Hive Mind

Chapter 27

Kraz was the one who picked when they dashed onto a new floor. Their thundering footsteps as they charged down the stairs were echoed by the thundering footsteps of their pursuers up above, so it seemed time to ditch the stairwell and hide.

They continued running even once in the hall, so that if Zark didn’t manage to hide their auras well enough, they’d still be far enough away that the other dragons couldn’t sense them. Also in case they couldn’t quiet their breathing enough to not be physically heard; even Kraz was panting a bit hard at this point. Zark’s chubby, black-scaled body was wobbling with exertion as if he might fall over, and despite Arro’s mutated type Two gene, he was barely doing any better. His tired legs weren’t the only thing quivering as his massive poundage slowed him down.

When they finally turned a few corners and ducked into a room, Arro was relieved to see a few chairs and some desks and immediately went over to sit. He wiped some sweat off his face and tried to calm his breathing, figuring right now, while hiding, that was probably priority.

The other two dragons ended up taking his lead, choosing their own desks or chairs to perch on. Like everywhere else in the underground of the building, all of the stuff here seemed recently abandoned. The only dragons they’d encountered so far were still just the three Darkals earlier, and their mystery pursuers just now.

When they’d finally, completely calmed, and hadn’t heard anyone for quite a while, Kraz finally broke the deep silence that had settled over them. “This is bullshit.”

Arro and Zark shared a look. He wasn’t wrong.

“What are we going to do now?” Kraz growled. “What if they’re still searching the building for us? What if they blocked off every exit? What if—”

“Kraz,” Zark interrupted softly. “We’ll figure this out. It’ll be okay.”

“Will it?” the taller Faerian scoffed.

Arro was undecided as to whom he was leaning towards. Kraz had some very valid worries, but Arro wasn’t ready to panic just yet. Normally, he *was* the anxious one, but right now he just felt tired. “Let’s take this one step at a time. When we feel ready to head out, we’ll just try to keep all of our senses alert.”

“We’re really relying on Zark’s telepathy,” Kraz reminded him.

“And my hearing,” Arro pointed out. Kraz stared at him blankly for a moment, and Arro realized they’d never had a reason to talk about his powers. “I’m a tripe,” he explained. “The, uh, the first three mutations.”

“Ohh.” Kraz eyed him with new interest for a moment before frowning. “Wait, so I’m the only one who won’t know someone’s coming?”

Arro shrugged. “Well… I guess.”

“I think we should leave now,” Zark interjected before Kraz could open his mouth again. He hopped off his chair, doing a little wiggle to pull his sides out from between the armrests, his gut rolling over his lap as he leaned forward. He had to tug a few times before getting to his feet. “Let’s go.”

They trudged back towards the stairwell far more quietly than their frantic fleeing earlier. Arro wasn’t looking forward to going back, his sides still feeling sore from the doorway squeezing him. The adrenaline as they charged down the stairs had allowed him to shove himself through onto this floor, carried by his momentum, but he wasn’t looking forward to squeezing through two more times to get back to the ground floor. Never mind climbing back up all those stairs. And, adding to his stress, there was still the fear of their pursuers…

He shook his head as if he could clear the thoughts away, and took a deep breath. They’d be out of here soon enough, he just had to stay strong a little bit longer.

“I don’t think we should go up the same stairway,” said Zark suddenly. Arro wasn’t sure how close they were, but they’d been walking long enough that he was sure they were almost already there.

“Why? And then why did you bring us all the way here?” Kraz didn’t look worried. He looked annoyed. “What exactly do you propose we do, then?”

Zark stared up at him with his brow furrowed. “I just… have a bad feeling about it.”

Arro sighed. When he got home, he was going to take a vacation from walking. Indefinitely.

Zark flattened his ears. “Sorry.”

Kraz glanced up and down the hall. “So, what *is* the plan?”

Zark glanced back the way they came. “What if we just pick a new hallway and find some different stairs,” he suggested.

Arro stifled a sigh. His feet ached, but also the less time they spent standing around arguing about it, the sooner they’d be out of here.

Kraz frowned and crossed his arms. “That sounds like it’ll take forever.” He shifted his weight slightly, and Arro realized that he was still trying not to put too much on the foot he’d used to kick the door. He was doing a really good job hiding it, though. It probably hurt a bit after running.

“I don’t know what to do.” Zark bit his lip. “I… I can’t choose. Someone else decide.”

