Hive Mind

Chapter 14

“Okay, FINE, but only so you stop moping.”

“I’m not moping.” Arro was definitely moping. He hated how easily the Darkal could read his emotions. Although now, at the Darkal’s offer, he brightened. “So… really? You’ll come to the gym?”

“Will it make you stop moping?”

Arro scowled and crossed his arms over his protruding paunch. The soft flab jiggled as he moved.

“That’s literally a textbook-picture of what moping looks like.”

Arro sighed and looked away. “Well… I’d love if you went to the gym with me.” He knew Rangavar was only agreeing because he felt obligated to go, and Arro felt a bit guilty, but appreciated the gesture. He was planning to be super gentle about working out, though, hoping he could trick—er, convince—Rangavar into coming back.

The Faerian didn’t have to be able to read emotions to feel Rangavar’s reluctance as he entered the gym behind him. Two friendly faces greeted Arro at the front desk, both of which he was becoming too familiar with. Not that he had some sort of weird opposition to interacting with employees, but rather, whenever he needed to interact with them was usually the result of Kraz hogging all of the weights, and the employees would have to inevitably get more. He’d come to associate them with his Kraz-encounters.

Blissfully unaware, Rangavar gave them a friendly wave as they walked by.

“Where do you want to start?” Arro asked. “I usually start off by going straight to lifting.”

“I might do some floor exercises,” said Rangavar carefully, which Arro knew meant that he was going to spend most of the time sitting around watching or doing nothing.

“You know you could use some of the equipment or machines, right? You can make the workout as light as you want. I just don’t use them because I’m too, uh… big, for most of them.” He felt his face heat up. If he got stuck or broke something, it would put an end to his ventures to the gym. At least until all of the current employees quit and any patrons who saw, decided to never return.

Rangavar bit his lip as he stared towards the workout machines. “I don’t know… I might do a few, uh, warmups. Pushups and stuff.”

Arro rolled his eyes. “You can do pushups at home.”

“I’d rather be at home,” Rangavar pointed out. “I’m here because you wanted me to come.”

Arro supposed he couldn’t argue with that. “I mean… alright.” He didn’t want to pressure him too hard.

Although he hadn’t told Rangavar the reason, he was actually immensely relieved to be with someone else at the gym. He’d been mostly brushing off Kraz’s hurtful comments and intimidation, but they still weighed on him. Well, he had a lot weighing on him. Emotionally and physically.

Things were better when he was with Rangavar, though.

They went about their separate exercises while remaining nearby. Soon enough, Arro was immersed in his element, his muscles burning and sweat beading off his brow. His body jiggled with his movements, the creases of his fat pressing together with every purposeful motion, but he enjoyed the sensation of his body working hard. He didn’t feel ashamed of it right now. He didn’t feel ashamed of anything.

It was a while later, as Arro was in the middle of doing squats while holding a bar of weights over his shoulders, that he glanced over to see Rangavar leaning back on a floor mat, breathing hard. He was watching Arro as he rested.

Arro finished the set and put the weights down to wipe off some sweat. “Tired of pushups?”

Rangavar scowled. “I did more than that. You know there’s more exercise you can do on a floor mat other than pushups, right?”

Arro’s bulging gut heaved as he stretched and caught his breath. He splayed his wings and fanned them lightly to give himself some cool air. “Are you sure you weren’t just admiring the view?” he teased.

“It’s a great view,” Rangavar agreed. “I could just sit here.”

“You were already just sitting there.”

Rangavar scowled again.

“Why don’t you try a bit of lifting?”

“Ha. No.”

Arro pressed his index fingers together. “You’ve probably gotten stronger since the last time you were here. Or, uh, the last time you were here with me.” He wasn’t sure how recently Rangavar and his friend had gone. He thought it safe to assume the small dragon hadn’t done a whole lot of lifting, though.

Rangavar eyed the weights uncertainly. Arro began to take weights off the bar he’d been using. It technically wasn’t very many, because they all happened to be the massive ones.

