better spelling of that. Or, well, it's kind of confusing, because it's Irish, but it looks cool, too. And it would make your name different from that character's officially."

Then he reaches past me and deletes the name and types in his suggestion.

C:> Saoirse

Then he smirks through a couple of tears and then asks, “But are you sure you don’t want to be called Scorcha?”

*Now*, I rumble. Which he feels, because he’s got his hand on the back of the chair, and I’m leaning against that and his thumb.

He looks at me. “What did you just do? Did you just growl? I didn’t even *hear* that.”

I grin and nod.

“Have you been doing that this whole time?” he asks. “I mean, on and off. Like last night?”

I bite my lip and nod again.

“Wow.” He looks me up and down. “You’ve gotta try that next time you’re in a bath, or swimming. I bet you’ll make the water dance.”

I delete the name I think I’m going to actually go with, if I can’t think of anything better, and then type.

C:> Am I ever going to go swimming again?

He reads that and then studies me for a while.

“Saoirse?” he asks.

*Dammit*. I nod.

“Can anybody *stop* you from swimming, if that’s what you want to do?”



There’s a M\*A\*S\*H marathon on TV by the time Mom gets home, so she joins me in the rec room to watch that with me. I lie on my back for the most of that, occasionally working my wing nubs by pressing my torso side to side.

It hurts, but in a good way.

Eventually, we're all in there, with Mom and Dad on the love seat together, and Travis playing with Legos on the floor. And, you know? I was never done playing with Legos myself, and I've still got quite the collection, but I'm in no shape for it today.

My laughter sounds really weird, if I let it be loud. So, whenever I find something funny on the show, I silently snort through my nose instead. It's not nearly as satisfying, but I'm *so* exhausted.

At some point, I feel moved to talk, though. During a commercial, of course. All I can say is, "No. Attic."

Mom looks at me with a line between her brows, and Dad tilts his head.

"What?" Travis asks.

I push myself up onto my left haunch, to look at them more directly, then I point to myself, smirking, to let them know I'm joking. Then I make a play snarl and clench my claws a couple times. Then I point to myself and then up at where the attic would be.

"What are you getting at?" Mom asks.

"Oh, Kiddo," Dad says, putting the bridge of his nose in his fingers. "You're *not* our monster daughter."

"Am. Too," I tell him, then flop back down to watch the TV again.

"What in Heavens?" Mom asks.

"I think there's a Lovecraft or Derleth story about that," Dad tells her.

"Or Virginia Woolf," Mom scowls at him. "No, I know what you're talking about. It's a Victorian thing. And a feminist critique, when it's not written by men like that. But..."

I hold up both of my claws demonstrably and flex them over and over, like I'm threatening the ceiling, and I snicker monstrosly. It sounds like someone jiggling a garbage disposal switch, and it kind of feels like it, too.

"It's not funny, Sweetheart," Mom complains.

And she's right, because I'm never going to get to do girl things with her, like I actually realize I want to. I mean, she could still paint my talons, I suppose.

Then I point at the TV, because the commercials are over.

"Well. *I* want to be a monster," Travis says.



Oh, God. Oh, fuck. Oh, Hell. I cannot sleep. There is no sleeping for me.

All I can do is writhe on my bed in all different angles and poses, and rumble and hiss.

I've eaten so many eggs today. A lot of them raw, because I couldn't wait for my mom or Dad to cook them. And now my stomach is distended from them. But that's not what's uncomfortable. But it might be the cause of it. Because as everything progresses, I feel myself getting thinner and hungrier again.

When I feel myself make an aborted screech, I stop, eyes wide, breath quick, looking back and forth in my room. I can see a *lot* better than I should, though everything is sort of a grainy black and white.

I need to move back to the rec room, otherwise I'll wake my parents up.

Grabbing my electric blanket, which is currently unplugged, I lurch off the bed with a slapping thump.

Oh, wow, I've completely shredded my nightshirt. I'm just totally naked. And I feel my tail twisting back and forth in anxiety and the ache to stretch as much as possible.

*I think* I'm still vaguely humanoid.

Everything burns and hurts so much that I can't really tell where all my body parts are or what shape they're in, and I'm afraid to look.

But I find I have to crawl to my door, and my legs splay out to the sides and I use my feet more than my knees. When I step on a Lego, even if it's on scales instead of skin, it still hurts, too. But the rug in my room makes it work alright.

Climbing up to the doorknob is a thing. And the scales on the palms of my claws slide on the old metal when I try to turn it.

I'm being gentle. Partly out of pure clumsiness and lack of function, and partly because I don't want to break anything like I know I can do. But this pisses me off. It panics me. Because it means I'm stuck. Trapped.

So, I try again, but this time I grip that knob as hard as I can, and I dent it. Which gives me better traction, too.

I hang off the door as it swings open and fall on my side, hissing like an angry cat. A small and cute hiss compared to what I usually do, since I'm trying to be quiet, but it still sounds startling and threatening.

Then I roll to my stomach and push myself to facing the doorway, and scramble through it.

Moving rhythmically helps with the pain. And if I put my whole spine into it, wriggling side to side, that helps more.

But then, I'm in the hallway, on hard wood floor, and all four of my clawed limbs start sliding. I end up on my belly and struggling, pushing off the walls to move forward.

Really I'm just too weak, from pain and loose joints right now, to hold myself upright on a semi-slick surface. This shouldn't be as much of a problem as it is.

I'm, um.

My chin is flat against the floor, and so is my sternum, and my pelvis.

This is *not* a human posture.

"Kakch," I say to no one in particular.

I can get to the end of the hallway by pressing on the walls alone, but after that, I need to stand up.

And, oh, dammit. I wasn't able to hold onto the electric blanket. But, I don't think I'm going to be able to plug that in, anyway.

Shit. I think I'm stuck.

I stare across the floor, still and aching, for a while, trying to think about this. But the pain starts to flare again, and it ramps up like someone's holding the up button on the thermostat and the number's just climbing.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!

I'm wriggling, writhing, waving back and forth, swinging my limbs with the motions. At first, it's just random, trying to move to keep the pain from getting worse. But then I regain enough awareness to notice that whenever I move in a particular way, I slide forward a little bit.

So I repeat that movement.

Over and over, I repeat it, trying little variations to make it better if I can.

And I'm still mostly sliding in place, but I *am* making progress.

When I hit the metal strip between the wooden floor and the linoleum of the kitchen, I move faster over it. My belly itself catches on it, under the edge of each scute.

Oh, shit, I'm *slithering!*

Unfortunately, this is like sprinting across the field at school, and I exhaust myself pretty quick. And I have to rest.

On the other hand, my stomach is still full of partially digested egg, and my mom is thoughtfully keeping the house warm, even though it's Spring. So, I don't have to rest long. I just fall still and focus on breathing through the mounting pain until I just have to move again. And then I furiously slither forward some more.

It's so tedious. And hilarious. And stupid. And it's all I can do.

Slither, scrabbling with claws and scales, making soft noises in the night. Then rest. Slither some more, frantically. Then rest. Again. And again.

And in this way, I make my way into the rec room. Thankfully, the door to that room has been left ajar, and I can just push it open.

And then, once I'm on that fake wood floor that my mom *hates*, I vindictively try to dig in my claws, and it works.

In a mad rush, I climb up onto the sofa in one go. I work so hard on it that I end up climbing up the back, too, and knock my nose against the glass of the window there.

The blinds aren't completely down, but they're not completely drawn up, either. There's about a foot of space where I can look out at the moonlit night, at the streetlight on the corner. And I'm just in time to see a family of

raccoons hunching across the street toward someone's trash.

OK. *Now* I can probably make some noise if I have to.



I have to admit, I've never really believed in God or Jesus. I cuss with their names all the time, because everyone does, and it feels good. But it's just that, no matter what the Sunday school teachers said to me, I couldn't make their existence make any sense. They're extraneous to me. Like somebody else's idea.

There are some pretty good stories in the bible, which our pastor tells. The Sunday school teachers do not seem to know them, though. They know all the dumb ones. And some of the morals our pastor talks about seem like good ones.

But, I've always felt like fairness and kindness were the best doctrines, and that they were self-evident.

And, yeah, I really want to be extremely violent sometimes. But, I feel like I have good reason for that. And I still am mostly able to restrain myself.

So, I've felt like I've had no need for deities. Other than, it might be nice to talk to some higher power.

Except that I was born to agony and perpetual discomfort. And any god that was in charge of making that happen is not worth talking to.

Well. Now I've actually talked to a god of some sort. A higher power. And I don't know what it is, other than it felt feminine to me, and that it started... all of this.

And though I'm currently in *worse* agony before, I'm not sure I hold her responsible for that.

It's just existence.

And I'm angry at existence.

And I'm going to defeat it. I'm going to make it mine.

Finally.

And like how the relief from the torment of my previous genitals made me feel OK, even in the middle of my other pain, when this transformation is over I'm going to feel *so* amazing.

There are a lot of people in the world that would label me a demon, and proof that evil exists. And they'll try to kill me.

Fuck them.

They don't count in this equation for shit.

They. Do. Not. Matter.

But I do realize that I'm profoundly lucky that my parents aren't among them. Otherwise, I'd be dead already.



I guess I do fall asleep eventually, because I'm woken up by the phone ringing.

I don't move, though. I just listen.

I'm in sort of a weird, awkward position that feels really good, though. My hind quarters are up on the back of the sofa, my tail curled up against the window pane, for all the world to see that there's a weird fat-tailed lizard in this house. And my head is down on the seat cushions,

with my foreclaws on either side of what I guess is the beginnings of my snout. My left leg is hanging down the back cushions of the couch, almost touching the seat. My right one is stretched across the back on the other side. It's kind of a sploot, I guess.

The phone rings and rings. But before it goes to our answering machine, my mom picks it up.

"Hello?" she asks in a groggy voice. "Michaelson residence."

There's a long pause. She's listening to some kind of length explanation, or news, or something.

And then she breaks out in the most desperately, ironically hysterical laughter I've ever heard from her.

When she calms down from that, she pauses as if to listen to whatever is being said in response to that, but then she clearly butts in with impatience. "No. I'm sorry he's dead. Keith Michaelson *died*, thank you very much." And I feel my stomach clench again, and my blood pressure drop. Then she says, "And good riddance, you know? He was a miserable kid, and I know he's so much happier now. So, you know, you can just put that in your record, OK?"

There's another brief pause as she listens to the response to *that*. And I think, you know, I can live with that explanation. Keith didn't ever really exist, anyway, and I'm definitely way happier now that I'm not trying to be him. *I* didn't die. I'm *not* dying now, even though I still kinda feel like I might be. And hearing that, I know I really am happier at the moment.

*So* happy, in fact.

And the *idea* of Keith definitely has died, from the sound of it.

“Uh-uh. No,” Mom says. “I don’t have time for that. I have two other children I need to take care of, and I’m too busy to get you a death certificate. I don’t need to prove anything to you. You can just come over and see that he’s not here anymore.” Pause. “In fact, I *dare* you.”

And then she hangs up and starts giggling.

After her fit dies down, she starts walking across the kitchen toward where I am, and I hear her say, “K, darling? Saoirse?” Then a little more to herself, “Saoirse is a really pretty name.” Then louder again, “I really shouldn’t have said that, Saoirse, I know. But—”

And then I see her step into view and behold me.

“Oh, *wow*.”

I shift my head and look forlornly at the computer. Though, I don’t think she can read my expression. It doesn’t matter. I cannot type right now. Maybe someday later, but definitely not now.

“You... You have *horns*?” she says. “And little tiny wings? And that *cannot* be comfortable. You poor thing!”

I stick my tongue out and then draw it back in to get a whole bouquet of scents. Her hand cream, and hints of yesterday’s dose of perfume. The dried fruit projects she filled the pantry with last fall. Black mold that’s somewhere in the house. Laundry soap. The lingering body odors of everyone in the house, including my old human self. Freon from the chest freezer my mom is standing next too, and some of the stale, freezer burned food that’s inside it. Or the ice that’s taken on that smell.

I turn my head back to her and do that again, and get a kind of visual in my head of where each of the scents is coming from, directionally. It’s not perfect, but I think the mold is in the wall behind me, or on the window sill.

Mom sweeps forward and turns to carefully settle down on the couch cushion next to me. She's got her bathrobe and pajama pants on again, because I wasn't using them anymore by the time I went to bed last night. And she pats her lap.

"Come on over her, Saoirse. Climb on up on my lap. At least the front half of you," she beckons me. "You've still got some shedding left to do. Let me pick at it."

Maybe a couple days ago, maybe even yesterday, I'd tell her that she's at fault for this, and that she doesn't get to enjoy it at all. I was that angry with her, and I think I always kind of have been.

But that chicken has flown the coop completely and been eaten by a coyote. So there's no putting it back.

There's literally *nothing* I can say.

And having her help with my shedding sounds really good right now.

And, also, I don't care anymore.

All the things that people did to me. All the misunderstandings, the bullying, the cruelty, the slights, the dismissals, the pointless punishments, the yelling and yelling and yelling, the homework. None of it matters anymore. It can't touch me.

And this is all the justice I need for myself.

I'm not done changing yet, and I'm sure neither is she, but I can admit when I love my Mom, and why.

So, yeah, I carefully, slowly shift my position and climb onto her lap, to lay my chest across her legs, and close my nictitating membranes.

And then she starts gently scratching parts of my head, neck, and back, and peeling old, dead skin away. What's left of it.

This can be girl time, too.

## Chapter 10 - How to shed the fuzz

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN to be a girl and a dragon?

Not just a female dragon, but a female dragon who is also a *girl*.

I've been learning that, I think.

It's pretty arbitrary, though, and really personal, because I see my brother doing things that people would normally attribute to girls. But he's definitely not a girl. He's always been really, really kind to animals, for instance. Also, he loves strawberries. And I've only recently developed a taste for them.

So, it's not stuff, like, what you do. It's more why you do it. And how you think about yourself as you experience the consequences of what you do.

Like, my mom has always said that part of the whole point of feminism is to point out that women and girls can do anything that men and boys can do. Which is true! And since it's true, then we're not defined by what we do. Not even by the toys we play with, or clothes we wear.

So, the fact that I don't wear any clothes now doesn't mean anything other than that clothes just don't fit me anymore.

And just because my brother now sees me as a big animal that he can cuddle with doesn't mean he's not a boy. Boys can totally be good with animals.

Usually how that works, though, is that I curl up on the floor, and then he sort of uses me like a beanbag chair while he plays with his Legos or watches TV. Or both. And I like it. It helps keep me warm, and *not* fighting with him is a pretty good deal.

As for body parts and stuff like that, I have to admit something. I don't actually know if I'm a female dragon. Nobody does. I just feel like I probably am, like it was part of the deal. We'll either have to take me to a veterinarian who specializes in lizards for an exam and hope that what they know is relevant, or just wait to see if I lay an egg someday.

And, being a dragon, when I tell people I'm a girl, nobody wants to argue with me about it.

Not that I can *tell* them anything. I completely lost the ability to talk last Sunday. But I can still type and write. And I can nod and shake my head, and make other gestures. Writing is probably the easiest, if I can get something I can make scratches in with my claw. But I'm getting better at typing again.

By Noon that Monday, my changes had slowed down again, and I could stand up and manipulate things with my fingers. If these things can be called fingers.

Anyway, I'm basically saying that, given all of that, what makes me a girl is that I say (or write) that I am. And when someone says something about girls, I feel like it applies to me. That's really all I'm left with.

Boys are just those other people, to me, anymore. They can be my brother, my friends, my former classmates, my

bullies, whatever. And I still like playing with them, or hanging out with them. When they're cool about it.

Honestly, now that I think about it, that's how I've always felt. Even when I just assumed I was a boy, I didn't really feel like I was one of them. I felt like a visitor who was being given a tour of boyhood by some of the nicer guys in class.

Well. So, now, the thing about not being able to talk is that it forces me to spend more time just thinking about things. Things I might want to write, when I can.

So I kinda figured all of this out while I've been trying to work out how to live with my family as what I am now.

Dad's daydreaming about making a big keyboard for me, to make it easier for me to type. Like, a mat on the floor. Though, from the sound of it, it's going to be made from wood, and circuit boards, or something. He's saying that he could do a prototype out of cardboard.

Um, and I've been pooping in the woods behind our house, usually. I mean, it's only been a couple of days, but there really isn't much else I can do until Mom finds a litter box that's big enough. And she's probably putting that off, because someone will have to scoop it.

Oh, and I've seen my reflection in the glass of the sliding back door.

I know I'm not done changing. My wings have a long way to go before they're useful, or even look like wings. My head still looks vaguely human, but you can see where it's going, and it's a little further along every day. There are nubbins of horns sprouting from the back of my skull. I've still got human shoulders, but my hips are way different now. And my tail is only as long as my thigh, yet.

But it looks like I'm headed toward something that looks like a tiger striped Komodo dragon with wings and

some kind of horns. Some of my stripes look more like they came out of a book about dinosaurs, especially the ones along my limbs, snout, and tail.

Oh, and my tongue is black and pointy, and I've already got a little divot in my lips where I can stick it out without opening my mouth much.

Even though I'm definitively stuck on all fours now, or slithering on my belly if I want to, it's obvious I've got more growth spurts ahead of me. So I've spent the last couple of nights sleeping on the sofa in the rec room, in case that happens and I gotta scream in my sleep about it.

Anyway, the pooping outside means I do get out of the house. But I stick to the backyard and the woods and do my best to stay out of sight. And, as long as the back door is unlocked, I can work it myself.

It's better to go at night, but I can't always control that.

Which is why, at 10:30 on Wednesday morning, with Mom taking the day off to care for me, I'm out in a spot between my Mom's flower bed and the woods, where some bushes are hiding me from the road and the next door neighbors.

You know how when cats poop, it looks like they're just sitting there looking around? Especially if their back end is obscured by something, like the edge of a litter box or a clump of weeds. And the only thing that indicates that they're doing their business is how still they are, and sort of an expression that's like they're thinking about something, but not too hard.