“Then, I decide we make our way back to the same stairs,” said Arro. He shared a brief nod with Kraz, who looked as relieved as Arro felt. “We’re almost at the end of this hallway. Let’s just keep going. Which direction were the stairs again?” They’d dashed down a few twisting hallways to shake off anyone who followed them onto this floor. Arro didn’t remember, he’d just been following Zark.

The short, rotund dragon was currently fidgeting with his claws, the slight crescent of his second chin more prominent as he looked down at the ground.

Arro got a sinking feeling. “You don’t remember where we are, do you,” he said flatly.

Kraz let out a frustrated growl. “Seriously?!”

“I’m sorry, okay?” Zark snapped. “I was a little distracted by trying to save our asses!”

Arro and Kraz shared another glance. Arro pressed his fingers together. “Now what?”

Kraz turned away for a second to think. “I guess we do the best we can remembering, and if we end up wandering around, then, well, that’s what happens. Not like there’s anyone to ask for directions,” he snorted.

Arro sighed. “Alright. Let’s not waste time standing around, then. The sooner we start looking, the better.”

“I think it was this way,” Zark nodded determinedly as he picked a new hallway on the left. “Hopefully.”

“Hopefully,” Arro agreed.

Kraz stared after them for a few moments before following. “Hopefully.”

Arro leaned a paw on the metallic wall. “Are you sure we haven’t been down this way already?”

Zark sheepishly pulled his wings in a little tighter. “We’ve already established that I’m not sure about anything.”

“I think this area is a giant square,” Kraz scowled. “We’ve been in this one section in particular for at least an hour.”

“We haven’t taken enough corners to make a square,” Arro pointed out. “I think everything is just identical.”

Kraz bared his teeth. Not at anyone in particular. He glanced around at their surroundings; blank wall, blank wall, and the hallway in between. “I know I’ve posed this question before, but feel the need to reiterate; how big is this fuckin’ place?”

Arro glanced back and forth down the plain, endless corridor. “I still think the answer is ‘pretty fuckin’ big’.”

“We could, uh…” Zark withered beneath their judgmental stares as they turned back to look at him. “We could always… backtrack.”

Kraz groaned. “Spend another hour hoping we don’t get even more lost? No thanks.”

“I have to agree with Kraz here,” said Arro, again amazed at the words. “The other set of stairs is a bit of a lost cause at this point, and we’ve gone far enough that it would make more sense to find another stairwell soon.” Considering the size of this place, he couldn’t imagine there being less than several; what about more emergency exits, at the least? In an actual emergency, everyone would need enough to rush to the surface without bottlenecking, and also be close enough to one to leave quickly.

Zark’s shoulders slumped. “Alright.” He was obviously losing steam. Arro felt the same way, but his extra strength kept him going.

As they started walking again, Kraz muttered a few more lines under his breath about how everything was total bullshit right now, but Arro ignored him, and Zark didn’t seem to hear. Or, maybe he did, but was used to ignoring Kraz like this at home. Arro didn’t know Kraz that well. Maybe he was like this all the time. Arro did feel sort of bad about his foot, though.

Arro’s own pudgy paws were more than a bit sore, mashed beneath the bulk of his body with every step. His doughy arms sunk into his belly as they leaned against the sides, the sagging adipose making him feel sluggish and slow.

He was relieved when Zark finally, officially called a break. Even Kraz didn’t protest, simply lowering himself to sit cross-legged on the floor.

Arro rarely had such luck in the same pose. He lowered himself more slowly, bracing one of his chubby paws against the floor as he settled his weight. The thick pudge of his legs didn’t allow them to cross, so he only left them bent away from each other slightly, spread so that his soft paunch could rest on his lap. He actually hated sitting on the floor like this, extra self-conscious of how large and doughy his body looked when plopped on the floor like a sprawling mountain, but he was too tired to remain standing just out of pride.

Anyway, Zark was a bit of a contender himself. The chubby Faerian lowered himself much more easily than the immense pale-red dragon of the group, but it wasn’t beyond anyone’s notice that his gut squished up when he bent his knees, bowing over the soft, thick limbs. When he relaxed his legs and leaned back against the metal wall behind him, his gut spilled forward, jiggling at the release. He wiped the side of his face with a paw, looking more than a bit exhausted himself.

They were all quiet for a moment, sitting in a triangle, nobody really looking at anyone else. Arro realized he was one of the dragons who ended up with a wall behind him and took advantage, leaning his own pudgy back onto the cool surface. It chilled his wings, making him tuck them in tighter. Fortunately, his blubbery body gave off plenty of heat.

Kraz ended up in the middle of the hallway, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and propping his chin on his paws. After a moment of awkward silence, he couldn’t contain himself. “This was the worst idea ever.”