“You’re just going to make fun of me.”

“I won’t make fun of you,” Arro promised. Or, he tried to promise. He wasn’t really sure if he were lying or not. It sort of depended on how funny it would be to watch Rangavar try lifting weights. “I mean, we can just make sure not to give you more than you can handle.”

Still looking a bit unsure, the smaller dragon pushed himself up and made his way over. “Can I safely assume that if I try lifting weights, you’ll stop pressuring me?”

“You know, you’d probably really *like* it if you just did it correctly and at your own pace. You treat the gym like it’s some sort of torture chamber when in reality, it’s whatever you decide it to be based on what you’re feeling.”

Rangavar didn’t look impressed by his speech.

“We could, I don’t know, use the punching bag or something instead?” Arro grinned a bit. “It might be cute to watch you attack something bigger around than you are.”

The Darkal wrinkled his snout. “The punching bag is not ‘bigger around’ than me.”

“Hmmm…” Arro made a show of looking him up and down.

Rangavar rolled his eyes. “Oh shut up. You’re being mean.”

“If it makes you feel better, I can’t use it either.”

Rangavar looked at him questioningly.

“A punch or two would break it,” Arro fake-lamented, trying to stifle his small grin.

“I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not.”

Now he grinned. “Can’t you use your special Dar—I mean, *unspecial* Darkal magic, to tell if I’m kidding?” He waved a paw. “I guess I’m sort of half-kidding. I mean, I feel like I might be able to if I really, really tried.” If he were angry enough, maybe. If he were frustrated enough.

Maybe if Kraz were here.

“You should prove it.” Rangavar cracked a small grin of his own.

“If I get banned from the gym, it puts a permanent end to my exercise regimen.”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t be able to beg me to go anymore, that would be awful.”

Arro crossed his arms, as best he could over his large, overhanging belly. “You should try to do at least *one* thing before we go home.”

The Darkal sighed with exasperation. He glanced around. “You know what? Maybe I will try to use the punching bag. But don’t, uh, stare at me,” he asked, in a more serious tone.

“I won’t ‘stare’,” Arro assured him.

Rangavar looked relieved.

“I’ll just ‘admire’ you.”

Rangavar scowled.

Arro waved him away. “Fiiine. I won’t watch. I’m going to do a few more exercises, then we’ll go.” He watched the Darkal turn away. “Hey Rangavar?”

The other dragon paused and glanced back. “Yeah?”

Arro pressed his index fingers together. “Thanks for coming to the gym with me. I mean, I know you didn’t actually want to. But I do appreciate it.”

Rangavar nodded slowly. “Well, you owe me now.”

“Heh. That’s fair.”

It turned out Arro had been lying about not watching, although he fortunately hadn’t known it at the time of saying so. He ended up taking a breather at some tables on the side of the room while watching the smaller dragon attack the bags. Ironically enough, as Arro watched Rangavar beat the shit out of them, he noticed the lithe dragon seemed to have a fair amount of fighting experience. He started to wonder if that might be the key to bringing Rangavar back to the gym.

The Darkal caught him watching and stopped to glare back. Shit.

Arro gave him an awkward thumbs-up. “You’re doing great!”

He saw Rangavar glance back at the bag and tiredly wipe his forehead. Arro wanted to tape his own mouth shut for ruining the moment. What he did instead was push himself up and head over, resisting the urge to rest his paws on top of his round, heavy gut as he lumbered across the gym room floor.

The Darkal crossed his arms and watched him when he noticed the Faerian arrive. Arro tried to slow his panting slightly. “Do you need any help?”

Rangavar wrinkled his snout. “It’s a punching bag. What would I possibly need help with?”

“I just... I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

The smaller dragon put a paw behind his head to rub the base of his black horns, looking away towards the side of the room. “I think I’m done in here, actually, if you’re ready to go. I’m getting tired.”