I'm pretty sure it looks like that with me.

I am keeping an eye and an ear out for anyone who might be in danger of spotting me.

And I am thinking about how my friends visited me yesterday after school.

They ended up conversing more with my mom than with me, but we did spend some time around the computer so I could type. I climb up on the office chair backward to do that, resting my chin on the back of it. Mom puts a pillow on it to help, and someone has to hold it when I climb on.

But, anyway, Indigo informed me that the way my dad suggested to spell my name is actually pronounced more like “Sear-shuh”, and that it means “freedom”.

I let Mom know that’s what I want to be called. I don’t know how much Irish our family has, but being named the Gaelic word for freedom feels right. And, to me, it feels truly draconic.

Mom’s currently out front, tending to the plant beds out there. Weeding, I think. She doesn’t know I let myself out to poop, but we have a tentative understanding about that, and I’m pretty sure she’s using her gardening time to look out for me in case I am out here. Or, also to knock on the side of the house to warn me to stay away from the windows, if I’m inside.

It’s a good system, so far, but there’s only so much for her to do out front. Most of her garden is in the back.

So, it’s when I’m just about done and wishing I could find a better way to wipe than dragging my butt across part of the lawn, when I hear her knock. Just before a quiet car pulls into the front driveway.

Not so quiet I don’t hear the crunch of tires and then the sound of two of its doors opening and closing.

I freeze and listen carefully.

Unlike a normal lizard, my hearing is better than a human’s. My ears have become parabolic, though they’re also developing three points, which is neat.

A man's voice asks, "Are you Mrs. Cassandra Michaelson?"

"Yes, officer," my mom says. "What's going on?"

"One of your neighbors has reported sighting a large animal on your property. One that may be an endangered species that is not indigenous to the area," the policeman says. "You wouldn't happen to be aware of its presence, would you?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, officer," Mom says. Her voice is strained and she's talking a bit louder than she needs to. "Could you describe it?"

"May we have a look around your property, Ma'am?" he asks instead of answering, obviously deciding she's hiding something. Me. And he's right. "It won't take more than a few moments, and then we'll be out of your hair."

"I'm not—" Mom stammers.

"We're just doing our job, Ma'am," he says, his voice ever so friendly. "We'll be quick about it, and we'll mind your flowers."

I can hear someone already walking back across the driveway.

My instinct here is shitty and a bad idea. I know that the best thing to do is try to get inside and go hide in my room. But my body wants me to chase these strange predators clear out of my territory. Or to kill and eat them.

Which is why I'm frozen in my spot with visions of bloody meat and yummy entrails filling my mind.

I haven't actually experienced doing anything like that, yet, but my brain now knows what it wants.

"I'd really rather you didn't," my mom says, still kinda loud.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. Asking you is just a courtesy,” the officer tells her, still with a mild enough voice. “I’m sure it’s nothing. But we are going to have a look around.”

“Don’t you need a warrant?”

“To enter your house, yes. But I’m sure we won’t need to,” again with his calm reassurances, even though he’s forcing the issue and his partner is already on the grass, about to come around the side of the house. “We’re authorized to give your property a cursory inspection. So, if you’ll just stay right here, we’ll be done in a moment.”

I gotta move.

Wait, there is a hiding place I can get to. If I go into the house now, they’ll hear me at least, if not just catch me struggling with the door. It usually takes a few moments to open it. And to hide quickly enough, I might need to leave it open. That’ll incriminate my parents.

Not that I’m an illegal thing. This is my home. I grew up here. I was enrolled in school. I might still be!

But, if...

I turn and dash into the woods, keeping my pathetic winglets held tight against my back. And, I deliberately make noise. Not that I can really help that.

Rushing to the path means tearing through some brush. The nettles still sting, but not as bad as they used to. Maybe it’s just that I’m already still in more pain than that, and I’ve felt much worse now. Maybe I’m just not as vulnerable to them.

But then, once I’m on the trail, my stance is too wide to not disturb things or at least brush more than a few twigs and leaves.

But that’s OK.

This feels a little like playing ninja spies with paper throwing stars in the woods with Jeffrey, Indigo, and

Heath, like we used to do in third grade. And my thinking is if the police decide I've just been hiding in the woods, that gets my parents off the hook. And, they're still going to have a heck of a time reaching me.

Yep, as I reach the top of the steep part, I hear boots quickly tacking across the back driveway, around the family van.

"I've got movement in the back woods behind the property," a woman's voice mutters. "Sounds like a large animal. Over"

"Copy. I'm coming around the other way. Over," is the response.

Mom's gotta be terrified now.

I decide to slide down the muddy path on my belly, using my limbs as oars. It's actually way more fun than it should be for the situation, and I want to do it again.

It takes almost no effort to keep sliding and make my way into the brambled hollow. It's not really quite slithering, but it's a very similar movement, my scutes acting like a sled, and it's mostly my momentum that carries me. I just push the last few feet with my claws.

As soon as I come around that corner, though, I see a pair of muddy shoes in there, and they've got a pair of crusty, mud stained jeans above them, with legs in them, that belong to a bearded man in a grey T-shirt and some kind of jacket.

I'm startled enough that I hiss before I can get control of myself. Which certainly doesn't help him manage his reaction.

He's screaming and shouting, and leaping up in the air, limbs flailing, and then falling on his ass with a nasty thump and scooting back across the muddy moss, scraping up rolled divots with the heels of his shoes.

“Ah! Fuck! Don’t eat me! Don’t eat me! Don’t eat me!”

I want to be in here. I don’t want to scare him, actually. I don’t want him to try to hurt me. And I want to let him get away. So there’s really only one thing for me to do.

I clamp down on my urge to hiss more as he yells and kicks in my direction, and then I stand up and crawl into the space and circle to the right, keeping my distance from him, watching him in the chest. No eye contact.

“Oh shit! Fuck! Get away!”

I mean, this means I do get closer to him. But, in a counter-clockwise fashion, which urges him to scootch and scramble to his right, to keep his distance. I make meaningful glances at the entrance to the hollow as I go, and keep stalking slowly around.

“God! What? Fuck! Jesus! Holy shit! What the fuck?”

In this way, we eventually end up trading places, so that his back is to the tunneled path through which we both came. And that’s where I stop, with my left side still facing him, looking past my shoulder at him. And then I tilt my head in what I hope is a quizzical expression, and wait.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck...”

It takes him more than a moment to realize he can escape now, but it does eventually hit him.

I wonder what he’s going to tell his friends about this, as I watch him crabwalk backwards out of the clearing. And then I settle down on my belly in an undignified and very dismissive sploot, sticking my tongue out briefly to emphasize how relaxed and blasé I am. Which works to help him relaxed enough to flip over to his front and scramble the rest of the way out on his hands and knees and start running once he can get upright. But, it’s a mistake in another way.

When my tongue enters my mouth again, my head is filled with the acrid odor of some weird and nasty kind of smoke. It's sulfury and strange, with hints of old dried moss in the summer, stale incense, and mustiness. I realize I noticed the smell before, through my nose, but now it's too strong to ignore. My throat is instantly irritated with my next breath.

Before anything else happens, as I'm calming down from this encounter, I notice there's an ornate glass bauble on the ground not far from where the guy was standing. It's like if someone took an extra large marble and stretched it out to look kind of like a bone of some sort. And next to it is a chipped plastic lighter.

I fail to resist the urge to turn my head further to the side and taste the air again. And I regret it even more.

I missed the D.A.R.E. program by two years, but I'm pretty sure this is a weed pipe. I know that Heath and Jeffrey both agreed that this place was probably popular with pot smokers.

Well, *known*, at least. Again, I'd never encountered anyone in here until just today, despite litter indicating that was a fluke. After a while, we all just got used to seeing it down here and assuming we'd never see a person. Just, using the place at different times of day.

Well, it is the morning of a school day, so yeah, actually. Huh.

The female cop's voice comes down from above. "That yelling was a vagrant. Scared by some kind of animal, I think. I also have distinctive animal tracks. It looks like it was headed downhill toward Jefferson street. Over."

"Copy," the reply is audible and only a little scratchy. "Stay right where you are and keep an eye out for it. I'm

bringing the cruiser around. If it approaches you, keep your distance. Over.”

“Roger that. We should call in a request to animal control. Over.”

“Roger. On it. Over.”

Um. No, thank you.

I stand up.

I make that sound like I’m calm and reacting rationally. But it’s pure sarcastic panic.

The problem is, I don’t know what to do. I feel the need to leave. But I’m surrounded by open and mostly coverless suburb, once I leave these woods. And in the middle of the day. And also, I have no stamina. I’m good at ambushes, but I can’t run forever, or very long at all.

However, if I stay here, they’ll eventually start cutting down the brambles to get to me. And there’ll be even more people here with equipment designed specifically for dealing with things that are at least kind of like dragons. And experience and skills I *do not* have.

And, already there are guns.

I could try to hope that my mom will think of something to get me out of this, but I honestly can’t imagine what that’d be. Like, what? Will she drive up in the van, door wide open, and shout for me to get in? And then we’d be in a car chase.

I’m standing stock still as I think about this, only moving my head occasionally to track any movement I detect. A bird here. A car passing by in the distance there. Tree branches waving in the breeze. I look southwest, through the wall of brambles.

I don’t *have* to follow the paths.

I could just burrow around in the thickest of the brush, constantly moving away from my pursuers.

They'd still eventually corner me, probably, though. Shit. It's the best I've got.

I dive into the blackberries, letting the thorns scratch across my hide. And it turns out that doesn't bother me much.

"It's on the move. Possibly headed south. Over"

Oh, dammit. I'm forgetting something really important. Something I'm very good at doing. And while there are only two people here, it's the best time to take advantage of it.

Amidst the brambles, I turn toward the officer that's in the woods, uphill from me, and start stalking directly towards her, climbing the slope.

The blackberry vines are thick and fresh and green, so it takes considerable force to push them aside and make room for something my size. But, I'm also *very* strong. I don't really know just how strong, except that this feels like walking through particularly itchy grass. And with the thorns catching on each other and then breaking loose, I'm making a horrific and constant tearing noise. Claws digging into the ground to pull me upward, I don't slow. But I also don't go fast. I'm not exactly trying to make her run or, worse, shoot her gun.

I want her in eyesight, horrified maybe, but also curious, when I emerge at the top.

"It's now headed right for me, coming up the hill. Jesus, it's big. Over."

"Copy. Stand your ground, but keep your distance. It's an animal. Shout at it, if you have to. Issue orders. Try to scare it back down here. Over."

"Roger. Over," she responds. Then she shouts at me, "Alright, you monster! I see you! You're not scaring me, you hear that?"

She does sound a little scared, though, actually.

I keep moving.

Her partner radios, "I'm in position. Let's try to keep this thing pinned until animal control gets here. Over."

"Roger. I'm doing my best, but it's not listening to me. Over."

"Just keep trying. Over."

Taking a couple of audible steps backward, she shouts at me some more. "Stay right where you are! You are under arrest!"

Shit, this kind of panic might lead to her pulling her gun. I don't have quite a good enough view of her. She might already have it drawn.

I've never wished I could talk more than I do now.

Would it be better to make coughing or hissing dragon noises? Or should I continue to silently get into position? Mm. Maybe if I go sideways a bit, so I'm not coming directly at her.

I try that.

"It's circling me. Over."

"Copy. Over."

Under her breath, "Dammit, Brad." Then at me, "I need you to get down on the ground and put your paws... claws? Put your mitts on your head! Can you do that?"

Actually, yes, I can. I'm *more* flexible than I was before in a lot of ways. But I'm not going to. On the other hand, what if I did start following her orders? What would she think? Still not going to do it, though. There's gotta be some way I can communicate with her, to let her know that I understand English perfectly fine and that I can *think* in it.

Oh, ho, ho! I've got it.

I do wonder what Mom's up to now, though. If I were her, I think I'd be at a complete loss. Maybe just standing and watching in horror and hope. But she really could be doing the van thing. I don't hear it yet, though.

It really doesn't take me all that much longer to get into position, and as I do, it is obvious that the female officer whose name I haven't learned yet is, indeed, holding her gun in both hands, with it pointed in my direction.

When I see that, I freeze. Mostly.

I move my head just enough to try to stare her right in the eyes. This is the furthest distance I've tried this, though, and there are vines and leaves between me and her. I don't know if she can see me very clearly.

She doesn't move from where she's at. Her gun remains pointed right at me. But I can't tell if she's frozen in place, or just being patient.

I can't really move my head to one side or the other, to see if she'll sway, or the leaves will get in the way and break our eye contact. So, all I can do is wait to see if she'll radio her partner out of lack of patience.

"Officer Grey. Do you copy? Over," Brad radios her.

She doesn't move.

*Perfect.*

Tentatively, I start shifting position, snaking my neck and body to push my head straight forward as I reorient the rest of myself. In this way, I end up stepping out onto that muddy path, eyes locked on hers.

"Officer Grey. Repeat. Do you copy? Over."

I can write OK enough without looking. But I can't do it upside-down that way. And, it'll be better if I keep it simple. It doesn't really matter if it's upside-down to her, anyway. She should be able to recognize what I have in mind.

I want to tell her to fuck off. But something more cunning and spooky, and much simpler has inspired me.

I walk up to her until I'm about two yards away, that way, when I leave, neither of us is likely to step on what I create.

And then, without looking down, I start dragging my right index claw in the mud, as deep as I can shove it, to make nice big furrows. And I draw an arrow pointed right at her, with the letters "GREY" at the base of it.

I've just labeled her with her name.

That should freak the shit out of her once she or her partner sees it.

Now what?

How do I get away?

"Deedee! Repeat! Do. You. Copy? What's wrong? Over!"

Experimentally, I step to the side a couple of paces, maintaining that ever important eye contact. But not only does she turn her head to follow, she turns her whole body, twisting at her waist, and keeping the gun pointed at me as well.

That's *not* good. And if I keep going, a tree trunk will pass between us.

OK. Um...

Repeating to myself in my mind that I'm going to get shot, I go for a possibly worse idea. But maybe she'll be too confused to pull the trigger. It's really the only thing I can think to do.

I move back and position myself right behind where I drew her initials, at the base of the arrow. And then I slowly crouch down so that my head is as close to the ground there as possible, so that when I do break eye contact, she'll be looking down at the letters.

And then I wait for a bit longer.

“Dammit. Stay where you are. I’m on my way. Over,”  
Brad radios.

One.

Two.

I look down at the letters that are right in front of my snout.

“What the...” Deedee blurts, and then there’s a huge explosion, and my right shoulder goes numb.



The next thing I know, I’m tearing through the trees, with a road in front of me, and I don’t know which direction I’m going, and I’m *not limping*.

I don’t hear much except muffled voices and a constant ringing. I can’t even hear myself crashing through the brush. The whole neighborhood seems to have gone quiet, and my head feels like it’s stuffed with fluff.

For a brief moment, this reduction in what I can sense allows me to notice just how I’m running. I’m diving forward with my foreclaws outstretched, grabbing the ground with both of them, pulling, and bringing my rear claws up to take over, and then springing forward. I’m *galloping*.

I hear a gunshot behind me, but I’m pretty sure it doesn’t hit me.

It’s when I’m halfway across the road and flying toward a neighbor’s driveway that I realize that the big explosion had also been a gunshot, and I *had* been hit.

*Jesus. I've been shot!*

And I'm running like it's nothing!

I have just enough energy to make it around to the other side of the neighbor's house if I want to. But now I'm amazed. I'm flabbergasted. And I'm really super curious.

Instead, I bound around the pickup that's in the driveway, to give me some cover while I conserve my energy. And I come to a halt there, in front of it. So that I can twist my head and neck to see if I can get a view of my right shoulder.

I'm not quite *that* flexible. My neck isn't all that long, even if it's shaped different now. But I definitely do not see blood trickling down my arm. Or, foreleg.

I lift that leg up and wave it in a rotation, clockwise and then counterclockwise.

I'm sure that the cops are doing something to arrange pursuit and try to corner me, but I still can't hear them. And, I'm thinking it might not matter.

The numbness in my shoulder is starting to wear off, and it *stings*. Not a burning, tearing feeling. Not a deep, piercing pain. Just a surface sting with an ache under it. And I'm not entirely sure how this works, but I think if the bullet had gone into my shoulder, especially at that range, I shouldn't be able to move my limb at all. Let alone rotate it like that.

I'm once again feeling like I'm in a dream. It's been awhile, hilariously, but I'm thinking that this should *not* be possible. As if I'm not already impossible.

However.

This.

*This* changes things.

I look up at the sky and think about the day I might be able to take to it. To fly.

That's the day that the whole world will know that there's a real live dragon in it.

## Chapter 11 - Animal control

**W**HEN BRAD BRINGS THE cruiser back up Tinker street to meet Deedee there, and to observe where I've gone, I imagine that Deedee, gun in one hand, motions for him to stop with her other.

She's already shot me two more times, much to my serious irritation.

It *really* hurts my ears.

I, however, am not looking at either of them. Instead, I'm taking the time to write in the gravel of the neighbor's driveway. I'm just about done, and I'm sure that the two of them, and maybe my Mom, too, are watching in wonder.

Mom must be amazed and thankful that I'm still alive. But if she's watching she also knows exactly what I'm doing. She's seen me do it in a bare patch of one of her flower beds. But, I'm making the letters a lot bigger now. And there are more of them.

When I'm done, I walk to the right of the double line of writing, so that anyone bothering to read it will have to look at me when they're done. And then I turn to face the two officers, and look back at my handiwork.

I WILL NOT HURT ANYONE.  
LEAVE ME ALONE.

Checking to see if they're bothering to read, I do see them standing side by side in front of the driver's side wheel, their eyes moving over the text. Then I think of one more thing worth adding.

— SAOIRSE

"It kind of looks like a kid in a costume," Brad says after several seconds of bamboozled disbelief. I'm amazed I can hear him. His voice sounds bass and distant.