Zark flattened his ears. “Sorry.”

Arro was a bit peeved at the situation as well, but wasn’t sure he felt like adding fuel to the fire. He was still afraid of getting sucked into a couple’s feud at any moment.

Alas, the effort was futile. “So, I was right about the Darkals,” said Zark carefully.

Kraz shot him an annoyed look. “Really? You want to talk about Darkals right now?”

“What better time?” the shorter dragon pointed out. “Want to talk about the weather? We just saw three of those monsters together, and we’re going to pretend everything’s fine?”

“I’d like to talk about the weather,” Arro said quietly, but he was already being talked over by Kraz.

“So, you were right about weird shit going on, alright.” Kraz was glaring at the other dragon. “And, yes, we saw weird Darkals. But what does any of this *prove*?”

Zark blinked. “That…I was right..?”

Arro glanced over at the irate gray dragon. “To be fair, that’s why he dragged us down here.”

Kraz scowled. “Well, I personally was hoping we might also find out anything relevant to whatever’s going on with that message we all received. Especially after that… thing, in the science-tube.”

“I mean, it’s still very possible the two things could be related,” Arro pointed out. “Remember what Rangavar said to Jade and I? The part where he thinks the research facility is going to ‘take over’ or something?” Arro had included that part of the story while filling in Kraz. The idea was actually sounding less and less absurd.

Now it was Zark’s turn to look confused, but they ignored him.

“I guess that’s true,” Kraz grumbled. “…Still weak, though. We’re just taking guesses based on events that don’t really seem correlated other than the words of one guy.”

“Everything comes back to the research facility,” Zark suddenly piped up. The other two Faerians turned to look at him, and he blushed. “That’s the common factor. It’s not that they’re only connected by whatever Rangavar said or didn’t say—What all this stuff has in common is the research facility.”

Kraz didn’t seem impressed by his epiphany. “We just established that we don’t know the research facility is behind shutting down all travel on and off Karraden.”

Zark drew his knees up to his chest. Well, as high as they would go, with the curve of his belly preventing them. “I mean… they have mind control and magic, and if what Arro’s saying is right, then they have a clear motive.”

“Having magic and motives doesn’t mean someone would *take over the world*,” Kraz began, but Arro just shook his head.

Arro sighed. “Talking in circles is getting us nowhere.”

“Walking in circles is also getting us nowhere,” Zark groaned. He slumped backwards against the wall, his belly bulging farther with the curve of his body. “This sucks.”

Kraz rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. This is your fault, you know.”

Arro caught the other tall Faerian sneak a quick glance down at his foot, and Arro’s gaze followed to see it was actually pretty bruised. Like, really, really bruised. The amount of walking they were doing down here definitely wasn’t helping. No wonder Kraz was in such a hurry to leave.

“Maybe we should get going again,” Arro suggested, although he didn’t really feel any better. But he was getting nervous about how long they’d be stuck down here. Not only because getting back to the surface was such a daunting task to begin with, but their group was also clearly in rougher shape than he’d realized. As it was, the pads of his own paws felt pounded to a pulp. It was why he didn’t normally choose walking as a sustainable form of exercise.

The other chubby dragon sighed and pushed himself up, his gut sprawling over his lap again. “I guess.”

Arro heard a stifled grunt and turned to see Kraz lowering himself back to the floor from the half-way crouch he’d just managed. He looked up at Arro, then shifted his gaze to Zark, seeing they had both noticed. “I don’t think we should get going again until you’ve both fully regained your strength,” he said evasively. He had his foot tucked close behind his other foot while he sat. “You know. It’ll be more frustrating if you two walk slowly.”

“Are you sure you won’t be the one walking slowly?” asked Arro with a raised brow.

He saw Kraz’s face fall to realize he’d been found out, but then he scowled. “You’re the one who told me to kick the door.”

Yeah, that was fair.

“Is your foot okay?” Zark obviously hadn’t noticed.

“It’s fine,” Kraz grumbled, still hiding it from view. He glanced from one of them to the other. “I’m fine, okay?”

“Alright then.” Arro extended a paw. “Then let’s go.”

Kraz was too proud to admit the injury, but took Arro’s paw. When the much larger Faerian pulled him up, however, Kraz stumbled a bit on his feet, and Arro realized that maybe he just didn’t realize how badly he was hurt.

Kraz waved away Arro’s and Zark’s concerned stares. “I’m fine,” he insisted, his teeth gritted a bit as he held all of his weight on his other leg. It didn’t look very fine to Arro.