Arro thought he could be content with leaving if it would ensure Rangavar didn’t feel too pressured. “Okay.” He was feeling satisfied with his own workout anyways. And he supposed carrying the layers of blubber that encased his body was like a bonus-workout in and of itself. It didn’t help that he’d been putting off the gym more often lately. He needed to stop that.

As they began to head for the exit, he gave Rangavar a reassuring half-grin. “I think you did a great job.” Arro stretched his wings again. It helped him cool down. “Maybe you should come back for the punching bags, if nothing else.”

When they passed through the doors, Rangavar finally threw up his paws. “You’re so patronizing.”

Arro frowned. “I’m not patronizing you! I just think you’re cute.”

Rangavar crossed his arms. “That’s patronizing.”

“You call me cute all the time.”

“That’s different.”

Arro snorted. “How so?”

“I don’t say it to be patronizing.”

Arro rolled his eyes. “I just noticed you’re really good at beating stuff up. You should come back and do that more.”

“You’re still just trying to get me to come back to the gym.”

“You know what? Don’t go back.”

Rangavar glanced at him with his brow furrowed.

Arro waved a paw. “Be small and weak so I can hold you and grab you and squeeze you and you won’t be able to stop me.”

Rangavar was quiet a long moment. “You know, that might actually be your most convincing argument for going to the gym yet.”

He was in a better mood by the time they returned home. Arro managed to get to the shower first, fortunately, since Rangavar always took for-fucking-ever.

The large dragon turned and inspected himself in the mirror before the steam fogged it up. He patted his belly, watching the ball of lard jiggle, the largest roll wrapping all the way around to quiver at his sides while the next largest sat on top, and then the next, the bulging pudge folding over itself as it fought for more room. He sighed as he watched the way his gut sagged heavily beneath the weight of his bad decisions. As much as he hated to admit it, he’d started struggling again. At least he knew why.

Fuck Kraz. Arro couldn’t seem to get his mind off him.

He sighed. At least he always felt a bit better after working out. Especially this time, since he’d finally been able to drag Rangavar along. He hoped that might happen more and more.

After he and Rangavar had traded places in the shower, he went and lay on the couch to await the smaller dragon. It wasn’t long before Rangavar joined him, his dark scales smooth and clean. When he sat, he leaned into Arro, sinking into the larger dragon’s soft flab. The Faerian wrapped a paw around him and pulled him close.

“We should do that again,” said Arro hesitantly. He was afraid of sounding pushy.

Rangavar was quiet for a long moment. “Maybe,” he allowed.

Arro tried to seem unfazed, but already knew that the Darkal could feel his emotions jolt with excitement.

“I only said ‘maybe’,” Rangavar immediately reminded him.

Arro leaned over and nuzzled the back of Rangavar’s head, the sea of fat spread over his lap making it hard to reach. He didn’t let it stop him. “I’ll take it for now.”

Rangavar turned his head to suddenly kiss Arro on the mouth. When he pulled away, he said, “Next time I want to do something you don’t feel like, you’re obligated to come.”

“Heh. That’s a trade-off I think I can live with.”

Rangavar leaned his head back on the massive paunch that took up Arro’s frontside. “What do you want to do now?” He finally cracked the barest grin. “Time for lunch?”

Arro rolled his eyes. “After we *just* finished burning off all those calories?” He’d meant that to be the end of his statement, but just then, his gut decided to add its own final comment with an unmistakable gurgle. He blushed.

Rangavar stared knowingly at the fat dragon. “What are you in the mood for?”

The larger dragon sighed. He gave the question some genuine thought as he sank farther into the couch. “Not pastries.” He knew that was definitely not the type of food he needed after a workout.

Rangavar snorted.

Arro went on, “Do you want to order in? I don’t feel like making anything.” He could use some standardized carbs right now.

The Darkal appeared to think for a moment. “We haven’t in a while,” he slowly agreed.

“That’s true.” Arro wasn’t picky. And it was their day off. They deserved to treat themselves.