I cackle, which is probably a guttural clacking noise, and then whip my tail as I curl my body so that I can lick the last place that Deedee shot me, on my left haunch.

"It sure doesn't move like one, Brad," Deedee replies.

I'm mostly guessing at what she said. It's what I want her to have said. Unfortunately, the ringing in my ears is pretty much the same pitch as her voice.

Then, to emphasize that I am putting the ball squarely in their court, and that I really don't give a shit about either of them now, I splay my rear legs out to either side, plopping my ass on the ground. Propped upright by my forelimbs, I look between the two of them and tilt my head to the side like an expectant dog.

It's *not* human *nor* lizard behavior. But I am clearly and deliberately communicating something as intelligently as what I've just written.

*Your turn, assholes.*

Across the street and to my left, I see Mom stagger out from behind the van, an expression of shock on her tear stained face. Oh, I can actually see tears at this distance.

I lift up my left arm and wave at her with a single circular motion. Then I put it back down and look back at the two cops.

As Mom slowly stumbles down the road to approach the two police officers, looking between me and them, and

squinting at what I've written on the ground, a lemon custard colored van rolls down the street behind her.

There's words on the side of it, with a logo, but I'm not paying attention, and I can guess pretty much what it says. It's animal control. Whoever's in it pulls in line with the police cruiser to park, half a car length away from my Mom. And then they open the driver side door to stand and look over the windshield and hood at me.

They say something I can't hear, and Deedee looks at them.

And then she says something back.

I huff.

Mom speaks up, putting on a frown as she looks back and forth at the people around her.

Brad throws his hands up, and speaks loudly enough I can just hear his words, "Well, I sure as fuck don't know what to do."

I guess I might be feeling smug?

My overwhelming emotion is elation. Despite my absurdly relaxed posture, my heart is still beating so fast, and my whole body feels oxygenated. Buzzing with power.

Despite what are going to be nasty bruises where the three bullets hit me, I'm actually hurting less than I did the night before. And *much* less than early Sunday morning. But, it still is my whole body aching and burning. It's almost as if I can feel things continue to shift.

Anyway, I give up listening to Brad or trying to imagine what anyone else is saying, and just kind of look at the relatively clear sky as I wait for everyone but Mom to decide they might as well go away.

I do hope that Mom is continuing to deny anything to do with me. She doesn't need to admit I live with her,

let alone that I'm her daughter. And I think she's smart enough to keep those things to herself.

Unfortunately, Brad eventually leans into the cruiser to use the radio there, and it doesn't look like he's planning on getting in to drive away. And while he does this, Deedee takes it upon herself to direct traffic away from the scene, for drivers to go around the block to get to the other side.

But I'm not planning on just sitting around to wait for reinforcements. Or the press, which feels like a scary possibility now. So I lower my front half so that it's easier to draw in my rear legs and get my feet under me. Then I stand up. On all fours, of course.

Everyone freezes and looks at me expectantly.

I can't roll my eyes, so I roll my head in the same kind of expression. Then I walk casually up to Deedee, who is still holding her gun.

This causes her to back up away from me, into the fender of the cruiser. And then she raises her gun at me again.

In response, I turn my head to the side, to present my neck and shoulder to her, and protect at least one of my eyes. This also shows her the length of my horns, even if they're still really short. But I keep walking. For good measure, I close my nictitating membranes, but I don't think they'll help if she manages to land a bullet there.

Then I think the better of that and look her right in the eyes again, widening my eyes.

Yeah. That's better.

And everyone watches in horror as I trundle up to her and then, in a lightning strike, I snake my head to the side and turn it toward the barrel of the gun to deftly snatch it from her hands. Pulling it out of her startled fingers is as easy as swallowing eggs.

Then I drop the weapon on the ground and place my foot on it.

Looking back up at her face, I make a noise that's not unlike a cat chattering at birds from behind a living room window. I know it sounds like that, because I've made it before.

Then I turn toward the animal control guy and make the same noise.

This time I understand him when he says, "This is way above my pay grade." And watch as he gets back in his truck and starts backing the machine up.

Progress.

It's not long after that that Deedee and Brad climb into their cruiser and pull away as well, Brad saying something into his radio.

At which point I pick up Deedee's gun and carry it past a stunned Mom toward her garden, where I want her to bury it.



Mom spends most of the rest of the day crying over me, while I hide in my bedroom.

That was possibly the most surreal event in my life.

Reality is *not* supposed to jump the shark like that. And now I know that when it does, it tends to alter your entire self-image so sharply that your brain just doesn't know what to do with anything else for a while.

Ultimately, I need another conversation with my metaphysical mentor. Or is she a fairy godmother? I don't

know what. But, I can't put myself back into the right kind of sleep state to make it happen. If I ever even had any control over that.

All I can do is proceed through the rest of the day (and possibly the rest of my life) in a daze, waiting for things to make some kind of sense again.

And, of course, I have just enough free thought to have this nagging feeling that they're just going to be back again with more people and much bigger guns.

More of an of course, both Mom and Dad lecture me about what happened, after having a serious discussion between themselves. And I *can't* talk back. Nor do I want to. I'm too exhausted to do anything but agree with most of what they have to say. Even if I want to point out that I'm *bulletproof*.

They're scared.

My brother is scared, when he comes home and learns what happened.

And I'm scared for them.

My hearing is slowly returning. I understand about every third word.



It's about half an hour past his bedtime when Travis shouts in annoyance from the rec room, "Aw, this dragon *sucks!*"

Mom and Dad have decided that letting him calm himself down by playing King's Quest III is more important than cajoling him to go to bed on time tonight.

Which is a really unusual decision from either of them, but today was really unusual. And Travis has been having a rough time at school this week. He thinks it's not fair that I get to stay home and loaf around while he has to go to class and do homework still.

But, then, when he's home, he treats me like a weird dog.

Letting him play that game is also a way to get him out of my—well, I don't have *hair* anymore.

But now he's got my curiosity peaked. Peeked? I need to look up the right spelling of that somehow.

I get up from my spot next to the fireplace, glancing at Mom in her easy chair as I pass her.

"Maybe you can tell him it's time to wrap up and go to bed," she suggests, with a smirk to let me know she's joking.

I stick my tongue out at her.

Dad's outside, under the carport, working on something. I can see him in the porch light, through the sliding glass door. He's got a lot of nervous energy, after learning that I got shot at four times by a *police officer* and shrugged it off to take her gun from her. And working with his hands is probably helping him get his mind off of it. I wonder if he's making me that keyboard, or a litter box. Probably the latter, I imagine. At this stage, what I see could be either thing.

Travis clacking away at the keyboard in the dark of the rec room is almost as loud as my claws on the linoleum of the kitchen.

"Ugh! I hate this!"

"Hey, Trav?" Mom calls. "If you're getting frustrated, maybe it's time for bed!"

"No!"

He looks my direction before I turn the corner at the end of the dividing wall. And I flick my tongue at him, getting a strong whiff of familiar backroom pantry and laundry smells in the process. Also the fruit roll-ups that Travis is constantly eating.

“This dragon is *dumb*,” Travis tells me. “It has three heads, and it looks like a stupid cartoon. And I can’t figure it out.”

My ears are still ringing, but I can hear everyone fine now. But when I come up to sit next to him and look at the screen, it seems like the graphics are worse than they used to be. It’s like the video card is having a glitch and isn’t showing as many colors as it should.

But then I realize that Travis’ shirt looks the same way to me, too.

Most of the rest of the room is fading into that grainy black and white of my night vision, so it’s harder for me to notice anything weird there. But, this also doesn’t feel sudden. It’s more like the simplicity of the game graphics is making it obvious that something’s been going on with my vision for a while. Also, it’s been a while since I looked at this game, while I’ve been living in the world moment to moment.

I can’t quite figure out what colors I’m *not* seeing now, though. Just that certain things are the same color as each other when they weren’t before.

I huff, and give that dragon on the screen a good look.

Something is weird with Travis’ character. He’s got lines through him, and he’s flickering on the right side of the screen. On the left is a princess in a white dress, tied to a stake. And in the middle of the screen is this big, fat green hydra. It’s animated, but badly. Most of its

body is completely still, and only it's heads are moving, occasionally blowing fire.

"See?" Travis says. "Dragons don't look like that!"

I look at him and then back at the screen. I love him right now.

"Now watch," he says.

And he types words into the prompt at the bottom of the screen.

MIX POTION

The game responds with an error:

WHAT IS A MIX?

"I hate this!" Travis yells.

I get up and step back, so that I can look around.

We've had this game for a little over a year now. And Travis didn't start playing it until a few months ago. I know there's a manual that goes with it, and the manual is supposed to be important. But I never played it all the way through, myself. Dad was the first of us to beat it.

What I do understand is that you've gotta be precise about what you type. And Travis is probably too stressed to figure it out now. And I can't exactly reach over his shoulder and type it in for him. He'd have to give me the seat.

The manual might help.

But it's nowhere in sight.

I make an irritated clicking noise.

"I know, right?" Travis responds.

Maybe I can communicate that I need the chair now.

I'd like to use my teeth to grab it, but they're not done growing in.

Oh, yeah. Did I mention that my human teeth all fell out by Tuesday morning? With the way my skull and jaw have been changing, it was sort of inevitable. And I woke

up with most of them on the couch cushion around my head. But I think I swallowed a few of them, too. Mom put the ones we could find in a jar.

Anyway, I reposition myself behind Travis and to the side, and then reach up with my right foreclaw and pull on the metal support for the back of the chair. I do it slowly and gently, because I *could* do it fast and that would hurt him.

“What are you doing?” Travis shouts at me. “No, you stupid dragon. *I’m* playing this game. Leave me alone!”

“Children?” Mom calls from the living room. “When your Dad comes in from what he’s doing, you are *both* going to bed.”

*Fine.*

I pull the chair two yards out away from the computer, but Travis grabs the computer table with both hands, and hooks one foot around the base of the chair. With his other foot, he tries to keep traction on the ground, and tries to sit as heavily on the chair as possible, to prevent me from doing the inevitable.

The result is that both Travis and the computer table get pulled out from the wall, too.

“Dammit, Sorsha!” he shouts. He hasn’t got the memo about pronouncing my new name right. But it doesn’t bother me.

“Travis!” Mom shouts back at him from the living room. “Language!”

“But, Mom!” Travis complains.

We both hear her get out of her chair, with a crink and clunk of metal and wood. And then she calls as she starts walking back toward us, “I’m going to turn that thing off! You’d better settle down by the time I get back there!”

Panicked, Travis gets up from the chair in order to push the computer table back into place.

Which then allows me to push the back of the chair with my right claw, spinning it. And then to reach up with my left to stop it.

I think I can do this without help, if I concentrate.

If I keep my left forefoot on the top of the seat and push down, I can create enough friction to keep it in place as I reach for the top of the back with my right. And if I take it slow, I can adjust for any movement of the chair. It's not *really* the hardest thing in the world. It's just that my body hasn't really been working very well as it's been changing. But, after all my running about today, and even being shot, I feel more in tune with it. And doing something more calmly and carefully feels kind of good.

But, without the pillow that Mom has been providing me, it is a bit less comfortable, once I get up on it. On the other hand, I'm not as slow at it as it felt.

I manage to get my chin resting on the back, and my belly on the seat, just in time for Mom to enter the room to see what's going on.

Travis turns to her, and says, "It's OK! It's fine. She's just helping me beat that game. Right, Sorsha?"

"Well, it's good to see you two cooperating, then," Mom says, her tone of voice betraying just how little she believes that we're actually playing nice. Of course she knows full well that Travis has changed his behavior now that she's here.

I push myself up to the keyboard with my hind legs, reaching out from either side of the back cushion to steady myself on the table. Then I tilt my head to look down at the keyboard, and start to hunt and peck with my right claw.

## FIND THE MANUAL

I look at Travis.

“I don’t know where it is,” he cries.

As I delete those words, Mom says, “Calm down. There’s no need to yell. Did you look in the bookshelf, Travis?”

“Which one?” he asks.

Mom looks to the left of the computer table, to the shelves just under the window there, and points at them. They’re full of boxes of floppy disks, and the few games our dad actually bought. There are also some stacks of paper with printing on them that are bound together with plastic spirals. Maybe one or two of them are actual paperbacks. But they’re sparse, between all the other things.

“That’s not a bookshelf,” Travis complains. “That’s the *game* shelf.”

Mom rolls her eyes, and then bends down and reaches for one of the manuals that are on the game shelf. When she pulls it out, she flips it over and looks at it. Then she looks up at Travis with a sardonic, half apologetic smile. She then holds it out to him.

He huffs in exasperation and takes it.

I guess I missed it because the color on the spine looks wrong, or something.

But, while Travis is flipping through the book with a frown, slowly getting more frustrated again, I start trying to remember what Dad typed in to kill the dragon.

Ugh. Just another dragon that needs to be killed. Kinda hate this.

But, the words do mostly come to me.

STIR STORM BREW

But instead of hitting enter, I push back a little and nudge Travis' hip with the back of my forefoot.

"Oh!" he says. "I wanted to figure it out, Sorsha."

But he hits enter, and it throws an error:

**HOW CAN YOU DO THAT?**

"You didn't get it right, either," he sneers at me. "What am I supposed to do?"

Mom is just standing there, watching, but she asks, "What can you mix the storm brew *with*, Travis? What do you have in the game?"

"I don't know!" he whines. "I don't have a stick. Was I supposed to find a stick somewhere?"

*That* reminds me of what it is. I lift up my left forefoot and flex my claws. Then I curl all but my index claw to make a stirring motion with it.

"I don't have a claw," Travis says.

Both Mom and I look right at him in disbelief.

In response, he dramatically sighs, saying, "No, I get it."

And then he types in his best guess:

**STIR STORM BREW WITH FINGER**

To which, the game responds with, "OK," and then nothing happens.

The hydra keeps moving its heads and breathing gouts of flame. The princess keeps screaming. The hero keeps flickering, apparently invisible to the dragon.

"What am I supposed to do *now*?" my brother's voice is gaining a desperate edge to it.

"Here, give me the manual," Mom says. And then, she starts flipping through it.

As they proceed to argue about it, I start to carefully push myself off the chair, doing my best not to send it rolling into the computer table. And then I move to crawl up on the sofa, where I'm going to sleep.

From there, I watch.

Eventually, Mom figures it out, finding the entry in the manual for casting spells, and recites the words to Travis. And, though it takes him a couple moments to decide to even follow her instructions, he tries it out. And it works.

What an obnoxious game.

“Now, kiss your sister goodnight,” Mom says, smirking.

“Ew!” Travis blurts. But he does come over and pats me on the head. “Good night, Sorsha.” Then, to Mom, “Why doesn’t she have to brush her teeth?”

I open my mouth to display what’s there, but he’s not looking.

“Because they haven’t finished growing back in,” Mom tells him, putting her hand on the back of his shoulders and pushing him toward the exit of the room. “Now, go get ready for bed.”

“But Dad’s still outside!”

“Yes, but you are Mr. Crankypants. And I haven’t seen Mr. Crankypants since he was a toddler. It’s way past time for bed.”



It’s not long after that that Dad flicks the light on in the back and comes into the rec room with a shallow plywood box made from scraps he keeps outside leaning up against the house. It looks really nice, though. It’s about twice the size of a cat box.

“Sorry this took so long, Saoirse,” he says, stepping into the rec room. “I wanted to make sure the edges were really sanded well. So no one will get any splinters. And no sharp edges, so it’s comfortable to squat over it.”

He grimaces as I raise my head to look at it better.

“I know it’s kind of demeaning, but I can paint it for you, if you like,” he says. “Or make a better one on the weekend. And it’ll be much safer than using the woods.” He goes to put it down next this side of the dividing wall. “Hm. No, it’s gotta be further away from the wall than that, doesn’t it?”

I get up and come down to give it a closer look. Then I put my claws on it and pull it into a position that I like better. It’s further into the room, but still enough out of the way that no one will trip over it.

“Yeah, OK, that’s a good spot,” Dad says. Then, hooking his thumbs into his belt loops, he adds, “I’m sorry it’s not your keyboard, but you’re getting pretty good at using the computer again, anyway. So, I want to make you something you can use in the living room. And that’s gonna take a bit. Gotta order some parts. Maybe source another old computer.”

In answer to that, I bob my head once, and then sidle over to lean against his leg. On all fours, I come up to his knee. It’s not like I’ve gotten *smaller*.

He kneels down and gives me a hug. “I love you Kiddo. I wish this wasn’t happening. But it’s also so amazing, isn’t it?”

“Kakch,” I say.

“Yeah.”

Then, after a while of mutual silence, he says something more.

“If they come for you with bigger guns, don’t get shot, Saoirse. Don’t risk it. We’ll figure it out, OK? I’ll be there for you.” And then, after another pause. “But, you did the right thing. You told them the right thing. I’m proud of you. I gotta go get you some litter now, before the store closes.”



It’s going to be another sleepless night.

After Dad returned from the store to pour flowery smelling litter into my box, and then got ready for bed and left me in the rec room, I got a flash of light behind my eyes.

It was like there was a supernova in my soul, and the glare from it reflected off the lenses of my eyes, making them brighter on the inside than the room surrounding me. And with it, there was a soft burning sensation that washed through all my bones and muscles.

It was like the goddess touched me.

And now, well before midnight, the pain is *really* setting in.

This might be worse than Saturday night, and I’m going to be *so* hungry in the morning. But this time, all the warmth I need is coming from within, somehow.

I don’t really hear all the noises I make. I’m too busy swimming in agony.

## Chapter 12 - House arrest

**I**T'S 7:20 ON THURSDAY morning, a week and two days after my transformation started, Todd is at the end of our driveway. Just standing there, kicking at rocks, and looking around, almost like he's impatient.

He does have his backpack, so he is on his way to school, presumably.

No Marcus. But they live in different neighborhoods. The thing is, Todd doesn't live in mine.