“We can rest a while longer,” Zark offered, but Kraz immediately interrupted with a head-shake and a scowl.

“Here.” Arro offered his arm instead, slinging Kraz’s over his broad shoulders. It was a bit awkward since Arro was slightly taller, and Kraz’s body had to lean over the huge rounded sides of Arro’s middle. “Can you walk like this?” He looked down to see Kraz’s face a bit red, although with exertion or embarrassment, Arro didn’t know. He clearly didn’t want to be helped either way.

The shorter Faerian slumped into Arro’s squishy side pretty heavily, but he nodded. “I really am fine, I just…” Arro decided his flushed cheeks were probably embarrassment. “I still think I’d be okay if I just sat for a bit.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” said Arro. They technically had all of the time, since they were apparently stuck down here, alone, but if Kraz’s foot continued to swell or bruise it would only get harder to keep going. He wished the stubborn dragon had cared to share with everyone before trekking all the way down here. Although, Arro supposed that the series of events that followed would have probably gone much the same.

“Arro’s right.” Zark was watching with concern. “The longer we wait, the more painful your foot might get.”

Kraz sighed in defeat. “Fine… but.” His cheeks were still flushed as he leaned heavily into Arro’s side. “Do we have to walk like this?”

“You can let go anytime you want,” said Arro with a touch of amusement. “I was trying to help.”

Kraz groaned. “I can… I can still walk.” He sounded uncertain.

“At least you’re a type One, so it’s probably safe.” Zark crossed his arms over his pudgy gut. “There’s no way it can be broken.”

Arro frowned at the black, chubby dragon. “I thought that was a myth.” Kraz’s foot was definitely looking worse.

Zark frowned. “You’re a type One too. Have you ever broken a bone, Arro?”

Now Arro scowled at him. “That doesn’t prove anything.”

“Well if it’s NOT a myth, then it’s probably fine to walk on,” Kraz interrupted, looking down at his foot. “Even though Zark’s been wrong about literally everything, recently, except for the Darkals, I think I’d rather choose to walk on my own if there’s a chance I’ll make it.”

Zark made a face.

Arro watched Kraz push himself up a little straighter from Arro’s cushy side. “Are you sure you want to risk making the injury worse?”

The gray dragon winced as he slowly rested his injured foot on the floor. Of course if there was even the tiniest chance Zark was right, he’d risk it rather than sitting around or accepting help. Arro wasn’t sure why he’d asked. And he wished Zark wouldn’t encourage him.

“Maybe it just hurts because we sat for a while and gave it time to swell,” Kraz said.

Arro was a bit doubtful about that logic. “I think it’s swelling because you hurt it, not the other way around.”

Kraz scowled down at it. “Well I don’t know, I’m not a medical doctor.”

“Guys.” Zark interrupted. “We need to stay focused on getting out of here.”

“Right.” Arro looked up and down the hall. “The only way to go is forward, I guess.”

They started walking again. Well, Kraz was limping now, and Arro and Zark were moving more ponderously due to exhaustion. The progress was slow. The way that Arro’s rounded gut bulged over his thighs didn’t make it any easier to lift his legs either, the soft fat folding over the limbs with each step. He supposed they were lucky that Zark wasn’t having quite the same problem, despite the chubby dragon was also more than a bit out of shape.

Kraz had been focused on limping for a bit, and Arro had been discreetly focused on not letting him fall over, so it was Zark who suddenly paused and pointed. “Is that an exit?”

Arro looked up sharply. The glowing red sign said ‘EMERGENCY EXIT’. “Gee, I dunno, Zark, I think we should ask around.”

The chubby Faerian crossed his arms. “How can you be joking around right now?”

Kraz glanced up at the sign too, and audibly sighed with relief. “Thank Vaugh.”

The three dragons went around the corner, Kraz stumbling the last few steps, until they saw where the sign pointed. They drew abruptly to a halt. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

A ladder was set into the wall leading up to a square opening.

“How the hell is that an ‘emergency’ exit? Looks more likely to cause an emergency than solve one,” Kraz growled. “Even for people who fit through there, one wrong step and everyone’s falling down.”

“I guess skinny Darkals don’t have to worry about either of those things,” Arro mused as he stared upwards at the inconvenient exit. Still, it was the first one they’d found in a while, so he was reluctant to dismiss it. “Maybe it means there’s a normal one nearby?”

Kraz snorted. “Why would they put a ‘normal’ one around if everyone could just use this one, then? If you’re right about everyone down here being a Darkal, then they probably save space by having narrow ‘doorways’ like this one.”