He suddenly thought back on the last time they’d gone to a restaurant together. Well, the only time. Going to a restaurant might actually be fun too, but he supposed they probably shouldn’t go back to that one.

“Want to go to a restaurant?”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Arro resisted the urge to run his paws over his belly, squeezing it, judging whether or not he’d worked out hard enough to warrant a night out.

Rangavar noticed and grabbed his paws to still them. “It’ll be fun.”

They were interrupted by the buzzing of a wristband. Arro sighed. He could understand why Rangavar longed for the days before they existed; they usually just prevented anything from being done.

He was surprised to see that his own wristband wasn’t the culprit this time, however. Rangavar was frowning down at the band on his more slender wrist.

“Let me see.” Arro was already reaching over. He turned Rangavar’s arm and frowned at the screen.

“What is it?”

“It’s… it’s the research facility.” Arro’s eyes scanned the alert screen. He couldn’t really make sense of the message. He supposed it was a bit similar to the last weird message they sent a few weeks ago, which he realized that he’d continuously forgotten to ask about. “It says ‘Extra security personnel needed’. What does that mean?”

This time, Rangavar seemed just as confused. He stared blankly at the screen. “Does it say anything else? Is it calling me in?”

They both glanced out the window. The afternoon shift was already in full progress by now. Arro looked back to the wristband. “I mean… If they’re messaging you on your day off, do you think you’re supposed to?”

The Darkal seemed uncertain. But he finally let out a sigh. “Maybe. I guess…”

“The worst that could happen is you show up, and they send you home,” Arro pointed out.

“I guess that’s true, but that still sucks too.”

Arro leaned back as Rangavar got up and stretched. The smaller dragon suddenly turned around to look at him. “You know what you should do now, too.”

“What?” Arro asked with an amused expression.

“Call Jade.”

Arro’s ears immediately flattened.

“Last day,” Rangavar reminded him. “Has to be by tonight.”

“I know,” Arro sighed. “I just…”

“You ‘just’ need to call Jade.”

Arro watched Rangavar tiredly from the couch as the Darkal got ready to leave. He got ready pretty quickly. Since they’d just gotten home and showered, it didn’t really entail anything other than making sure he had his keys.

“By tonight,” he said with a final, serious glance over his shoulder.

Arro nodded. “By tonight.” He was fully aware that he’d put it off too long. Even longer than too long. He’d had extra time and still managed to put it off.

Rangavar gave him a distracted wave as he finally turned for the door. Arro stared after him as it swung back shut behind him, a small gust of cold air rushing in beforehand. He glanced down at his own wristband. He wondered whether he or Rangavar would have the truly harder job tonight.

Rangavar was tired from his time at the gym. Of all the days to have a work emergency, it just had to be this one. At least whatever was going on didn’t seem urgent; just ominous. Which he supposed might not be a whole lot better, except that hopefully, no one was in any danger this time around. Including himself.

When he pushed his way through the doors of the building, he immediately headed downstairs without begging anyone to tell him what was going on. The hallways were empty anyway. Which he realized was sort of weird, since he hadn’t actually seen anyone evacuating. Or seen anyone at all, actually, besides some sparse security staff, who all seemed tense and alert. He supposed at least that much made sense. Not that any of the security on this floor would know what was going on, either. They didn’t have the clearance.

Downstairs, though, things weren’t actually hectic either. If anything, the place seemed eerily… still.

“Rangavar.”

Ugh.

He turned towards the voice, the Darkal it belonged to swiftly coming towards him from the opposite end of the hall. She was fully Glitarian right now, her long steps quick and light. The intensity of her aura brushed over him as she neared. She didn’t seem upset or anything, fortunately. Serious, but not upset. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Rangavar glanced around. He was the only other dragon here. He couldn’t understand why she’d be happy to see him, in particular. “I… I got called in.”

The corner of her mouth finally quirked up. “I know.”

Yeah. He supposed she would. “Why do you want me here?” She was the first person he’d seen since coming down the stairs. Nothing was glaringly out of place. Certainly not any dragons with wraith cannons or blaring alarms.