And, like, my house is near school, but it's kind of out of the way of most routes kids take to get there.

Fiddle road, which he's standing on, runs from Tinker street to the cow pasture, passing by six houses, three on either side of it, before hitting a dead end blocked by that combination wooden/electric fence.

We're on the corner of Tinker and Fiddle, and if I had ever been a normal kid, I would have been going up Tinker to Bexel road, and then over to the highway. But, I *liked* my shortcut. It helped me to meet up with Heath more frequently on the way to school. And I avoided at least a little bit of the common thoroughfare, so I'd see slightly less of my other classmates. Cows are cool, too.

But for Todd to come down off the hill where he lives, walk *past* our school and then away from it, to get to my house, he had to leave early. Or get a ride. He's not as confused as he looks. He's obviously here for me.

Depending on whether or not he was at school yesterday, and how much my friends have blabbed about my condition, he might not *know*.

And, even if he's heard detailed descriptions of what I looked like Monday afternoon, no one outside of my household has seen me this morning.

I'm also not the only one home right now, and won't be all day.

No one got much sleep last night.

Even in the rec room, as far away from the bedrooms as I could get, my screeching was impossible to sleep through. It seems that I can whistle like a bird now, if I want.

Anyway, it was so bad, Mom called in to get Travis a day off from school, which I think he really needed anyway. And Dad even called his employees in to cover him. And since I've now been able to quiet down, everyone's back in bed. That is, after having put me in a hot shower and then making an early impromptu breakfast of, you guessed it, more eggs.

The rec room lights are off, and the blinds are lowered down to about ten inches away from the sill. This allows me to watch for trouble without being seen, if I keep my face far enough away from the window. Which you better bet I'm doing.

Todd's not *on* our property, but that's still my territory. I've got my ears flared out, and I'm making a low hissing noise. I think my head is shaking menacingly. And as

much as I want to chase him away, or run him down and eat him, it feels good to do that. Soothing.

What does he *want*?

Behind me, leaning against the wall near the litter box, is a full length mirror that Mom brought in from her bedroom door. After she'd seen what had been happening to me, she wanted me to see a clear reflection of myself.

In *my* eyes, my scales are brilliant now. The yellow is bright and fiery, like someone's ideal of lemon. While the brown has range, from milky to the darkest black coffee, but it also has a sheen to it, like there's a coating of varnish that reflects some kind of magical light.

And my eyes are fuck-off green fire colored. Like they don't exactly glow, but they look like they should. Ooh, and my pupils reflect light like a cat's!

I don't think I can use my wings for flying yet, but they finally look like classic, bat-like *actual* wings.

And my tail is the length of one of my legs. It doubled in size overnight, to get a sense of just how fast the accelerated transformation was.

Also, my shoulders are a lot slimmer, and more flush with my torso and neck, which taper into each other more smoothly, too.

But the biggest, most profound difference is my face and head.

When I looked at that, I felt a calm I don't think I can really describe. There is not a single hint of humanity left there. Besides my horns being a whole hand length now, my snout is the entirety of my face. The top of my head slopes right down to the tip of my nose, uninterrupted by any unnecessary contours like eyebrows. And it's almost easier for me to look at the side of my head through one eye, than it is to look at the front of it with both.

The shape is something between that of a Komodo dragon with ears and horns, and maybe some kind of seal.

My teeth are half grown in, too, and they're wicked as *shit*.

So, like, if I went out there right now to "talk" to Todd, he'd feel like he's being attacked by the cover of an epic fantasy novel.

*Probably* not a good idea.

On the other hand, it's getting late. He needs to be getting to school. My family is all asleep. I'm not actually planning on hurting him. A good scare would be hilarious. I'm *invincible*. And fuck the neighbors and the police.

*Sketatitch takick, tick tack tack tick tick tack tick scritch tack skitch skatch tack tick tack!*

I snake my way right to the back door and go to open it.

The suddenness and ferocity of my ten megaton hiss startles me.

Which is good, because in a fit of bewildering rage, I was just about to tear the door and its metal frame right out of the side of the house.

Because it's *locked*.

Destroying the house is not really something I need or want to do, when I have even a split second to think about it. But no one *ever* locks this door. We just never do it. Not even when we go out of town to visit Grandma. Mom gets upset when we forget to lock it then, but no one remembers, because we *never do it*.

Doing my favorite cat chatter, I hold myself up with my right claws on the handle, and twist my head to look at the latch that's behind it. Then, with the concentration

it takes me to press the escape key on a keyboard, I reach with my left index claw and push the latch upward.

Click.

There!

With a twist of my torso, the door easily slides open. Dad oiled it yesterday, it looks like.

Alright, Todd, here I come.

I don't bother to close the door again, because it's just warm enough outside that it doesn't matter, and I'll probably want to get back in fairly quickly after I do this. Whatever it is I'm actually going to do.

There's this scene at the end of *The Never Ending Story*, where the kid rides Falkor the luck dragon down out of the sky to terrorize his bullies. I fucking loved that scene. It left me feeling a high for months afterward. And I've always wanted to do that, and now here's my chance (only without the flying, but I *can* gallop).

But I don't. Nope. I am not that kind of dragon.

I'm the dragon that writes that I will not hurt anyone to get the police off her Mom's back. I am the dragon who helps her brother defeat King's Quest III. I am the dragon who promises her dad that she will stand down even when she doesn't need to.

And Todd literally can't hurt me anymore. Not that he'll even recognize me.

If he knew what I was, he wouldn't even be here.

Oh, God, I wish I could talk, though. And the front driveway being concrete is really going to cramp my style.

But, so, I simply walk calmly around the side of the house, and casually make my way toward Todd, hopefully like a big, slow dog that just wants one scratch before going back to the porch.

And Todd doesn't see me at first. He just happens to be looking the other way in boredom when I come around the corner. But the way I went, between our house and the neighbors', I have the whole front lawn to cross before I get to him.

About halfway there, I think the better of doing anything more to actually threaten him, and sploot my rear legs to sit down in my most ridiculous fashion, tail straight back. Then I stretch my wings briefly to make sure they're comfortable, and fold them back up. Finally, I look away from him, like up at a random cloud, and make a clacking noise not unlike a crow.

He turns with an easy curiosity, as if he's looking for that crow, until he sees...

Me.

I'm not moving a muscle. I just wait to see what he does, watching him with my left eye.

He blinks, half jumping back a little. But when I don't budge, he then leans forward and squints, as if to figure out how this amazingly lifelike dragon statue got placed in the middle of the yard when he wasn't looking. Was it there before?

I taste the air. Tongue out.

Oh, fuck, shoot. I can smell his hairspray from here! Why does it have to taste good now? When did that happen?

Todd hisses inward through his teeth and his eyes fly wide, and he almost falls over backward, tripping over his own foot. But then he stops himself and frowns. Did he really see that? And he starts to lean forward again.

I tilt my head like a bird, to follow his movement, and adjust my footing, then freeze again, because this is fun.

This time he hunches, crouching, ready to run, and hisses, “Holy shit! Are you *real*?”

Yes, Todd! Yes, I am. I am actually really real.

He looks like he can’t decide if he needs to run or, you know, figure out a way to make friends with the dragon. And, you know what? Sure. Let’s do this. Let’s at least let him think he’s making friends with me. It’s easier to control my instincts that way. Because, if he runs, I’m gonna chase him.

I adjust my wings again, to emphasize that, yes, I have them and they *are* wings and I have six limbs like an insect. Or seven, if you count my tail. Like a *real* dragon. And then I slowly walk my forefeet out in front of me until I’m resting my chest on the ground. Then I rest my chin on the backs of what used to be my hands.

With my rear legs sticking straight out to my sides, at a forty-five degree angle to each other, I’m pretty sure that this looks remarkably unthreatening.

Then, for good measure, I lift my head up just long enough to quietly make my most friendly noise, “Kakch.”

“Holy fucking...” He leans even further forward, taking a step, to get a better look. Then, in hushed tones he asks, “Can I pet you?”

I don’t know, Todd, can you? I tilt my head quizzically, while keeping it resting on my wrists. And then I thump my tail. It’s a pretty soft thump. My posture doesn’t make it easy to lift it up far.

I am *not* making eye contact with him. He’s far enough out that I can easily keep both eyes on him, but I don’t need to make him freeze again. And, also, by looking a little lower than his face, I look a bit more demure.

“Easy, boy,” he says. “I’m just going to scratch behind your ears, OK?”

Nope. Wrong word. I lift my head up, and he stops.

“What?” he responds. “What did I do?”

I don’t know how to tell him what he did wrong. But, what I can do is just get up and walk away.

I huff, which I hope is a sound of disappointment, the way I breathe in first and let the air loosely out through my teeth, rather than tightly in the back of my throat. Then, I pull forward and up with my forelegs, to help my hind legs do the same, reflexively using my wings to assist against the ground as well. And he steps back a couple paces to give me room or to consider running. But then I turn and walk back the way I came.

“Oh, come on!” I hear him say. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, whatever it was! I can be your friend! Why are you going that way? That’s where Keith lives.”

Nope. No, Todd. No, it is not.

“Fine. Whatever,” he says. “No one’s going to believe me. Holy shit, that’s a real fucking dragon, though!”

But I keep going. And by the time I’ve made it back into the house and closed the door and crawled back to my sofa, I can see out the window that he’s backed most of the way out of the street, still looking for any sign of me.

In fact, it looks like he’s trying to see if I’m going to come around the other side of the house.

I laugh at him, in my way. And then I gently claw at the window to make a noise and push my right eye up against it, right above my forefoot that’s resting on the sill.

The look on his face is now part of the hoard in my mind, my most prized jewel.

I bet there’s no way he’s *not* going to talk about what he saw, now. He’s going to blab loudly about it at school. And everyone is going to laugh at him, and bully him, now. And, possibly, at some point, one or more of my

friends will say, “No, that’s Soairse. She’s what happened to Keith. Remember how he pounced on you like that last Friday? You’re lucky she didn’t eat you!”

And then, maybe later, news of my encounter with the police will get around, and everyone will have to consider believing Todd, and *he’ll* have to consider believing my friends.

I need more eggs.

I’m pretty sure I can get into the fridge to get them without making too much of a mess.



Staying inside *sucks*.

I don’t mind just sitting and basically napping most of the time. But, right now, I want to spread my wings under the sun and soak up the heat. It’s not summer yet, but it’s sunny today, and the direct light already felt warm when I was out there ‘socializing’ with Todd. And it wasn’t even all that late in the morning.

If I could get up on the roof it would be *the best*.

But my parents have decided that I need to stay inside and out of sight, so it sucks even more.

They haven’t figured out that I’ve already been outside today, though, and I’m not going to tell them. And *especially* not that I can unlock the back door, and then lock it again afterward. I need them to do nice things for me, and letting them know that will put a stop to the nice things.

So, while Dad has gone out to get some lunch and dinner fixings, and to rent some movies to watch this afternoon, Travis has started playing King's Quest III *all over again*. Which means that I can't use the computer to talk to Mom. So, I'm back to moping near the fireplace while she reads another one of her mysteries.

What's interesting is that I really can actually feel things shifting and growing still. It's not hurting quite as much as it used to, either. Though, it might be that I'm just used to it. Unfortunately, it makes me want to *move*. Some to stretch the muscles and work my joints, but mostly because it makes me excited and gives me what I think are the beginnings of the zoomies.

Do reptiles get the zoomies?

Anyway, I'm a dragon. I'm *different*.

For instance, something I've noticed is that it is *impossible* for me to get too hot now. Or, well, I can lie under that electric blanket turned up all the way non-stop for hours and hours. And the hottest water out of the bathtub tap doesn't bother me. And I want to experiment with that.

It'd be really cool if my dad could build a bonfire somewhere, and then I could just sit in it.

Well. It would not be *cool*. But you know what I mean.

I also have this theory that my body converted some of the energy from those bullets into calories for my transformation.

But I can't *tell* anybody about it, because my brother is using the computer to play an obnoxious game he already beat!

Mom suddenly snaps her book shut, and looks over it at me with narrowed eyes full of amusement.

I lift my head and tilt it. I'll take anything right now. Something to make me less bored and twitchy.

"I have ideas," she says.

And it almost feels like she was reading my mind and responding to my thoughts. So I watch her with mounting curiosity as she gets up from her chair and starts heading back to the hallway.

"In this book I'm reading, the detective is using a Ouija board to get hints to clues," she says. "But, not to talk to spirits, actually. He's using it to make the suspect spill the beans subconsciously. It's really neat. *However!* We can use it for something else! And, also, we have a Scrabble set!"

Oh? Oh! It really is like she was reading my mind.

I might have trouble playing Scrabble properly. Picking the tiles out of the bag, lining them up, and placing them on the board are actions that are too fiddly for my claws. But, I could move them around on a table (or on the board) to spell words pretty easily. And I can definitely move that Ouija puck thingy, no problem.

And she comes back to where I'm lying, carrying both boxes with a big smug grin on her face.

"And now you can still practice your spelling," she cackles.

Oh, god *damn* it.



So, yeah, we *do* have a VCR. Most people I know do these days. And Dad comes back with three movies while I'm

in the middle of telling Mom about my yearning for more heat with the Scrabble tiles.

The Ouija board was too frustrating.

After struggling to unlock the back door, Dad steps in to say, "I rented *Caravan of Courage: an Ewok Adventure*, *The Adventures of Hercules*, and *Return to Oz!* I tried to find something that had a dragon as the hero, but the only one that the clerk knew about was checked out."

"Ooh, *Return to Oz* sounds good," Mom says. "You can watch the other two with the kids while I read."

That's pretty much my own reaction, especially after hearing about *the Ewok Adventure* from kids at school. Though I'll give it and Hercules a chance, out of sheer boredom.

I remember Mom reading the other *Oz* books to me a while back, and having odd, dark feelings about different parts of them. And that might be good in a movie, if they did a good job with it. Also, now that I know that I'm a girl, I kinda really want a story with a good heroine, and Dorothy is pretty alright.

I look down at the scrabble tiles and start moving them about to spell something else.

OZ FIRST

Dad, with grocery bag in arm, watches me do this. Then exclaims, "Oh, that's clever! Maybe you don't need that keyboard."

I look at him and chatter. It's a nice quiet noise that expresses displeasure *so* well.

"OK, OK!" he laughs. "I'll work on it this weekend."



Megan, of all people, swings by after school. My other friends are not with her, which makes me curious.

At that point, we're in the middle of *the Ewok Adventure*, and I am perfectly happy to have the distraction. So as Mom is answering the door, I get up and walk out of the rec room to come through the kitchen and come up behind her.

"Hello, Megan! It's good to see you," Mom says. "Do you want to come in? Saoirse is watching Ewoks with her dad and—"

"Oh, *wow!*" Megan interrupts her when she sees me approaching.

Mom steps aside to let her come in, and Megan crouches to look at me more on my own eye level as she does.

"You look *amazing!*" She exclaims. Then she reaches out with both hands to the sides of my face, and pauses. "May I? Is this OK, Saoirse?"

*Yeah, you can totally give me scratches, Megan.* I plop down on my butt and bob my head once, saying, "Kakch."

But what she does is hold me by my cheeks and the back of my jaws, and moves her head this way and that to get a better look at my face and eyes. She even manages to make eye contact with me without getting transfixed, which maybe tells me something about how that works? It just doesn't always happen, apparently. I'll have to see if I have control over that.

I've definitely been hungry, scared, angry, or just doing it intentionally every time before.

"I love your ears," she says. "And your horns are getting *big!*"

Then I spread out my wings, just shy of knocking over Mom's ficus, Walter.

Megan takes in a breath when she sees them. “Oh, wow.”

“My daughter is getting to be quite a creature, isn’t she?” Mom laughs nervously. “I can’t believe I gave birth to her. It’s amazing.”

“I can’t imagine,” Megan says. Then she sits back on her heels and looks up at Mom. “Um. So, I wanted to hang out with Saoirse, if that’s OK. You know, talk or something. Maybe in the backyard?”

Mom sucks in a breath through her teeth.

“But, I wanted to ask some questions first anyway,” Megan finishes. “Do you mind?”

Mom shrugs and tightens her lips. “I don’t know about going outside right now, but if you want to sit and talk, please, be my guest! Megan’s been using the Scrabble board to communicate, and I’ll help answer anything that’s too long for her, if I can. I think that would be nice. Do you want some tea, or juice, or something?”

“Oh, please! Tea would be great!”

So, I realize I haven’t been drinking much lately. Maybe I’ve been getting enough water by eating raw eggs and letting the shower pour into my mouth. It’s only been a few days since it’s become hard for me to use a cup, though. And I open my mouth a little bit and watch Mom as she goes past to the kitchen. She sees the movement, looks down at me, and seems to understand.

“I’ll put your tea in a salad bowl, Saoirse,” she says, as if she was already planning on making me tea too, as well. But then she says, “I can’t believe we haven’t gotten you a water dish or anything. You must be parched!”

I look toward the bathtub, which is in the bathroom.

“Not the toilet!” she exclaims.

I look up at her, tilt my head, and then chatter.

“Oh, right, sorry,” she says. Then she looks at Megan. “Last night was hard. She had another growth spurt. And we had to warm her up. So she was licking the water out of the bottom of the shower.”

“Ah.”

Great. So, my weird habits are not a family secret. That’s fine.

Anyway, as Mom goes to make tea, Megan and I get situated in the living room on either side of the scrabble set, which is still out and in danger of being kicked around. Then Megan, sitting cross-legged on the floor, just starts talking to me like I’m one of her regular friends. Assuming she has any, actually.

I mean, she probably does. But she always seemed to be a loner, and now she’s hanging out with me a lot.

“OK, so, the reason that Indigo and Jeffrey couldn’t make it was that Todd picked a fight with them in math class. Because those three have math class together. And it was, like, an actual full-blown fist fight,” she says. “They totally wanted to be here, but they all got seventh period. And they’ll try to come over afterward, but their parents might not let them.”