Arro supposed that was true.

“What if I go up and get help?” Zark suddenly offered. He took in their confused glances. “I mean, I don’t know how well you’ll get up with your foot,” he told Kraz. Then he turned to Arro. “And I don’t think… uh… I just don’t—”

“It’s okay, you can say it,” Arro sighed. “I won’t fit.”

Zark looked away uncomfortably.

“Even if you went up for help,” Kraz suddenly spoke up. “You’d get it from who? Think everyone on the surface just carries around floor plans? They’ll just find their way down to come get us?”

Zark’s ears flattened. “I’m just trying to think of ideas.”

Arro was a little bit at a loss himself. He glanced up at the square again. Despite Zark’s ample pudge, he was definitely still small enough to get through. And if not for Kraz’s injury, the more muscular Faerian could probably get up too.

“Hey Kraz,” Arro said slowly. “You’re like, super strong. Could you pull yourself up with your arms and keep most of your weight off your foot?”

Kraz thought seriously for a moment. “Huh. Maybe...” The idea didn’t seem to have occurred to him. But Arro had seen the amount of chin-ups the guy could do.

That just left himself, of course. He kept staring up at the opening as if he could will it to get bigger.

“We can all try to go up together,” Zark finally said what was on everyone’s mind. “Arro, you can just… You can squeeze, right? We’ll just— We should try.”

Arro nodded, jostling his chins. He took a deep breath. “Alright.” The alternative was wandering around by himself.

They gathered at the base of the ladder. Zark was the first they sent up, moving easily enough. Although exhausted, he was the only one of them not injured or too big to simply pass through, although his gut wobbled with every step. His chubby sides didn’t even brush the edges though, and Arro let out a quiet sigh of relief. He hoped the opening just looked smaller than it really was. Maybe it just looked small especially to him.

Kraz went up next. He took a deep breath, braced both paws on the ladder, and set his injured foot very lightly on one of the bars for balance. “Heh. Wish me luck,” he chuckled nervously as he hauled his other foot up onto the ladder while taking the majority of the weight on his straining arms.

The going was slow, but the determined Faerian pushed himself up another step, all of his muscles rippling as he worked to keep pressure off his foot. As he rose and it passed in front of Arro’s face, he could see how bad the swelling had gotten. Kraz needed a healer. Or at least, a lot of rest and a few days off work, if Zark was to be believed.

Kraz slipped suddenly, and Arro braced himself beneath the ladder. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” the buff Faerian grunted, all of his muscles bulging as he clung to the bars more tightly while trying to catch his breath.

“If you fall, I’ll… I’ll try to catch you,” said Arro uncertainly. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to catch someone Kraz’s size. He hoped it didn’t show through his voice.

“Thanks.” Kraz let out a strained laugh. “It would certainly be soft. Like falling into a tub of cookie dough.”

Arro scowled. “I hereby rescind my offer.”

“It was a jooooke.”

“Kraz jokes when he’s scared,” Zark helpfully piped up from the other side of the opening.

“Shut up, Zark.”

Despite himself, Arro snorted. He stayed below the ladder anyway, although Kraz reached the opening a few moments later, and Zark was finally able to help him up. The buff dragon’s broad shoulders fit through the opening easily enough, giving Arro more hope. Surely, he’d fit too?

He glanced back and forth down the endless hallway in the endless maze they’d been trekking through in the endless building. It wasn’t as if he had a choice.

“Come on!” Zark called down to him. “This floor already looks a bit more promising. More lights on and stuff. If there’s offices up here, it’ll be built for more people, and there’ll be more exits.”

Arro hoped that logic was right. He wasn’t sure, but appreciated the other dragon’s optimism. Either way, he wasn’t staying down here by himself, and finally put a paw on the ladder. “Alright.”

He had to lean around the bulging collection of blubber on his frontside to even reach the ladder with all four limbs at once, and he wrapped his wings more tightly around his large frame to help his balance. Still, he couldn’t see his feet, and it was hard to lift his leg from the first step to the next. He suddenly had a flashback to his and Rangavar’s day at the park. Back then, he hadn’t thought he was even capable of climbing at all, but had then climbed over half a tree. Sure, Rangavar had been the motivator, but he’d done it.

He could do this.

“Any day now,” Kraz called down to him. Arro saw Zark discreetly elbow him in the side, and Kraz turned to his companion to glare.