“There’s a bit of an incident going on. I want everyone here.” She narrowed her eyes slightly at his blank stare. “Yes, even you.”

When she finally brushed past him, she casually beckoned him along, and he followed. He had no choice but to follow. She led him down several more flights of stairs, all of which were also quiet and empty, and then into another silent, nondescript hallway. He found himself wishing that the office doors had windows, so that he could catch glimpses of what might be going on inside. Everything was closed off and still. The sound of their pawsteps seemed increasingly loud on the tile floors.

“The building is in lockdown,” she answered his unspoken question. Rangavar still wasn’t convinced that she couldn’t read minds, even though he would definitely detect someone as powerful as her if she tried. “Everyone in the building is being contained in their offices and workstations until the issue is resolved. Well, except for all of us,” she smiled darkly again, as she paused and pushed open a plain-looking door.

Her aura had overwhelmed the sense of all the other Darkals in the room. They were all Glitarians, of course—and all male, of course. Rangavar tried not to stare around curiously, even though that was what he wanted to be doing. On the lower levels, he’d seen some Darkals around. This room, though, was huge; probably large enough for a game of sportsball, and still managed to be packed full of dragons awaiting her orders.

Feeling slightly out of place, Rangavar slipped off to the side of the room while she addressed them. Not just because he wasn’t using Glitarian magic right now, feeling incredibly small beside them, but he knew he also wasn’t… like them. He didn’t belong to the female Darkal.

He still paid attention when she spoke. “It looks like most of us are here.” She glanced around the room, switching to speaking telepathically as she addressed the gathering, since it was a Darkal’s more natural language. “Some of you know why, and some of you don’t. Don’t be alarmed. We merely have a… problem, to correct.”

Despite himself, Rangavar was intrigued.

“One of our wraith cannons has gone missing.”

He frowned. He thought back on what had happened the other day, when he was sent upstairs for supplies. Wraith cannon? The box he’d found had been missing a single capsule.

She wasn’t looking at him in particular or anything. She was still looking out over the entire room. “Someone broke into one of the stock boxes this morning. Nothing else seemed out of place; it just wasn’t there. And prior to this, I already had reason to believe that someone was taking ammo. This practically confirms it.”

Oh. So it was in addition to the capsule. Now that a cannon had gone missing as well, Rangavar supposed it was pretty unambiguous that someone who took a capture sphere would also want a cannon to use it.

“All of the employees on this shift have been adequately detained and are ready to be searched. I just need all of you to do the searching.” Her eyes narrowed and skimmed the crowd. Her gaze ended on Rangavar. He wasn’t sure whether or not it was intentional. He was all the way at the side of the room, which was his idea of being as unobtrusive as possible.

“You. Rangavar.” She suddenly beckoned him forward. Oh no.

He struggled to keep his expression neutral as he slowly moved from the crowd to stand before her. He normally tried to look neutral anyway, but now he had a massive audience to impress. He kept his eyes only on her, forcing himself to ignore the crowd, wondering why the hell she had singled him out.

 “You know you’re supposed to be using your Glitarian powers right now?”

He froze for a moment. Even though she hadn’t mentioned it in any way whatsoever, he nodded. He wished she’d mentioned it before bringing him in here. Maybe it would have avoided him the trouble of being singled out right now.

“I’m having trouble understanding why you wouldn’t do as I ask.” The side of her lip curled. “When I give an order, I expect it to be followed.” She cast a brief, unamused glance at the dozens of eyes focused towards the front of the room. “From *anyone*, outsiders or otherwise.”

Rangavar stood stiffly. He hoped she would reveal what she was getting at and get this over with. For someone with a grievous ‘problem’ to fix, she didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry.

When she turned back to him, her overconfident grin returned. “No one disobeys me.” She reached out and cupped the side of Rangavar’s head suddenly, her talons around the back and her thumb under his eyehorn, forcing him to look up at her by tilting his head. He flinched, but her grip was unbreakable. Her gaze, too; he couldn’t focus on anything else. “No one.”