I sit up a bit more straight to indicate I’m listening.

“Right?” she asks. “Anyway. The reason they got in a fight was because Todd was saying things about there being a dragon here, which *we* all know is you. And he said that maybe the reason you aren’t at school anymore was because the dragon ate you. And they told him he was being dumb. This was right at the beginning of class, and Indigo backed up Jeffrey, and Todd just blew it and attacked them both.”

“What?” Mom blurts from the kitchen. “What is *wrong* with that boy?”

“I don’t know,” Megan says, turning her head to be heard more clearly. “It seems like brain damage to me.”

“Now, Megan,” Mom chides her gently. “I don’t think we need to say that about people.”

“Well, he did get a concussion last Friday,” Megan reminds her. “And, my mom is a psychologist. And she’s told me stories about brain damage changing people’s entire personalities, or giving them mood disorders. So, I think it’s actually a possibility. And it would be sad, actually.”

I am suitably chagrined, but I can’t really express it well.

I look down at the scrabble tiles for an easy word to spell. When Megan hears me moving them around, she looks down to see the results.

OOF

“Oof is right,” Megan agrees. “So, Saoirse. Did you encounter Todd this morning? Like, while you were out in your front yard?”

Mom stomps over to lean around the wall that’s between the kitchen and the living room to *glare* at me. And then when Megan sees my head twitch to look at her, she looks back at my mom.

“Oops?” Megan says.

Mom points at me and says, “We’ll talk about this later, young lady.”

Despite the scolding and the anticipation of a lecture and stricter lockdown (I am still technically grounded, too), I really am super focused on how cool it is to be called “young lady”, even in anger. As a dragon in particular, “lady” feels *really* good. But I move a couple more tiles for her.

OK

Mom seems satisfied enough by that that she forces herself to relax. Then she asks Megan, “What was Todd doing in our neighborhood this morning? Aren’t we way out of his way to school?”

“Well, that’s the other thing I wanted to ask about,” Megan replies. “There were, like, four gunshots from over this direction, yesterday. And a whole bunch of us were really worried about that. Do you know what that was about?”

Mom makes a hissing noise through her teeth and lowers her brows ominously in my direction. “The police came by to round up Saoirse, and one of the officers shot at her.”

“What?” Megan looks back at me in alarm.

I turn to lick my left haunch, which also shows her my right shoulder. But there are no marks, because my goddess is protecting me, or something. Also, far less bruising than I expected. But I also generally feel like just one big bruise, and I’m getting all too used to that.

“We’re really lucky she missed,” Mom says. “And Saoirse was able to tell them off by writing in the neighbor’s driveway.”

At the word “missed”, I immediately chatter over the rest of Mom’s words though, and keep doing it until she shuts up and looks at me in irritation. Then I huff and work on a new arrangement of tiles. It takes me way longer than I’d like, considering how frustrated I am, but I manage it, and the two of them wait until I’m done.

**DID NOT MISS**

“What do you mean, ‘did not miss’?” Mom asks indignantly, voice raising in alarm and disbelief.

I simply look at her and tap the board twice with my claw right below the letters. Then I look at my right

shoulder, then my left haunch, and then I hold up my left arm—er, foreleg.

“What? Don’t lie! Where are the bullet wounds?”

I roll my whole head, then lift up my right foreleg, and bite it as hard as I can. Then I let go and hold it further up to show her the complete lack of any mark there.

Megan looks at Mom with barely concealed excitement. “I think she’s saying she’s bulletproof! Smaug’s not a *mythical* dragon, but he was impervious to *everything* except for in this one chink in his armor on his chest. It’s definitely a dragon thing.”

“Well, I’m going to have a hard time believing it until I see it,” Mom declares. “And I don’t want to see it. Ever.” She’s looking at me, specifically, of course.

“That’s fair,” Megan replies.

It’s not, really. But I’m not going to say that, or write it.

“Anyway, what if you get shot in the eye, Saoirse?”

Mom says to me. It’s posed as a question, but it really isn’t one.

I lower my head in acknowledgement. I have definitely thought of that.

“I don’t ever want to see you disarm a policeman with your mouth again. Or with anything!”

Megan’s eyes are even wider as her head snaps back in my direction again. “You did *what?*”

I bob my head and say, “Kakch.”

That seems to be my way of agreeing, now. I don’t know why. It just feels like how I feel lately when I do agree with something.

“Oh, the boys are going to be so jealous I heard about this first!”

## Chapter 13 - Turning up the Heath

**S**O, THE NICE THING about nighttime, especially midnight or later, is that if it's not during one of my growth spurts then nobody else is awake, and *I can do things*.

Now, don't get me wrong. I also did things when people were awake. And my afternoon with Megan was wonderful once we got past subjects that put my mom on edge. Dinner was OK, too. But, also, I then just crashed right after that. Because, like, I didn't get any sleep the night before, and I do still need to sleep. Sleeping, actually, is a very dragon thing to do. But, also, I feel like I might be nocturnal?

Anyway, I wake up around 12:30, and everyone else is asleep. And I know the time because my dad is really good at keeping the oven clock set to the right time, and I happen to be looking its general direction while I think about this terrible idea I woke up with.

I kind of don't even remember walking out here to the kitchen, because I was so focused on this terrifyingly exciting idea that I just dreamt about. And the thing about my dreams, actually, is that some of them turn out to not be *bad ideas*. Maybe they turn out to be warnings,

really. But the things they warn about are really very cool, especially when it has to do with being a dragon.

This didn't feel like a dream with the goddess of all life? But, who's to say it really wasn't?

Besides, I've been shot and shrugged it off like being hit by small rocks. And I've stuck my snout under the hottest water from the bathtub faucet just to drink the water. And my hearing has totally recovered from the gunshots that deafened me on Tuesday. And I've already experienced the worst pain in the entire universe, I'm pretty sure. I think I can get away with this.

See. We have an electric stove. And the neat thing about electric stoves is that the element takes a little while to get up to its full temperature. So, I should have enough time to pull my foot away before it really burns me. Or, I mean, before it burns me *too* bad. I should be able to rely on my instincts and reflexes, because they're pretty damn strong, and neither of them are telling me not to do this right now.

If Mom saw me trying to do this, she'd just scream. So it's a good thing she's asleep.

The problem is that the knobs are on the back of the stove. So you have to reach over it in order to turn it on or off. And, I can't do that like a human can. Not anymore. I can't stand on my hind legs for very long, and I can't reach with my forelegs without falling forward. My wings and tail aren't quite big enough yet to act as good counterweights, with the way my hips work now. And, besides, the easiest thing to *twist* with, when I'm gripping anything, is my mouth and head. My wrists don't really work that way anymore. And while I can still grip some things with my thumbs that are no longer fully opposable, it's just going to be easiest to bite the flat part of the knob.

Also, the knob for whatever element I'm going to use is going to be right behind that element.

So, if this doesn't work, and I get burned, it's going to be hard to turn the stove off.

It might be better for me to try this with the oven. But then I have to work the oven door.

Which I'm sure I can do, but I'm not sure I can do it quietly. And, at this point, while I'm sure my parents are developing the ability to ignore dragon screeches, hisses, rumbling, and the like, my mom probably has her ear out for thumps, bumps, scrapes, and any other noises that might indicate I'm getting out of the house.

*Which shouldn't be a concern!*

But, seriously, though, the thought of that heat growing in my chest as I lean across the stove top, mouth on the knob, ready to turn it off, is *so enticing*.

So, that's what I do.

Carefully, as quietly as I can, I rear up and put my forefeet on the edge of the stove. Then I grip the handle of one of the two pots that are there with my teeth, and pull my head up and back.

Oh, that was so slick. Not even a little scrape.

Lifting myself up off the stove to pivot and drop is also something I can do pretty well, and fairly quietly. My wings and tail aren't perfect for the kind of balance needed to imitate a human, but they do help *a lot* with regular draconic movements. So, I walk the pot over to a far corner of the kitchen and gently place it on the floor there. That way it's well out of my way, if I suddenly have to thrash about for some reason.

I then do this with the other pot.

And then, before anybody knows it, even myself, I'm climbing cross the stove top to crane my neck and take a

grip of the knob for the biggest of the two front burners, which my breastbone is now resting on.

Is this really gonna work?

Who knows?

I turn my head so that the knob should be pointing roughly at the “High” setting. It’s pretty easy, just a short twist to the right. Though it does mean that I’m going to have to turn my head back to a fully sideways position to turn it off in an emergency, which is not going to be my reflex, but I don’t think I’m going to have an emergency.

Now, I can definitely sense heat. I’m not immune to it. It just doesn’t cause me pain anymore. At least, not yet. More, these days, it seems to soothe pain. The pain of cold, the pain of sore muscles, the pain of aching joints, and the overall pain of transformation. Even hunger, in a weird way.

I seem to remember that Godzilla eats radiation. That’s not quite the same thing as heat, but heat radiates.

Hmm.

This is actually *really* pleasant.

I think, at this point, the element is probably getting toward red hot, and I just *like* it.

I should do this more often. Maybe every night.

In fact, there’s still been a little bit of ringing in my ears since Tuesday. Not enough to keep me from hearing most things, or understanding anybody talking. So, like, I’ve started to ignore it, as annoying as it is. But while I’m resting here and basically cooking myself, I swear I hear that ringing *go away*.

The relief is notable. I am noting, in my head, the relaxing ache of its quick absence, and I’m wondering if the heat is doing that. Like, is it helping me heal? Heck,

*all* of my joints are hurting less now, too. And I'm feeling more awake.

But it's really cool too, because now I'm noticing all the things that that ringing actually was blocking out. Little, tiny noises that I'd forgotten I should be able to hear with my newer, better ears. Like the sound of trees waving in the breeze outside even though no windows are open. There's a bat circling the property, too, squeaking away. And the freeway, many blocks away, which, when I was human shaped, I could usually only hear when I was outside.

And a quiet tapping noise on a what I think is a pane of glass. One of the windows.

That's curious. We don't have any trees growing that close to the house. Mom is really good at keeping them properly trimmed.

I let go of the knob and lift my head up, so that I can turn it one way and then the other. I also flare my ears and pull them back alternatively.

The tapping is definitely coming from *my* bedroom window.

What the hell?

I turn back to the stove controls and reach to turn the knob off.

Don't want to burn the house down.

Then I, quietly as I can, make my way to my bedroom. Which isn't very quiet. I'm about as loud as a large dog walking around on a hard wood floor at night. It's just dragon noises, though. I'm just going to my room, where I belong, where my hoard is, such as it is. My hoard of Legos, toy cars, and plush animals. I do have to push the door open with my nose a bit, but it's not latched.

So then I look up at the window, and there I see Heath peering in, trying to shade the glass with his hand. He's looking in the direction of my bed, and it seems pretty clear he can't really see it, because he's still tapping the window with his other hand.

Like, he thinks I'm there. But the room is just too dark for him to see much of anything, even in a shadow of the reflections on the other side of glass.

I don't really have much choice but to surprise him, I guess. It's not like I'm going to let him think I'm not here.

I try to be as gentle about it as I can.

So, I climb up the wall under the window, and just place my left forefoot on the glass. In a calm, smooth, easy movement, so that it's not like I'm rushing him or coming out of nowhere.

He still jumps back, startled and more than a bit terrified. But, then he's curious about what he's seeing, and he figures it out.

Like Todd, I know he hasn't seen me since Friday, and I don't think he's talked to any of our other friends since then, either, unless his parents have let him. So, he might not know just how far dragon I've gone. But, he at least does know that I've been turning into one.

I miss him, too. So this is cool.

He should get to see this.

I tilt my head and watch as he creeps back up to the window and puts his hand flat on the glass, opposite of my hand. For a little bit, I want to call that my hand.

"K! Is that you?" he asks, just loud enough for a human to hear through the glass, but not so loud he thinks my parents will hear. I pick it up just fine.

I bob my head, and lick the air. Dammit, he hasn't talked to the others, and I'm going to need to spell out my

new name for him. And *then* spell out how to pronounce it. Well. There *are* a couple of gravel driveways on this street.

I tap the glass with my other index claw, as a way of trying to tell him “one minute”, and then leave to get outside.

It is a measure of my parents’ desperation to keep me inside that they’ve added a wooden dowel to block the sliding back door, as well as just using the regular latch to lock it. And they did that while I was napping, and it’s a surprise to me now.

I know that if I just hook it with a claw and pull it out, it’ll make a clattering noise. So I’m not doing *just* that.

Before I even bother to get my talons around and behind it, I lean down near one end and open my mouth, like I’m trying to bite it where it is. And now it has nowhere to go but right in my mouth. Then I do the hooking and pulling thing. And I bite it, and pull it out almost as quietly as I moved the pans.

To make sure it makes no more noise, I tilt my head sideways so that it sticks almost straight up. And then I walk into the living room where there’s a carpet, so I can put it down quietly.

After that, it’s simple for me to get outside and trundle through the grass around to the front of the house, where Heath is. I *do* close the door again, though.

As I come around that last corner, I lift my tail up as much as I can and wave it like a dog. This is a *choice*. It’s not a draconic expression, and my tail doesn’t go up all that high, like, maybe the height of my head when I’m holding that up, too.

Heath is vibrating with excitement, and like Todd did, he looks like he’s teetering between raw panic and

overwhelmed awe and joy. But he manages to ask, “Holy shit! Can I hug you?”

I make kind of a dog like gesture, which is also close enough to the human expression of come in for a hug, which was what I was really going for. I rear up and spread both my wings and my forelegs briefly, and then land on all fours again. And then I left my head back, to give him room to crouch and wrap his arms around my shoulders.

Heath and I have never really hugged before. So, this is definitely one of those things where he’s treating me more like an animal. He’d totally hug a dog. But, he still *asked*.

“I can’t believe I’m hugging an *actual* dragon!” He exclaims, dangerously loud.

And I reach with my wing claws and gently grip his shoulders to return it.

It feels good. I think I need more of this from everyone, really. The most cuddling I get lately is from my brother using me as a cushion, and my mom helping me shed or rubbing me down in a hot shower to help with my transformation pains.

Megan did hug me yesterday, too. And I had the same reaction then as now. But a *boy* hugging me is so unusual that I have to think about it a little more.

I know that most animals don’t like feeling trapped and will pull out of a hug, especially if you surprise them with it. It’s really only a few who get used to it after trustworthy humans teach them how. But, even though my instincts are sharp and strong, and I have to work hard to ignore them, I’m not getting hit by them right now. Not *any* instincts. Unless feeling kinda wanted and calm when hugged is an instinct.

Maybe it’s a shred of my humanity that’s left. Or, maybe dragons just like hugs. I don’t know.

I think if *Todd* hugged me right now, I wouldn't like it at all, though. I might be surprised. But kind gestures from him don't feel kind. They feel like a trap. Or like he doesn't recognize who I am. And his presence alone is repulsive to me, putting me on edge.

Heath pulls back after a decent amount of time, and asks, "Wait, you can't talk anymore, can you?"

I shake my head. Which, if I lowered my head so that my neck was straight forward, would be like how a dog shakes water off. But since I'm reared up and tilting my head forward, it's a normal human-like gesture.

"Oh, dang!"

I huff and say, "Kakch." But then I get up and walk toward a neighbor's driveway, pausing to look back at him, to make sure he's following.

And there I spell out my name, and how to pronounce it, while he watches. Then, I spell out that I'm doing OK.

IT'S SO COOL

"I bet it is!" he tells me. "But, not talking has gotta suck."

My reflex is to respond to that by flapping my wings and then settling down as I fold them back up. It's like a working out the energy and then relaxing into it. And to me it says that I'm frustrated by that little thing but eager to enjoy everything else as much as I can. And I think he gets it?

"Well, I'm done with being grounded while also being suspended," he says. "I mean, I still am. But I'm *not* doing it anymore. So I thought you might want to go for a walk or something."

I bob my head, because that sounds great.

And then I look down the street, the opposite way from the cow pasture, because I don't think walking through

there is going to be a very quiet experience. I still want to eat one.

Too bad there aren't any wild cows. Or that my parents don't own any that I can just have.

Heath gets the message and starts walking back toward Tinker street. And I follow.

And he just starts talking.

And aside from not being able to talk back, it's almost like old times.

Not that we've walked around the neighborhood in the middle of the night, ever. But we've meandered around on our way home after school a lot. And we've talked about all sorts of things. Usually fantasy books and role playing games. Or, playing the Merc game, which I know I mentioned before.

And tonight, after he gives me a brief overview of what being suspended and grounded has been like for him, which isn't much, really, besides being bored at home and having to do more chores and homework than usual, he gets into the books he's been reading. Because, also, he's been banned from the TV for the foreseeable future.

He shrugs that off, though, because, like me, he's a bookworm.

Oh, shit. I haven't tried to read a book since Friday, at *least*. It's going to be hard to do. Possible, maybe, but fiddly enough to be exhausting. Also, the computer screen is getting to be a strain to look at up close, like I'm getting farsighted. Though, it's not too bad if I look at it with only one eye.

I wish I could tell Heath all of that, but it's pretty nice just to hear what he's been up to.

Turns out, he's been reading everything he can about dragons. Which isn't much, because he hasn't been able

to go to the library, so all he has is his D&D books, the WARHAMMER rule book, and a collection of novels, mostly by Piers Anthony, who doesn't really write that much about dragons. There's one called DRAGON'S GOLD, though, that he talks about. It has a girl in it named Jon, who pretends to be a boy sometimes to get to do things girls aren't allowed to do. But she gets in really big trouble for it, and there's a nasty scene, and I don't like Heath's description of it. It reminds me of Todd bullying me in the locker room, if he could get away with what he's *threatened* to do to me.

But, the best resources he has for dragons are the two role playing games.

So, then I want to tell him that Megan knows a lot about dragons, and he should talk to her. Which I get to do when we cross paths with another patch of dirt.

#### MEGAN KNOWS DRAGONS

"Ah," Heath says. "Yeah, but I don't get to see her until I go back to school. Probably next week."