Arro shook his head to himself and picked up his leg, hauling with his arms to help lift his weight, and groped around with his foot until he found the next step. He was worried for a moment until his claws settled firmly on the metal rung, and his mood changed to satisfaction. He then pushed off with that leg, his other thick, pudgy leg following. His arm fat jiggled as the muscles strained underneath, but he’d spent enough time at the gym the past year to easily bear his own weight. Most of the problem was the way that rolls of pudge bunched up on his shoulders when he tried to stretch his arms directly over himself.

Well, the ‘biggest’ problem, actually, was the most obvious one; the one that made up his bulky figure. He glanced down to see nothing but adipose, partially pancaking against the wall where he strained around it to reach, making him look even bigger.

“Okay, I hate to agree with Kraz, but you might need to pick up the pace a bit down there.” Zark was staring anxiously down the hole.

Arro glanced back up. “Yeah, I’m… I’m not very good at climbing,” he blushed, “but give me a second.”

Like the last time he climbed, the going got easier the farther up he went as he settled into the repetitive motion. The bonus this time was that leaves and twigs weren’t poking his scales, so he didn’t have anything extra to worry about as he focused on quite literally just putting one foot in front of the other. His knees drove into the underside of his doughy middle with every step, his belly sliding along the wall where it was pressed, including over each and every metal rung. It was uncomfortable, but he put all of his attention on the task at paw, and was eventually rewarded by the opening coming into sight directly before him.

He paused beneath the opening. Shit. It wasn’t quite as big as he’d hoped.

The other two dragons seemed to have noticed as much, and didn’t say anything as they both stared down at him, only looking immensely uncomfortable. Nobody wanted to be the one to point out the obvious.

“You can, uh… Just, you can move out of the way.” Arro stared back at them. “I mean, I don’t have much of a choice except to keep going, you know?”

Zark moved away to give Arro plenty of space, but Kraz only moved back slightly. “I’ll help pull you up,” he resolved, which Arro thought was pretty nice of him given that he’d just made another crack at Arro’s weight several minutes ago. He just couldn’t figure out if this guy still disliked him or not, ever since finding out he was with Rangavar. He at least hoped when they went back to work, he wouldn’t keep being mean.

It suddenly occurred to him that if everything they assumed about the research facility was true, then they probably wouldn’t have jobs to go back to.

Arro got his flabby torso to the hole, his doughy shoulders fitting through well enough, although he was worried to see they brushed the sides of the opening a bit. Looking around, he supposed this space would seem plenty huge to a Darkal, tall or otherwise. No wonder it was so comparatively small to his mass. Arro took another step, pushing himself up a little farther, watching as the edges of the hole began to close in.

“You might make it,” said Kraz helpfully. He’d been kneeling by the hole watching. He wouldn’t need to put any weight on his foot in order to help pull.

Arro nodded nervously. He couldn’t figure out any more of a reply. He just pushed himself up another step, his arms able to brace against the floor now. He got his first glimpse around the hallway, which didn’t seem as promising to him as Zark had implied, but he’d focus on one thing at a time. He took another step.

The edges were definitely closing in on his body now, the soft pudge sliding along the opening. He sucked in slightly as the wider bulges of his rolls began to ease through. As the grip on his sides became more firm, he shimmied a little bit to jiggle more of his fat to the other side, but before he reached his widest part, he began to slow. At his size, when he sucked in, the effect it had on his gut was minimal. Sucking in his breath bought himself a few spare inches, and he tried to make it count by pushing and writhing until he couldn’t hold his breath any longer and let it out in a whoosh.

He paused for a moment, panting, a fair amount of his pudge spreading around him, and the rest hanging on the other side of the opening, pressed up by his legs beneath the hole.

“So, uh,” Kraz broke awkwardly into the silence. “How are you doing?”

Arro shot him an annoyed look.

Kraz started to look a bit red again. He obviously didn’t know how to ask the obvious.

“Do you need any help?” Zark supplied. Arro wondered if Zark had free access to all of Kraz’s thoughts.

“Yeah, um—I can start pulling,” Kraz offered.

Arro wasn’t sure which was more embarrassing, so he decided to just agree. It was probably the easier route either way. “If you can pull up my wings, it should buy me some extra space.”

Kraz did as requested, moving around to Arro’s backside. A moment later, Arro felt the strong grip of his paws clutching the claws of Arro’s wings, and the other Faerian began to pull upwards.

Suddenly, he gave the wings a rough yank, and Arro yelped at the flash of pain. He was pressed forward hard for a second, squeezing the wind out of him as well as the pile of pudge he’d pulled through. The soft, furry flesh of his wings scraped along the opening.

All at once, the limbs were through, and he jerked back again as his gut unfolded from the extra pressure. “What the hell, Kraz!”