Before he quite understood why, he felt Glitarian magic welling up to the surface of his aura. Then the pain began.

He let out a startled growl as his spine began to crack, feeling his shoulders dislocate. Standing up as he was, there was also nothing to take the pressure directly off of his hind paws, the bones suddenly splintering and elongating, the ankles stretching away from his toes until he stood on the balls of his feet. She let him drop to his knees, although still holding his head in her iron grip. He gasped with the pain, wanting to beg her to release him, but couldn’t. His throat could only produce unintelligible growls as he dragged ragged breaths of air into his lungs.

He writhed as the burning sensation across his wings became unbearable, and the surface was suddenly covered in budding feathers that pierced like needles through the skin to replace his fur. Stretching them wide, he thrashed harder to loosen her grip, his long, black talons digging into the floor, but she still didn’t let him go. As he gritted his teeth, he was aware of his fangs shifting slightly until they pushed out from his upper jaw. And when he was just ready to pass out, and his Glitarian body was finally complete, she released his head and let go.

As he dropped to the floor before her audience of Darkals, she turned to address them. “I control everything that goes on in this facility.” Her tone was stern. Her gaze was sharp. She cast a pointed glance down at Rangavar, although her smirk had been replaced by a smug air of indifference. “Everything.”

He found he could only lie there, panting, staring back up at her. He was too exhausted for anything else. Too exhausted to move. All of the practice changing his form in the woods had been at his own pace; in the face of her overwhelming power, it meant nothing. It had done nothing to prepare him for this.

 Not to mention, he was still exhausted from working out. He bared his teeth slightly as his emotions lit with anger. Fuck the stupid gym. Fuck Arro. Fuck—

She gave him a swift kick to the gut, making him choke out a strained yelp and double over where he lay. It distracted him from the anger. She’d clearly wanted to halt that.

“When I called you all here, I told every Glitarian to be ready to address this security issue. Anyone else not feeling very Glitarian today?” she asked the room.

The room was dead silent.

Her tiny smirk returned. “Excellent.”

She rattled off a few other instructions that Rangavar didn’t pay attention to as he focused on catching his breath. He felt tired. He felt defeated. And it wasn’t until after she’d finished handing out orders and the last of the other Darkals left the room, that she bothered to return her attention to him. “You should consider getting up. You have work to do.”

He wasn’t impressed by her false amusement. “You only called me here to make me an example,” he growled weakly. He hadn’t yet tried to move. He’d been lying helplessly on display for dozens of eyes, sprawled halfway on his back on the open floor.

She smiled down at him. “Did you listen to a single thing? Everyone here has their purpose. And besides,” she reminded him, “the entire reason you’re here at all, is to serve me. It was the deal.”

He stared back up at her tiredly.

Her golden gaze was unwavering as she stared down at him. “In any way I want.”

Rangavar took a few moments to glance around the room. Anywhere but at her. “What do you want me to do now?”

She knew what he meant. She always did. “Well preferably, you’d join the others. Help figure out who stole the cannon. And in your Glitarian form, that should be easy.” She looked him up and down. “Just go force answers out of everyone in the labs. You already know the moment you’re near them, your powers will manipulate them. None of them will even remember it anyway.”

She didn’t have to explain. The problem was that he didn’t want to wander around forcing commands and erasing memories. It wasn’t right.

She picked up on it and sighed. “Lie here and sulk, then. I don’t care. You matter very little to our work.” She finally turned and started to walk away. “Oh, although in that case, you should probably change back before leaving. Outside the walls of this facility, there could always be dragons with the type five mutation that our powers don’t work on. Remember that.”

He stifled a groan. He didn’t have the energy to change back yet. Fuck her powers.

After she’d gone, he tried to get up again, only to find that he still couldn’t. He begrudgingly realized that ‘lying on the floor and sulking’ might be his only option for a while. Until he had his energy back.

Fuck the gym.