I lift my head and look around. Do I know where she lives? Can I guess?

"What are you thinking?" Heath asks.

I lick the air. And I really only mostly smell Heath, grass, dog shit, and the lingering scent of somebody's late night laundry run. Also, myself. My own scent has changed enough in the last few days that I've got a pretty strong sense of it, and it's fascinating. And I could get into that, but the important thing is that I don't smell anything remotely like Megan.

I'm probably not going to be able to track her down that way. She uses a nice shampoo, and some kind of spicy hand cream, but she doesn't use hair spray or gel like the other girls. Which makes her scent unique among my

classmates. And, of course, her own body odor is fairly memorable. But, it's been a while since she walked home, and we're pretty far away from my house now. I'd have to backtrack to see if I can even pick up her trail, if it's still there.

Heath looks a bit more excited than he already was. "Can you smell her?"

I shake my head.

"Damn." Then he suggests, "We could head back to the school to try to catch her scent from there, maybe."

I shake my head again, then look down the street the way we were walking and flutter my wings a bit.

"Yeah, OK," he says.

And then we continue.

And we keep talking like that. With me answering yes and no questions and occasionally stopping somewhere to add a word or two in the dirt. Which is great, because it helps me to feel like Heath is trusting more and more that I am *me*, and that I am still a person. Which, sometimes I feel like my family is starting to forget.

Especially with the way I'm being locked into the house, like a cat that shouldn't go out.

Eventually, we cover most of what Mom and I talked to Megan about, too. And I manage to communicate that I'm impervious to heat as well as bullets. Basically, I write a couple of simple sentences, and then he asks me yes or no questions about them, to clarify. It'll be better if he can eventually talk to Mom, or I can take the time to type out a whole letter, maybe, but it's still nice to get him all caught up.

Telling him about our encounter with Marcus at the movie theater is just a bit too complicated, though, so I

don't bother with that. That seems like a long time ago now, too, anyway.

The important things are what I can do, and that those gunshots that the whole neighborhood heard were actually shot at me.

POLICE SHOT ME  
I'M BULLET PROOF  
HEAT HEALS ME

Like that.

I end up having to add:

SAT ON STOVE TOP

To which his eyes bug way out. And he asks if that hurt, and I shake my head. And then I rear up and look down at my torso and abdomen, to show him that there are no burns there. And he's suitably impressed.

After we continue walking, away from that evidence of our conversation, in a bit of silence, he asks, "So, what's it like being naked all that time now? That's gotta be weird."

I roll my head, because it's not a yes or no question.

At the next patch of dirt, I write:

NOT NAKED, SCALES

"Oh, yeah," he says. "I kinda wondered."

I did basically show him my ass there, though. And he didn't recognize it, because it was just a set of slits in my line of scutes that covers my underside from throat to tip of tail. Like, if he knows snakes or lizards, he probably does recognize it, but he doesn't say anything about it.

It's not like I have anything naughty looking there. Not to humans, anyway. *Which is how I like it.* I like that a lot.

But, I do, actually feel naked. A lot of my scales have skin with nerves over them, so I can still feel things. It's just tougher and I can endure more. But I can feel the air that I walk through, which might be useful when I'm flying,

now that I think about it. And that does make me feel exposed more than when I was wearing clothes.

I've just had to get used to it, because there just aren't any clothes that are practical for me anymore. And nobody seems to care, because they see me as a pet that they can talk to, now.

Which is fine.

Still kind of want to paint my talons, though. I need to bug my mom about that.

I don't mention that to Heath. It would take too much work, and he's probably not interested in knowing that.

Not before long, because it's been a long walk, and we walk all over the neighborhood, we do end up heading through downtown. Which is like, a single street with businesses lining either side.

There are two taverns, a bridal shop, a used clothing store, an antique shop, a diner, a Mexican restaurant, a travel agency, an Ace Hardware, and a handful of other businesses. The post office is there, too, actually.

And it's late enough in the morning that even the taverns are closed.

It's really kinda creepy to see absolutely no one around. Not even any cars passing through Main street at this time of night. But, that also means that no one sees the boy and his dragon trudging along the sidewalk past shop windows and closed signs, looking down at the pavement as they walk and the boy mutters things.

The problem with the downtown area is that the post office is the only property with any dirt or gravel on it, thanks to its landscaping, and we've walked a couple blocks past that by the time that Heath says the next big thing about me that I want to respond to.

It might be how the streetlights illuminate the concrete and brick of the buildings, and cast everything in a simplified glow, making it look like we're in a comic book. It might just be that we're in the only vaguely urban area of the whole town. But Heath is moved to say something that I honestly have just been too busy to consider, amazingly enough.

"You know, you're kind of like a superhero now," he observes. "You've got all these powers. You're impervious to bullets. Super strong. You *eat* heat. And you might even be able to fly. Someday, at least. And the police are afraid of you! The lack of a secret identity kinda sucks, especially since you still live with your family. But all you have to do now is fight crime!"

I look up at him. My head is usually about even with his thighs, though I can raise it to even with his belly. Rearing up, I'm taller than him, but I'm not doing that.

I want to say, dude, don't jinx me. But I *can't!*

All I can really do is chatter a bit and huff. And then admit he's right and say, "Kakch."

"It's like you're talking, but I can't understand anything you're saying," he says. "Like a lizard that's imitating a talkative cat. It's really cute."

I snort.

He reaches out and scratches the back of my head, right between my horns.

Mom and Megan are the only people who've done that. Not even Travis. And it feels too intimate for a moment, so I duck my head.

"Oh, sorry," he blurts. "For a second, it felt like I was walking next to my dog."

I stop walking and just look at him again.

Sitting down as an expression, I'm finding, is actually more trouble than it's worth. Getting back up is enough of a chore, I'd rather lie down completely, in order to rest for a while, or just stay standing. I mean, I can definitely lunge from a lying position. It's a great way to wait for something to happen. But, I don't know. In a moment like this, just standing there seems like a lot less work and good enough.

He walks a few steps forward before he realizes I've stopped and turns to look at me with a concerned look on his face.

"What?" he asks. And then when I tilt my head, he sighs. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, I guess. Just. You're my best friend, right? We've known each other since first grade. And we've talked about everything. I know you're *you*, right? But now you're so *different*. And out of the corner of my eye, I don't see a human or a dragon, I see something like a dog. Because I trust you, and my brain really doesn't know what to do with the whole dragon thing! Dragons aren't real. Except you are now. And you're so relaxed right now, you don't feel like a threat to me? I think?"

After a moment's thought, I slowly bob my head. I can be OK with that explanation. Mostly. It still hurts to feel like our relationship is changing. I do feel like he just cannot understand what it's like to be me, now. And, in a way, I'm realizing that he never did. It's just that all the differences are super obvious.

Huh. I *was* really not a boy back then. The two of us always got along just fine, and we played together a *lot*. But I still always felt like I was different from him, and he'd always make assumptions about me that weren't quite

right, like everybody did. And now, looking back, I can see why.

But since he hasn't changed, and I'm just more me now, it feels like our friendship shouldn't be different. But it *is*, because what *he* sees when he looks at me is different from before.

And, that's what's happening with my family, too. Though, it's kinda nice with Travis, because yelling at each other all the time was actually hurting my ears.

But the only person who's not going through this with me is Megan. Because I didn't become friends with her until after I started changing. And I think she's sticking around because I'm a dragon, and she loves dragons.

Though, I guess that means our relationship has changed too. Just, for the better. Like, we didn't even have one before.

I feel kind of an ache in my heart as I realize I wish I was talking to Megan some more, rather than Heath. And Heath hasn't actually done anything to hurt me.

"Besides," Heath says. "I bet it's hard for you to reach that spot, yourself."

I glance at him, and then bow my head, leaning a little to the left, and reach up with my right forefoot and scratch exactly where he'd touched me. And then, for good measure, I put my foot down, snake my head up and to the other side, and do the same thing with my right wing claw.

Then I look at him again and hold my gaze.

"Ah."

I just start walking forward again, then look back at him and fluff my wings, as I go.

"Yeah, OK. I'll ask before I do anything like that again," Heath says. "Sorry."

“Kakch.”

He looks down at me. “You’ve been using that when you nod. Are you saying it’s OK or something?”

“Kakch.”

He laughs. “OK, sure.”

That’s exactly what it means.

I wonder if this is like how other animals often prefer women over men, just to be around. Like, who they trust and are more comfortable with. Or.

Am I a lesbian, and just still thinking of humans as my people? It’s not like I have any other people to talk to. I’m the only dragon I know of in the entire world, unless you count Komodo dragons, leafy sea dragons, and snapdragons.

The thing is, Heath touching me felt *gay*. I’m used to thinking of that sort of thing as gay, even though I’m not a boy.

And I’m seriously *not* a boy anymore. It shouldn’t matter. It should be like any animal getting scratches from any human.

But it’s just not.

The hug was OK, though.

It’s confusing.

We’re walking in more silence, and it’s just starting to get comfortable again what we get to the end of the downtown stretch and start to cross the bridge over the river. We’re on the left side of it, and Heath looks over the edge and across the gap to the train trestle that crosses the water several yards away.

There’s a square panel of metal in the middle of the trestle, and someone a few years ago painted the words “LET’S LISTEN TO METALLICA” on it. I’m sure Heath’s probably checking to see if it’s still there. It always

is. No one dares to paint over it. Not even the train company.

But then he says, “Looks like we’re not the only ones sneaking out of the house.”

Of course, I try to see what he’s looking at. And I can see better than he can.

The moon has been getting bigger in the last week, and it’s three quarters full now, so it’s casting a lot of light from the west. And the side of the trestle is facing southwest, so the reassuring graffiti is really visible. And so is the person who is walking along the tracks, right in the middle of them, sort of listlessly stumbling a little as he carefully makes sure his feet don’t fall through the cracks.

It’s more like he doesn’t care at all, but he’s going through the motions anyway, because that’s what you do.

He also isn’t carrying a spray paint can, so he’s not there to refresh the handmade sign, or add to it. He’s just walking down a train track in the worst place possible, heading the same way we are.

I was just thinking that Heath and I should turn around and start heading back. Our houses aren’t really that far away, but we do want to get home before alarms start waking parents up, right?

But, in my vividly accurate distance vision, tracked by eyes meant to hunt while flying, I see *Todd* doing something that looks *really* out of character for him.

I think the word that describes his posture and expression best, right now, is despondent. And I think I’m spelling that right?

Something tells me I need to close the distance between me and him, some kind of instinct. It’s urgent, and it feels a lot like my need to chase him off my property. He really doesn’t look like he needs that kind of bullshit right now,

but I guess I'm too confused and distracted by everything that my body just kind of goes on automatic, anyway.

Fortunately, I don't feel like I can jump across that gap yet. I have a sense that my wings are still too small to fly. But the bridge and the trestle get closer together as they cross the river, so I find myself picking up the pace, as if I'm going to intercept him at the train crossing ahead. Which won't be the easiest thing to do, because it crosses the road with another trestle that goes over it.

However, there's a stretch of land where the raised tracks are on an embankment of earth that passes behind a municipal property on the left side of the bridge there. And, I can run through the parking lot there and up that embankment to intercept him that way, and I'm thinking about how that's going to play out when I hear the train horn.

It comes from my right. Which means it's headed north. Which means it's coming from in front of Todd, as he's crossing the trestle. While he's three quarters of the way across the trestle, so he has to run toward the train to get out of it's way.

And he's *not running*.

He doesn't even look up.

"Hey!" Heath calls, as loud as he can. "There's a train!"

Todd looks at us, then back down at his feet. And he *stops*.

## Chapter 14 - Cheating Todd

**E**VEN THOUGH, IN MY transformation, my field of vision has expanded to the point that I can catch some people moving behind me in my periphery, I still pretty much just see what I'm focusing on. And, right now, I'm experiencing enough tunnel vision from being so alarmed at what's happening that when I move my head it feels like I'm watching a movie.

A quick pan to the right, and there's the train! It's a lot closer than I thought it would be, but obviously I was picking up the sound of it long before I realized it was there. Which is weird, because it's *loud*.

It should have entered my consciousness long before this moment. But, I guess, with trains passing through town with the regularity they do, I've learned to tune them out. I think I even miss when they blow their horns.

I didn't miss the horn this time, because it was just *that close*.

It's crossing the trestle that passes over Main street already.

Pan to left, and it's less than the length of a city block, maybe the width of a large building, before there's Todd,

standing forlornly on the trestle that's over the river, looking down at his feet, with nowhere to go.

I don't know how many times I've wished that this kid was dead. I've lost count *years* ago. And since my transformation into a dragon began, I've now started feeling the instinct to kill and eat him, which I've had to learn to fight because I don't actually *want* to be a murderer.

Or, I do. But I also really don't.

I've basically forgotten about Heath, who's beside me, a bit behind me, yelling and shouting about something. I don't think he recognizes Todd in the dark. He doesn't have my night vision or excellent ability to focus on distant details.

For a brief moment, I notice that I'm moving my head in little jerks this way and that to keep a focus on Todd, who is still *not* moving. And then, the next thing I realize is that I'm climbing up onto the railing of the bridge Heath and I are on.

"What? Wait! Fuck! What are you *doing*?" Heath yells at me.

There really isn't time to even think about this, let alone answer him with a voice I just do not have. I can run fast, but I cannot run fast enough to get off the bridge, cross the parking lot, dash up the track's embankment, and then beat the train to Todd.

Part of my brain is going, *That huge intrusive predator is about to take what is mine.* And another part of my brain is desperately trying to figure out if I'm thinking of Todd as food or as part of my hoard, or *what*?

But, the bulk of my conscious thought is focused on trying to figure out if my body really knows what it's capable of doing, because my head is moving back and

forth and side to side, as my butt is doing the same thing while I try to balance on the railing. I can feel my tail wagging behind me like an awkward but surprisingly useful pool noodle.

Is this what a cat—

And then I'm over the river, my wings spread as wide as possible. But as fast as my heart is now beating, and the speed at which my mind is panicking, fearing the frigid cold of the water, my eyes are still locked on Todd and the gap between the trestle's girders that I'm aiming for. If I can make it, I need to pull my wings in just enough to pass through, so my brain needs a sense of how wide that gap is. And every fraction of that distance that I move gives me a better idea of what that is.

I'm not sure I know just how wide my wings are, though.

I think I flapped, because I'm a lot higher in the air than I expected to be possible. And this is the ultimate in time-slowing-down-when-something-bad-is-happening, while I fall *horizontally*.

Heath is screaming, the train horn is blowing, brakes are squealing and hissing, and *I'm* probably hissing.

Or, maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm conserving oxygen and energy to get to *my* prey and remove it from danger.

It's going to be so close. It looks so much like I'm going to get T-boned by a train engine mid-leap. But I'm already committed, and I have no idea exactly what I'm going to be doing once I push Todd out of the way.

By all rights I should have fallen right into the river by now. I fully expect to slam into the trestle just below where Todd is standing. And then, if I do make it, I'm going to be pushing him off the other side and *probably* falling into the water below.

Because how the hell can I carry that scrawny dick of a sixth grader? He's almost the same size as I am.

And then the girders are passing my head, my wings are pulling in, *I'm right in front of the train*, my forefeet are finding perfect spots to catch and redirect my momentum, and my hind feet are landing right in front of them, and then I'm leaping at Todd with even more power than I had when I first took off.

And I slam into his shoulder with my chest, forelegs on either side, and reaching up with my hind heels to push on his hip and grip him there, while I flap my wings down and back as hard as I can.

It *feels* like the tip of my tail is hit by something massive, but it just swings one way, and then the other, and I'm wrapping myself around Todd more like a flying snake landing in a tree rather than gripping him like an eagle might a salmon.

And we hit the water.

Somewhere in there we moved off of the trestle, through the girders on the other side, and out of the way of the train, but I *cannot* figure out how that happened.



I'm not exactly dreaming, because I'm pretty sure I haven't lost consciousness, and I can feel what my body is experiencing and what it's doing even if I can't really make sense of it.

But the freezing shock of the river explodes like an atomic bomb in my mind, filling everything with a glaring glow that's familiar, and I'm having another conversation.

I think it's about damn time.

*We talk quite frequently and when it's necessary.*

Why am I doing this?

*Because you want to.*

Is this my purpose? Is this what I'm meant for? Is this why I'm a dragon?

*No.*

What is my purpose?

*You don't have one.*

What should I do?

*What you want to.*

...

Why am I a dragon?

*Because you've become a dragon.*

Is this cold going to kill me? It feels like it will.

*Not if you start a fire.*

I mean, a dragon *should* be able to breathe fire. But, *how?*



When I manage to get Todd to a bank, it's down stream, of course. And, stupidly, I've swum us fully across the river, the longest distance to shore, to the inside of the curve, instead of letting the current take us to the outside bank. Probably because I instinctually headed for home.

The one fortunate thing about this maneuver is that I'm pulling us up onto a pier that's part of the riverside park there.

I had a few things going for me that probably allowed *me* to survive this. Though, at this point, I don't even know if I can be killed, though cold definitely *feels* like my kryptonite.

I apparently have the instincts to swim with the body. And my tail and wings are more useful for doing that than I would have expected. And furthermore, I'm *really strong*.

Things that were working against me were, of course, Todd, his clothes, and the frigid cold. Also the strength of the current, but I didn't exactly fight that directly.

Or, at least, that's what I'm cataloging in my mind as I've caught us on the upriver side of the pier, water trying to drag us under it, and I'm trying to figure out how to get him up onto it.

He's not moving much, which is not a great sign.

Over the sound of the river lapping around me, I think I can hear Heath yelling and running.

I've got seven limbs to work with here, though, even if two them tend to catch a lot of water if I extend them under it. I try to keep my wings above the surface, reaching for the top of the pier as I push Todd up with my feet. And now I'm realizing I'm going to have to grip him with my claws to do this, and maybe I already have.

He's going to need stitches, if he survives this.