“Quick and painless,” the Faerian said sagely.

Arro’s face was furiously red. He was also mortified that he’d yelped. In front of Kraz. “That was not ‘painless’.”

“It would have been more painful to inch you through,” Kraz retorted. “Pain but like, for however long that would take.”

Arro tried to shake it off. And also calm his breathing. And the bright red color of his cheeks. Brighter than the normal, pale-red color.

He decided that the best thing he could do was get back to pushing himself up. He braced both paws on either side of him again and strained more of his blubber through the hole, trying to suck in as much as possible. He hadn’t even reached the largest part of his gut before being drawn to a halt again. “It’s no use,” he panted.

“Well, you’ve come too far to give up,” Zark encouraged. “You’re almost through.”

“Yeah.” Kraz nodded. “I think even if you tried to squeeze back down by now, you wouldn’t be able to. Your wings are already up here and stuff. And the top of your body is pretty fat too.”

Arro glared at him. “Thanks for reminding me.”

Kraz frowned. “What?”

Zark shushed the confused Faerian and butted him aside to sit closer to Arro. “What if we both pull up on your wings or something to give you more leverage. Are you still pushing with your feet underneath?”

Arro nodded. He would for as long as he could. Although it was true that the layers of blubber stuck stubbornly beneath the hole were currently in the way of lifting his legs another step.

“That sounds like a plan.” Kraz moved around to Arro’s backside and grabbed one of Arro’s wings, making him flinch. He didn’t really trust Kraz with his wings at this point, but supposed he didn’t have any other options.

Zark took his other wing. “When we pull, you push, yeah?”

Arro just nodded again, getting ready to suck in his breath.

“Alright… pull!”

All three of them strained. Kraz ended up accomplishing most of the task, Zark’s strength barely adding any help whatsoever. At least Arro had more than enough strength to add, and it wasn’t long before he slowly, ever so slowly, began to slide upwards, his many layers of adipose rippling as it moved over the edge.

“It’s working!” Zark gasped. He eventually moved out of the way so that Kraz could grab both wings and haul on them more firmly. He was still only able to put weight on just one foot, and Arro’s wings hurt in his grip, but as he and Arro became locked in an epic struggle against gravity, their focus on everything else seemed to fade away.

When they had to pause for a breather, Arro realized he wasn’t just panting from the exertion, but from how tightly the sides of the hole were digging into his soft body.

They’d made it to his widest part.

Kraz wiped some sweat off his forehead. “Almost there.”

Arro wanted to respond, but he was keeping his breath shallow. Kraz was right. They had the largest, widest bulge of his belly halfway through. Arro planted his hind paw up another rung. The lard pressing onto his leg felt lighter now, although that could just be his imagination. He tried not to feel hopeful just yet. Although, the alternative was being very seriously stuck, so…

Kraz grabbed his wings again. “Ready?”

As the pushing and pulling resumed, Arro could feel the rest of his pudge pancaking on the other side of the opening again. No matter how much he wriggled, the edges were pinching deep into his flabby sides. It was also getting harder to push against the floor, his arms unable to reach around the giant ball of dough that made up his midsection.

Suddenly, Zark crouched down in front of him, and began gently pulling on and teasing Arro’s fat from the hole. He didn’t look at him or anything, for which Arro was pretty grateful, but that didn’t stop it from being awkward. Still, he was forced to accept the help.

And it worked. He finally squeezed his gut over the opening.

The two not-stuck dragons immediately flopped down for a break. Kraz groaned, staring at the ceiling with his arms outstretched, breathing hard. “Vaugh damn.”

Zark just sat back on his tail, leaning back on both arms, his spare tire spreading out with the extra space his pose provided. He’d done barely half the work of the other two, but was still looking a bit wiped. Arro supposed he had been for a while now.

Arro wanted to rest too, but was too frantic as he tried to haul himself the rest of the way onto the floor. The opening caught on his fat hips, but they took significantly less wriggling to get through in comparison to the rest of him. When he did finally free himself, he dropped forward onto his belly, the pile of lard bulging around him on the floor.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, save for the sound of exhausted breathing.

Arro tried to pick up his head. “Thanks for not… leaving me behind,” he panted.

Kraz looked over at him. “Of course not.” He wrinkled his snout. “You really think that little of me?”

Arro stared back. “After the past several months? … I do.”

The other dragon flattened his ears. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“It’s a little late.”

Kraz rolled over to face him. “I just spent a significant amount of effort pulling your fat ass out of a hole, and that was while injured because *you* made me kick a metal door earlier, but you can’t get over a few rude comments?”