I'm trying to grasp his arms and legs, as being less likely to puncture anything important there, and it also helps me guide him to try to grip the pier himself. Which he's *not* doing.

This is not working at all, and I'm getting sluggish, and I'm sure that Todd has hypothermia already, too.

I sputter. I hiss. I rumble and thrash. And none of it does any good. It just saps me of energy.

And then Heath is there, gripping Todd by his arms and pulling.

Even with Heath there, the struggle is too long and too confusing, and it feels futile and I'm slowing way down. But, eventually, Todd is halfway up on the pier, and Heath has him and I can focus just on myself.

And suddenly, that's *way* easier to deal with.

I can swing my wings faster than the river is moving, as strong as the river is. Which means I can swim upstream. And, with a push against the pier, the swing of my tail, and my wings doing their thing, I rocket backward against the current.

Well, rocket is probably too strong a word for the distance I make, but it feels like what happens. And I just sort of know where I want to go next, and my body seems to know what to do to make that happen.

I curl forward and down, gaining momentum fast, and then bend up and rise, using that speed to leap up onto the pier next to where Heath is situating Todd and trying to shake him awake, or something.

Somehow I'm standing, and I have just enough energy to shake myself like a dog. I try to flap my wings while holding them closer to my body, so that I don't hit Heath or Todd with them. But Heath complains about all the water, and I have to step away from him, going out to the far edge to really whip up a wind and dry myself off as best I can.

“That’s *cold!*” Heath complains. “Oh, God. I don’t think he’s breathing! I gotta run to a payphone to call 911! Can *you* do CPR?”

I don’t know *how*. I’ve seen it done on TV, but we haven’t had that unit yet in PE or Science or Home Ec, or wherever they teach it. And, while I think we were taught in third grade or so, I can’t really remember what we learned.

And I definitely don’t think I can blow into his mouth. I don’t have the fingers needed to pinch his nose or pull his jaw down.

But I sure as heck can push on his chest repeatedly. And something has gotta be better than nothing.

So I step up and gingerly put my forefeet on his breastbone, carefully keeping my claws out straight, so as not to grip and puncture him. And then I look at Heath and push downward.

That was too hard! I hear Todd’s ribs break! Shit!

“No, that’s good!” Heath shouts, holding his hand out. “Keep doing that. Over and over. Um, um... sing something to keep the rhythm. In your head.”

The only thing I can think of is “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, which doesn’t seem as fast as I’ve seen this done on TV or in the movies, so I mentally sing that song faster than usual. And I just take Heath’s word for it that I’m not killing Todd with my pumping. But, I can’t help but do it more gently than before, because I don’t want to squish him flat.

And then Heath runs up the steps and climbs over the chain gate there, and stumbles away, flailing.

This is really, simultaneously the worst and most ridiculous moment of my entire existence. A little stripy dragon giving half a CPR to her childhood bully, while

her best friend runs to a phone to call for an ambulance. And it feels like it's too late.

Like, I'm embarrassed at how much I feel like I'm in some kid's show or cartoon, and that this just *can't* be real. Having recently tried to watch the Ewok Adventure is *not* helping with this feeling, either. But, like...

I'm also so cold, and feeling weaker by each exertion, and there's this *food* right under my claws. And it's important to me to not let myself *do* that.

And, I think part of it is that if I let myself kill and eat a human, then the other humans will do everything they can to kill me. And even if I'm impervious to whatever they throw at me, I just really don't want to experience that. I don't want to do that to my friends. I don't want to do that to my family. And I'm way past tired of bullying and pain.

Sometime during my pumping of his chest, I'm not counting, Todd's throat gurgles, and water comes out of his mouth. But he doesn't, like, start coughing it all up. It's more like I'm just pumping it in and out. And my heart breaks right then, because I think that means he's just dead.

Except, I know that what I'm also doing is keeping his blood flowing. And maybe there's still enough oxygen in that to keep part of his poor brain alive a little longer. And no one besides my own body is telling me to stop. I just don't know that it's OK to stop.

The cliché is that the masculine hero of the show is told by a female nurse that the patient is dead, and he should stop, but he's too determined and isn't going to listen to her, so he keeps going. But the reality of it, it turns out, is that the girl who's half-assing it because she *can't* do better

doesn't know that she's *allowed* to do anything else but keep going. And it's not going to end well.

I lose track of everything.

I push myself way beyond where I thought I could endure after the river sapped all that strength from me.

And I find myself lost in wishing that I could speak to the goddess again. Why isn't she helping me now, after distracting me in the river? Does she *want* Todd to die?

Or is it just what happens, because life ultimately exists to die?

Why do I *care*?

No. I've been over that already. I know what I *want*. I know the kind of world I want to live in, and the place I want in it, and dammit, I'm going to do everything I need to do to try to get there. And, right now, this is it. Even if *I hate this fucker's guts*.

I hate them so much, I absolutely refuse to give him the dignity of eating them.



I don't have another conversation with the goddess, or the universe, or life itself, whatever it is.

But I do once again lose full awareness of my movements, my surroundings, and the passage of time.

Maybe it's because what I'm doing is so rhythmic that it's automatic now, and I don't have to think about it. Maybe it's because I'm passing out from lack of energy, or just freezing to death myself, in the early Spring night.

But while I'm here, wherever here is, I'm aware of something that's always been here.

Much like the glowing source of the goddess herself, there are these radiances. I don't know what else to call them, except maybe motivations or emotions, but they're radiating, filling this space, filling *me* with their presence.

There are several of them, and they feel like different colors and smell like different temperatures and taste like different shapes, but two are particularly strong and bright.

There's my rage.

And then there's my sorrow.

Or, it's the rage of all the living things in the world, and the sorrow of all the living things in the world, and they're just mine as well. That's what it feels like.

And when I reach to touch either one, they fill me with all the memories of my life that carry them.

I could enumerate each. But, the truth is, I'm too exhausted from that life, that past, from enduring it all, to experience it again, so every time I do consider one or the other, I reflexively shy away.

Honestly, I kind of thought that these two emotions were one and the same. In my mind, they've been so entangled with each other, because everything I've been so angry about has also been everything that has brought me hopelessness and despair, sorrow. Whether it's bullying and harassment, my dysphoria, my family being just a little too terrible and just not quite understanding enough, or just the endless homework and no actual reward for doing it, it's all the same.

But apparently, they're two things. One that seems to cancel out the other, in a way. Because when I reach for one, the strength of the other diminishes.

I feel like, maybe, if I'm supposed to be able to radiate heat and breath fire, it needs an energy source, and these are the two brightest energy sources here.

But I don't like either of them for that.

What I want, what I've truly been yearning for this whole time, is simply my own agency. I want to be able to do what I feel like I *should* do, without anyone telling me that I can't.

And these emotions just stop me from doing that. They get in the way. They push me to do things that aren't what I really care about. Either to fight back with everything I've got against injustice or pain, with a wild abandon that can all too easily kill. Or to just curl up and surrender to death itself, like Todd had just been trying to do.

And I'm only twelve. I shouldn't be having to make that kind of choice at all. And neither should anyone else, not even Todd. Except, you know, that's just life, apparently.

And *fuck* the universe!

*Fuck* it for giving me what I want and turning me into a dragon with the ability to survive bullets, searing heat, and now an icy river, while giving Todd brain damage and then killing him beneath my own claws.

And *fuck* it for giving me a male body in the first place, when it so obviously hurt me to have it.

And suddenly I'm seeing things from the point of view of my rage, and there are still two strong sources of power that are not me.

I don't *care*, but there's that sorrow. And something else. Something distracting.

It's stronger than I am now, whatever it is. And I *need* it.

It can be the tool for my fury, to destroy the world in revenge for what it's done to me.

As I reach for it, I feel *intention* and I get visions of the future. Visions that don't match what I need, or want. Safety. Peace. Family. Agreement.

I try to hiss, but I can't do that here. All I am is rage itself.

But still, that's so powerful. It's grown so much larger than it used to be. I'm confused about where it even came from in the first place. It's just. It's aimed wrong. It hasn't had the right leverage, the right angle, to do the necessary work.

I realize I was there once, and that it was carrying me through the last few days of my life. But it wasn't enough. And with it so much brighter than I am now, it's obvious that I'm just not big enough for my lot in life.

And, of course, inevitably, I feel myself being pulled into sorrow, and its doom.

It would be *so* easy to just let my body die.

It's not like it should even exist anyway.

From this position in reality, I can clearly remember how I've been told that physics works that I've been burning more energy in my transformation and the powers it has been giving me than I've been consuming. Combining all the food I've been eating and the heat I've been soaking up, it still doesn't make sense.

Clearly, a dragon is a being of pure emotion. An entity that runs on more than mere chemistry and mechanics. And if you starve that dragon of its true source of power, its passion, it will cease to exist.

All I need to do is let go, and I won't have to experience any of this anymore.

Except that bright star in my soul, that hope, that determination, that *vision*, whatever it is, is reaching for *both* me and my rage.

It won't let me go, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

The last thing I think here is that it is so *unfair* that I have to live when Todd gets to have the relief of death.



“Holy shit! What the fuck is *that*?”

“*She* is a *dragon*! She’s doing CPR. Now get down there and help her save him!”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m fucking not!”

“How do you get her to stop doing that?”

“You *tell* her, dipshit!”

“Please don’t call us names, sir.”

“I can’t fucking believe this! Todd is going to *die* if you don’t *move*!”

“We’ll do what we can, sir.”

“Excuse me.”

“Talk to her like the person she is, dumbass!”

“Sir!”

“Excuse me, Miss?”

I open my eyes all the way, and there’s a man crouching in front of me about two yards away, as I’m pushing down yet again on Todd’s chest. But he looks *so* stupid with that terrified and bewildered expression on his face, and he’s *too close*.

*No, this is mine. You can't have it. You can't bully me into doing your stupid little rules and procedures. And I'm not going to let my own damn carelessness bring the peace of death to this shithead that's under my claws. I am going to choose his fate, not you.*

I hop backward off of Todd and hiss at the EMT with all of my might. To my own ears it sounds like gas escaping from a volcano.

I've never seen someone scramble away from me with such terror and uncontrolled panic before.

It's not satisfying, but it gets him out of my way.

And then.

Not quite knowing exactly what's going to happen, but feeling that internally blinding light that was me fill my entire being and expand within every cell, I take in the deepest breath I can to ignite it with *life*.

Rearing up on my hind legs helps with this, but also improves my aim and what I think will be the spread.

And then I open my mouth and expel almost all of it downward at Todd.

I'm sure that the entire town is bathed in the reflected glowing light that I've only seen in my dreams.

It's so bright that it shines off the night sky and comes back down.

Maybe the whole county sees it.

What's before me, though, is the fire of the world.

I can see nothing else. Not even what I'm standing on.

The whole time I'm exhaling, it feels like I and the whole world itself are being consumed by the three worst emotions in all of existence, catalyzed in my breath.

## Chapter 15 - My new life

**N**ONE OF IT IS fair.

None of *any* of all *this* is fair.

But there is a weird, beautiful, and ultimately inconsequential justice in the wake of what I've just done.

Todd, who I don't give a shit about anymore, is faced with the reality that I've saved his life against his will, and that he *has* to be grateful for it. Not just because everyone expects him to be, but because it's just the way he now feels.

I can see it on his face. He's conflicted. Wrapped in a blanket that the EMTs have needlessly given him, he's trying to decide if he should be angry that he's alive, or angry that he's not angry about that. And, at the same time, his breath is coming out strong like someone who is elated to feel the life flowing through his veins. Like he's trying to breathe the very same fire that I used to revive and heal him. To heal his brain, even. Possibly his soul.

But, he's going to have a lot to think about. Because I suspect that what I've done is give him a fraction of the power that started my transformation, and not the understanding of what to do about it.

Unless that goddess talks to him about it, he's going to go nowhere with it. And he'll be the same old Todd.

He still has the same family. The same feelings he had before. The same friends. The same enemies. The same values. The same shitty little human body.

He's still him.

But then, Heath comes up to him, an emergency blanket wrapped around his own shoulders, and crouches down to look in his face, to point back at me. And he says something.

"Todd? Listen to me Todd," Heath says. "You need to know who saved your life, right?"

And Todd looks at him in enough confusion that his usual enmity is drowned by it.

"I pulled you from the water," Heath said. "And if I hadn't done that, *she* couldn't have done what she did. So, you can blame me too."

I'm not sure that sinks into Todd's chaotic storm of a mind right now, but it is kind of funny to hear Heath explain that.

The EMTs are too stunned by what they've experienced to interfere with this.

We're still down on the pier. We haven't moved up into the park yet, even though the ambulance is usually where all the supplies are. I do think I see more lights up there than the ambulance. And a familiar looking police officer walks up to look over the bank at us. Her face is priceless.

"But her?" Heath points at me again. "*She's* Saoirse. A real life dragon. You've met her. She didn't just come out of nowhere. She used to be human. You know who she *was*?"

He is talking a little more slowly than necessary, and pronouncing things as clearly as possible. It sounds like

he's talking down to Todd, which is fair. Todd never really bullied him as badly as he did me, but Heath is my friend. And he's probably feeling pretty exhilarated by that.

But Todd is too full of life, energy, and wakefulness to zone out and ignore Heath's words, and he looks at me with dawning comprehension. He's putting two and two together, what he saw this morning with what he was told in math class and what he's just experienced.

"*She* used to be *Keith*," Heath tells him. Then he pokes Todd in the chest, and says, "And I think she should have *eaten* you."

One of the EMTs is back up on the bank of the park, talking to Officer Deedee Grey, telling her what happened.

That's also nice, but doesn't really matter, either.

I look down at my tail, which is curled over and around my feet. I'm doing that ludicrous hind sploot again, with my forefeet close together and propping my shoulders up. And my tail is long enough to wrap all the way around and touch my butt from the other side. I'm sure it's very silly looking, but it brings me so much pleasure just to see it. The end of my tail has a nice little diamond shaped spade on it, too. It's so classic.

And then I stretch out my wings to their fullest and look at them, one side and then the other. It looks like, together, they are five times as wide as I am long. And when they were folded up, they fit so nicely on my back, their digits curled up like slender fists.

I realize everyone is looking at me in awe, including a few more people I didn't know were here.

I laugh in what is to me an easy and happy way, and they all jump at the weird, animal sound.

What's really important to me is that I now know what I want to do with my life. And I have the ability to *do* it.

And there's so much work to be done, too.

But, first. I'm going home.

After all, I'm only twelve years old. I've got a lot of learning to do, to figure out how to really make the world a better place.

Also, I have things I want to tell Megan.

And I feel like I need to give my family a hug. Like, all at once.



It's been a couple months, and lots of smaller and easier things have happened, and school is out, but this is the next more important day. It really means something to me. I think I'll remember it always.

"Getting you a present was really hard," Jeffrey says. "Like, I know that you supposedly being a girl now doesn't mean your interests have changed. But as a *dragon*, what are you even going to *use*, right? But I thought of something, and I think you're going to like it."

"She *is* a girl," Megan scowls at him.

"I know! It's just—"

Megan raises her eyebrows at him, daring him to finish that sentence.

"I—"

She manages to raise her eyebrows even higher.

"Right." Then he addresses me, "Sorry, Saoirse."

So, I look down at my method of talking, this oversized keyboard that my dad made for me. It's quite the piece of

home engineering, and he spent a lot of time on it, even if it looks unfinished in some ways.

Its base is a very well sanded piece of high quality three-quarter inch thick plywood that he purchased at the lumber yard. I'm told that the keys are mounted on a set of heavy duty keyboard switches, and if I lower my head to the floor, or tilt thing thing up, and look at it sideways, I can see them, between all the homemade spring bars he made for them, too. There's a circuit board for it set into a hollowed out cavity in the underside of the base. And the keys are made from squares of dark brown Formica with the characters spray painted on in yellow paint with stencils.

It's just like a regular keyboard, but four or five times bigger. And it's hooked up to an ancient Atari 400 and a little 9" black and white TV from Goodwill. We don't use a program for it yet, just an Atari Basic cartridge to provide a prompt I can use to type things in, so people can read it. But, it works pretty well!

The TV sits on the raised stone shelf of our gas fireplace in our living room, and I'm off to the side, in the corner of the room.

And I type below the prompt:

THANK YOU

Talking to anyone now days takes so much more work, I've got to choose my words pretty carefully, and that makes me think them over. I decided that being perfectly polite was the easiest and fastest way to get past this little blunder of Jeffrey's, and acknowledging his apology would probably be better than saying that it's OK. Which would have been my impulse not too long ago.

I don't know. I'm frustrated, really. It's been a while now, and the difficulties of communicating between dragon and human are starting to get to me.

Even though my friends visit regularly for us to go outside and play in the woods when it's nice, or go for walks when we feel daring, or sit around my keyboard and talk when no one wants to be outside, I feel way more removed from than before. I've gotten pretty good at showing them I'm still me, and that I can still think and string together words, and they've gotten used to talking to me like I'm not a dumb animal. Which, they never really did, anyway. Though, some of our neighbors definitely do, when they're just not avoiding me altogether. But I am *not* my old self, and there's just no way around that.

And when I make a noise, it's either a rumble, a hiss, or some kind of bird-like whistle or chortle.

But they all came over for my birthday, and are going to have cake for me, while I eat a *steak*, so it's still a good day.

And, I'm also realizing that there's something about having a group of humans gather around to hand me gifts that feels like it's out of a storybook, now. Or something more ancient. Like, birthdays always sort of had that feeling for me, but now it's *really* strong. As if my judgment is *important*.

Maybe everyone has a different kind of body language now. Or, maybe I'm just noticing it more. Where they're all looking at me expectantly, and it doesn't actually bother me anymore.

Also, I don't have hands with which to receive a gift, but I have talons and teeth that are pretty darn good for opening them! So, Jeffrey is forced to place his gift to me

on the floor in front of me and then sit back. And there's something about that that makes it like an offering.

And I can tell by Megan's twinkling smirk that she sees it that way, too.

The size and shape of the present tells me exactly what it is, though. Except that it looked heavier than it should be. So, maybe it's a dice box full of pretty rocks? It's small, with sharp corners. Square in one set of dimensions, but tall and rectangular otherwise. If you're a gamer, you've seen this box so many times, you know it contains a D20, D12, 2D10, D8, D6, and a D4.

And, like, I've already got a dice bag full of dice, and don't really need any more. And, I can't use them very well, anymore. I have to get other people to roll them for me. And, gaming without talking is harder.

But, he said that he'd ruled things out that I couldn't *use*, so what's in the box?

When I tilt my head at Jeffrey incredulously, Heath chuckles and pats the huge present that's propped up next to him.

"Yeah, what'd you get her, Heath? Some kind of cute plushie?" Jeffrey snipes at him.

"You'll see," Heath says.

"I'm sure all your presents are fine," Mom says. "Come on, Saoirse, open it and say thank you!"

I huff at her. She doesn't need to tell me what to do like I'm three, dangit.

But then I get to work. I start by gently knocking the little box over onto its side, and then pinning it down with my left forefoot. Then, I use one of my right talons to puncture the wrapping at the bottom of the box, where there's a hollow in the plastic base of it. Hooking the paper, I pull and rip it.

The rip is pretty small, though.

This is actually pretty fiddly and takes a bit of concentration.

“I mean, I can—” Jeffrey starts to say, leaning forward to help. But I look up at him and he freezes.

Not from eye contact, just my expression. I flick my tongue at him.

Which gives me an idea.

I end up licking the paper off, because my tongue has little raspy barbs on it like a cat’s.

It is, indeed, a dice box.

And it is, actually, full of a set of dice.

But they’re metal!

A very pretty, fairly mesmerizing yellowish metal.

“They’re brass,” Jeffrey says. “And I got them for you because they’re *shiny!* I would have gotten you actual gold dice, but those are frickin’ expensive.”

I reverently pick them up with my mouth and put the box on the bench of the mantel, before typing my response.

**RAD! THANK YOU! SHINY GOOD**

This program is *not* going to be able to run, but that’s OK. It’s not supposed to.

And I actually really do appreciate the dice. I mean, it’s like he’s saying that I’m still a gamer, and that these dice are *mine*. But, they’re themed like a gift to a dragon. Like they’re supposed to go in my hoard.

And that makes me feel way better than I expected, actually.

I might not actually let anyone else touch them, now that I’m thinking about it. I’ve got other dice for that.

“I was thinking you’d probably keep them on your windowsill, where they can catch the light, actually,” Jeffrey says.

Heath nudges him. “Dude. You totally gave her pretty rocks!”

“I know I did.”

“Alright! Mine’s next!” Heath declares and pushes his gift towards me. It would come up to his knee if he were standing, and I have no clue what it could be. It’s not exactly light looking either.

Opening it is way easier, and viscerally more satisfying. The cardboard box that it’s in doesn’t survive unscathed. It’s not like my claws are X-acto blades or anything like that. They’re not razor sharp. And Mom insists on clipping them so that I don’t scuff the floors any more than a dog would. But cardboard is so soft and satisfying to tear, too. Most of the marks in it are in service of tearing the paper, but only most.

And then, when Heath says, “Oh, come on, you can’t hurt what’s inside,” I then destroy the box.

It’s a plush cow. Made from what looks like old leather. And, the way it moves, and the weight of it, makes me think it’s full of sand. Or something like it. Small rocks, maybe.

So, yes. It is a plushy. But it looks like one made for a wolf dog, maybe. Which is kinda cool?

Where did he get this?

Hold, on. These seem like expensive gifts. Why am I getting such good gifts?

Heath is grinning even wider.

I have to ask:

RICH PERSON PET STORE?

He laughs. “No, dumbass. My mom fucking *made* that for you! After you and I helped save Todd, she started working on it right away. Said it was for your birthday. I think it was because I told her about how you stared at the cow that one time.”

“Heath. Language,” Mom says quietly, obviously not expecting him to pay attention.

“Sorry, Mrs. Michaelson,” he responds.

OH WOW! TELL HER THANK YOU

“I will!”

This one gets a little less care, but no less reverence, when I pick it up to move it aside. I feel like being ginger with it would be disrespectful, actually. It looks like it’s made to last, though I could also totally destroy it if I *wanted* to. Easily.

But, it’s a *cow*.

I place it next to my left haunch and then turn expectantly to look at Indigo and Megan.

Indigo sighs and then looks at Megan, “Mind if I go next?”

She pouts and shrugs amiably, gesturing for him to do so.

“Alright,” Indigo says. “I know you’re probably going to need some help with this one. And be more careful unwrapping it. But, I know how much you like books, and I bet you miss them already. So, I got you some books. *And* a book holder! I hope that’s OK.”

The book holder isn’t even wrapped, because, while it is quite the gift for someone who needs to be hands-off while reading, it’s obviously not what he’s excited about. And when Indigo gets excited, instead of sounding like it like other people, he just overexplains things.

But the book holder is a nice folding metal frame, and I take the time to utterly destroy the box it's in, in order to get it out and put it on the mantel shelf, next to the dice. Unfolding it is a bit of a trick, but between tooth and claw, I manage. I've had practice with a bunch of other things at this point.

And then I get to the books, which is obviously a large box set, and instead of risking it, I look at Mom and push it slightly toward her.

"Oh, yes! I can do that for you!" she says. Then she exclaims as she's lifting them, "Oof! This is heavy!"

While she's overly carefully doing that, I take the time to thank her via the keyboard, but she's not looking.

Mom ends up meticulously refolding the paper-shopping-bags-as-wrapping-paper that Indigo had used and putting it next to her chair before turning the box set over in her hands. But as soon as Megan sees what she's holding, she gasps.

"Oh! *The Lioness Quartet!* The last book just came out!" She opens her mouth in excited anticipation, and then carefully closes it, flashing her twinkling eyes in my direction. "I'd love to read that to you, Saoirse. But if your mom wants to, that's fine, too."

Indigo gestures to the book holder. "I mean. That's what the—"

"Oh, don't be silly," Megan says. "Those paperbacks will never fit in there."

"Well, if you want to read these to Saoirse, I don't mind," Mom says. "But, I'd love to, as well. Maybe I'll just read them myself as you finish them."

"They're *so* good! Tamora Pierce is such a good author!"

“She is,” Indigo agrees, leveling a very serious look my direction.

THANK YOU

I follow that with what I hope is a pleased sounding noise, because I really don’t know what else to say. I *really* look forward to listening to stories being read to me. Especially by Megan, I think.

“I’ll get you something big, like the *Sillmarillion*, for the bookholder,” Indigo promises needlessly. But I can’t tell him ‘no’ to that.

THANK YOU!

“That is an extremely thoughtful gift, Indigo,” Megan tells him. “I think Saoirse’s going to really love it.”

He smiles.

“Alright! My turn!” Megan crows. And then, with the smuggest smirk, she pulls a medium sized box out of her backpack. Like, it’s nearly halfway between Jeffrey’s gift and Heath’s in size, but it still fit in her bag. And it’s wrapped in silver colored paper with a gold bow. And then she places it in front of me. “I put it in a slightly larger cardboard box, to protect it, because the wood is still nice,” she tells me. “So, be a little careful opening it? But you can probably lick that paper off, and just open the cardboard with your nails.”

I grunt and bob my head, and get to work.

“And I don’t care about the paper. You can even eat it! I just thought it looked kind treasury,” she adds.

I end up tearing it off in sizeable chunks and turning to spit it out.

And she’s right about popping the cardboard box open. I just bite one of the flaps and pull, and the scotch tape snaps and it opens. The other flap is just as easy. The

smaller flaps are a little fiddly with my claws, but kind of fun to work.

And inside is a wooden box with a queen of hearts, a jack of spades, a king of clubs, and a joker carved into the top of it. The finish is matte, like it's sanded and stained but not much else. It's old looking, and it does have a few scuffs.

Then I hook my claws into the spaces between the two boxes and pull the cardboard one apart and away from the inner one.

The wooden box has a small latch on it, and it's closed. I end up having to push it away from me, so that I can lower my head enough to try see what I'm doing, looking out of my right eye. Holding the box down with one paw, I use a talon from the other to push the rotating latch open.

Knocking the lid open after that isn't too tricky.

It's full of jewelry. A tangled mess of pendants, chains, earrings, bracelets, and rings.

"It's all my old stuff I don't wear anymore, plus a bunch of things I found at the thrift store!" Megan says. "I know you probably won't wear much of it. But it's a hoard! A proper hoard!"

I snort and trill and type:

**THANK YOU SO MUCH!**

Exclamation points are extra work, but so much easier on this keyboard than on the other, and I'm proud of being able to do them at all.

I have to admit to myself that I have mixed feelings about this gift, though. I mean, my immediate reaction is elation and feeling seen in at least two different ways. But, when I realize that I'm not going to be wearing any of this around my neck, or wrists, or ears, I feel a bit sad about it. I don't care that it's all hand-me-downs. Somehow that

makes it all that much more special. But realizing that maybe if I had been a human girl I would have liked *some* jewelry to wear is a melancholy thought.

I don't express that to Megan in any way. It would be too much work to do so, and I do realize it's not nice to tell friends what you didn't like so much about their gifts. And with this, it's less the gift, and more what my life has become. Not everything is good.

Otherwise, it's just as perfect as the others.

I also can't move this box with any sort of gracefulness, so I indicate that I'd like it placed next to Jeffrey's gift, and Megan takes care of it.

"So, OK! How about cake?" Mom claps her hands.

"Finally!" Travis shouts.

"Hey." Dad nudges him in the shoulder. "We do it the same way for your birthday, kiddo."

"Yeah, but she types so *slow!*"

I really do not.



"OK, so. The latest is that, after school let out, Todd and Marcus had a big falling out, and they're no longer the goon squad," Jeffrey reports. "Like, I just heard about this. But you know how Todd has been so different after your thing with him, it makes sense. He's still an asshole. But now he's an asshole at Marcus."

"I mean, Marcus started bullying *him*," Megan says.

"Yeah. That, too," Jeffrey agrees.

“Next year is going to be so different,” Heath says. “It’s been weird without you there.”

I rumble at a higher pitch than usual, so that they all can hear it. It seems like a good way of saying ‘yeah, I know...’

“I think, really, the whole world is different now,” Indigo counters. “It’s a world with a *dragon* in it. We didn’t have that before.”

“Right. *Our* dragon,” Jeffrey adds.

“You guys keep saying that,” Megan complains.

“Because it’s just true!”

“Right.”

“OK, so. Game!” Heath declares. “More LARPing? Or, should we try the Merc game? Or something with Saoirse’s new dice? Warhammer?”

After thinking about it a little bit, I get up from my spot on the back porch and waddle down to my box of writing sand.

### SCRABBLE

“Oh, come on, you always say that!” Heath whines.

“I like scrabble,” Indigo interjects to support me.

Jeffrey scowls at him. “Dude. You *dominate* scrabble.”

I pull rank this time, though.

### IT’S MY BIRTHDAY

“It’s sort of a four player game, though, isn’t it?” Megan asks. “There are five of us.”

I rub out my old words and write new ones.

### YOU BE MY HANDS

“Oh. Great! So, the girls against the boys?”

### YES

She studies me for a moment, while the others frown at each other. Then she says, “We will still need a way to communicate with each other that they can’t hear or see. Pointing only *kinda* works.”

I mean, we can just set up my keyboard and atari so that only she and I can see the screen. It'll take up a lot of space, but I think we can figure out how to do it. But, as a joke that only two of us will get, a sort of whimsical reference to our favorite old books, I write a different suggestion first.

### TELEPATHY

Obviously, it's pointless bullshitting, and the look Megan gives me tells me she's having none of it.

But, also, I think, she wishes we could have a telepathic link with each other.

It *would* be pretty damn cool.

"Oh! You two could use the Atari and keyboard," Indigo suggests, totally thinking along the same lines as me. "You could even put your letters on top of that little TV. It's flat enough!"

It's a good suggestion, so we do that.



So, it's been a while since that little early morning adventure with Heath and Todd, and I've had more growing to do.

You know, a few months, with my birthday in there. The town tried to hold a party for me, even, which was weird and located at Pioneer Farm. And it had local reporters there who wanted to interview me.

And then there was this movie that came out in July called *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, that I wanted to watch with all my friends and their families. And despite what I am, or maybe because of it, we made it work.

When I fold up my wings, I can still fit into a house. So a theater really isn't that much of a problem.

And what theater does a 13-year-old life breathing dragon go to in order to see a movie?

Any one she wants to.

Communicating *still* isn't all that easy for me. I still can't talk, and I don't think I will ever be able to. And that big keyboard with an old Atari hooked up to it that my dad made so I can type up words on a screen in the living room isn't all that portable. But, those conversations there with my family and friends have helped them to speak for me when we're out and about.

And they can just ask me the appropriate questions and I can just nod or shake my head. And *no one* argues with that for long. Especially if I casually show my teeth with a yawn.

It's not a threat. It's just boredom. It's not my fault if they take it that way.

After all, I'm a perfect lady. Anyone who shows me the courtesy due to anyone, will receive the same in kind, even *before* they do so.

I don't *have* to hurt people. There's just simply no need.

And, I think I'm pretty happy with that.

It's still taking me time to fully overcome my instincts and my learned reflexes from what is to me a lifetime of being mistreated and bullied. But I've proven to myself I have control over all that. And the safety I enjoy from just *being me* makes it easier.

So, anyway, my days lately have been spent sleeping on my parents' roof, in the sun, the rain, the storms, and the calm, wings spread out and just soaking up whatever sun reaches them. Except for when my friends come over.

Then I play in the woods with them, or just hang out and talk, or whatever. And I nap a bit at other times to make up for it.

In the mornings, I eat a modest breakfast with my family. And in the evenings, we share dinner, and I watch TV with anyone who's in front of it. Or I let any one of them read a book to me. Sometimes we play games. We're a family, it's what we do. Just, when they're all at work or school, that's when I sleep and guard my territory from the center of it. Our house.

I'm letting Travis select things from my hoard to be part of his. Because that's what older sisters do when they have things they don't need anymore. And I'm thinking about what I want to keep for myself, and what I should give away. And what I want to collect next. My clothes, of course, will be his when he grows into them.

The plushies are off limits to everyone, though. I'm keeping those.

We don't have a lot to fight over anymore. Except like, maybe the best place to sit. Or whether or not he needs to get up so that I can change my position.

It's funny. To me, it feels less like it's because I'm a dragon, and more like, as his older sister, I realize I've got other priorities. But I do know how he sees me. It's in the way he idly scratches the top of my head while I rumble.

And then, at night, when they all sleep, I go flying to see just how much territory I feel I can claim.

There aren't any other dragons around, that I know of.

The news says I'm the only one.

So, it's really just a matter of how far I can fly in a nightly circuit. And that's getting bigger and wider fast.

The news is weird, though.

Like, Reagan had a summit with Gorbachev, and now they've banned "intermediate nuclear weapons", and I don't know what that really means. There's dangerous medical waste washing up on the beaches on the East Coast. And I think there was a riot somewhere. An airliner was shot down by the U.S. military.

A lot of things are going on, but they always have been. I mean, we all know about the Iran-Contra Affair, because it's dominating the news. And it's an election year. Which dredges up all sorts of accusations and stuff.

It's just, now *I'm* the subject it seems like half the time.

I know I've had my picture taken a lot, by reporters, by scientists, and by the military. Often without asking. And my parents have been interviewed, as have a few other people. But, somehow, we're not being *totally swamped* by press and attention seekers. It's like those kinds of people learn pretty quick to keep their distance from me and anything and anyone I deem to be mine. Or, it's like no one dares test the one and only dragon anyone's ever seen. Maybe because there are centuries of stories about what happens to most people who do that.

A gout of my flame does tend to cool things off, in an ironic way. The fun part for me is how a bunch of plants start growing wherever I breathe it. But it's super scary looking.

Anyway, that is *all* reflected in the talk shows and grand standing politicians that dare to talk about me on TV.

So, it's on a day in August, when my brother is off visiting a friend so that Mom can work with Dad, who is tending his shop, that one of those big banana choppers boldly flies from all the way past the mountains in the East to come and land right in the middle of the street in front of my house.

Like, all the power lines are underground here, and a couple of the houses are far enough back from the street without trees in their lawns, that there's *technically* room.

It's still *rude*. And probably against some rule somewhere. *I* don't like it. That's my airspace.

But I watch them come the whole way, from my bed on my parents' roof, since the first hint of a noise I heard from way off.

It takes them several minutes to get here, and I'm just, like, *Really?*

If they really want to say something to me, I'm going to have to invite them inside in order to use one of the computers to "talk" to them. Or use my sandbox out back, I guess.

And, they're going to be pretty disappointed by what I have to say.

Because whenever I pay attention to whatever any government in the world is doing, including the U.S.—especially the U.S.—it looks and sounds an awful lot like bullying to me.

And I don't tolerate bullying.

## Other books by the Inmara

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*our one fanfic (on AO3 – will never be for sale or hosted  
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TWO-WAY MIRROR MOUNTAIN

## About the authors

Their Excellencies the Inmara Fenumera are visiting dignitaries from the world of Kepekape, whose tidally locked vessel is currently in a stationary on-Earth orbit near Portland, Oregon. Face to face, they resemble a middle-aged autistically plural trans enby with three girlfriends, a cat, and an electrically impaired mobility scooter. That Kepekape is largely within their head when it is not expanding across the pages of a book is merely a technicality that might otherwise get in the way of acquiring a latte and a muffin on occasion.

Their demographics include a growing number of girls, id monsters, and dragons. And their GDP is deplorable.

However, their chief export, fiction, currently remains unabated.

It is also their chief import.

It is rumored that they sometimes read or write about the lives of human beings. However, evidence for this is scant.