“‘A few’?” Arro glared.

“Alright… More than a few.” Kraz’s expression looked a bit guilty at that. “…But still. I’m not trying to be a shitty guy. I’ll… I’ll figure out how to make it up to you,” he resolved. “Okay?”

Arro didn’t know how that would be possible, but decided to let it go.

“I’m serious,” said Kraz, catching his look.

“Uh-huh.”

After another long moment of rest, Arro tiredly pushed himself back into a sitting position, ready to inspect the plethora of cracked and bruised scales. He groaned at all the aches and pains. He realized that included his wings, too. “Fuck,” he whispered aloud.

Zark seemed to take that as his cue to sit up too. “Are we ready to keep going?”

Kraz also sat up, grimacing at his foot. “No reason not to. Especially if you think there’s gotta be a real exit around here.”

“Well, look.” Zark gestured slightly down the hall. He pointed at the corner where it met the next hall.

Or, wait, no. Arro squinted at the space at the end. It wasn’t just a hallway. It was an incline. Maybe one that led to the next floor..?

“Where do you think that goes?” asked Kraz.

Arro studied it another second. “Up.”

Kraz gave him an annoyed stare, but Arro pretended not to notice.

“Well… alright, let’s go.” Zark took several steps in the direction. Arro started after him, and heard Kraz take a few tentative, limping steps behind.

After a few more, Arro sighed and turned to face the other dragon. “Here.” He put an arm around Kraz’s back and laid the other Faerian’s arm over his shoulders. “Don’t think I’m just being nice, though,” Arro said quickly. “You’re slowing us down.”

Kraz rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t possibly make that mistake.” He just gritted his teeth and let most of his weight lean onto Arro’s pudge as they started forward again.

It was extremely slow going up the first incline, and when they got to the landing, they saw a second. And after that, they saw a third. It was also deceptively tiring; the incline looked so slight at first that it was hard to realize how much of an extra strain it was putting on their legs. Arro almost would have preferred stairs; at least he’d know what to expect.

They were up another landing and a half before they saw a door at the top.

Zark frowned. “Wait. There’s something… up ahead.”

Kraz glanced down at him. “What is it?”

Zark focused for a second. He seemed perplexed. “It’s like… the aura is almost familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“Is it dangerous?” Arro asked.

Zark seemed to think for a moment. “I mean, there’s nothing inherently dangerous about sensing an aura, it just means we’re not alone.” He shook his head. “If you mean, is it doing anything, then no.”

“A guard, probably?” Kraz asked.

Zark shrugged. “Maybe.” He frowned. “I still have a weird feeling, though, like I recognize it.”

“We could go check it out,” Arro suggested. When the other two turned to look at him, he flattened his ears. “If this is the quickest exit, then we can’t just give up now. There’s three of us anyway, if it turns out to be dangerous, like that creature earlier. And Zark has special powers.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of faith in my ‘special powers’.” Zark made finger quotes. “If you think it’s our best chance, though…” He glanced at Kraz. “I’m willing to check it out.”

The muscular dragon sighed, realizing he was outvoted. “Fine. I’m standing at the back of the group, though, so you two dumbasses get killed first, since this is your idea.”

“Why? It’s not like you’d be able to run away.” Arro smirked.

Kraz narrowed his eyes. “Funny.”

They started up the ramp towards the next landing, Arro hoping that whatever was through the door wouldn’t try to stop them. They sure as hell weren’t going to let it.

Rangavar had regained more than enough magic to free himself, but hesitated. The Glitarian Darkal was right; if he was chained up, she technically couldn’t have him hurt anyone. From the way she’d pointed that out, he was sure that was part of her plan. She wasn’t the type to make threats she couldn’t keep.

On the other paw, he also couldn’t stay down here indefinitely. He tugged on the handcuffs with boredom. He knew he at least needed to wait long enough to make sure Arro could have gotten out of the building, if nothing else. Although preferably, the Glitarian Darkal female would leave, too. That would be the best case scenario.

The worst case scenario, he knew, was that not only might she still be around, but she might also have taken Arro as insurance. The thought of her hurting him made his blood boil.

And so, he waited.

An indeterminate amount of time later, he startled to hear noises down the hallway. He pricked his ears, trying to pick it up more clearly; ironically, the bare metal walls deflected sound strongly enough that his hearing picked it up long before he could detect any aura. He had no idea what the sounds were from.

He shifted a bit, trying to stir some circulation through his body so that he could be ready for whatever was coming.