Uprora – Last Night

*Please, God, all I want is to stay, and I’ll take the trauma, the punishment, and everything else You give if it means I can stay with her.*

*Am I dreaming? Somehow, I think that’d be even crueler than to be taken away from everything. Ever since that day, I hoped this was all some nightmare I would eventually wake up from. I sat down, every day, hoping that. I secluded myself from everyone, all while I made these silent prayers when I came here, I thought the nightmare had reached its peak, and I had died from a heart attack.*

*Then… she came…*

*I felt feelings I never thought I’d feel again. Instead of thinking I was dreaming, I thought I had died and gone to Heaven. Even if I hadn’t died, I’m so sure she’s my guardian angel…*

*Maybe this is a dream… because every feeling here is so surreal. The first thing that comes to mind constantly is just how humid it is in here. That jungle was pretty wet and warm, but this passes it by such an inconceivable degree. I’m not sweating a lot, but I feel as if I could pass out at any moment. If only my body would let me.* *Then there's the noise. Not just the soft squelches sounding from the walls all around me, or the far less soft gurgles and groans that I think must be coming from a stomach much more active than the one I was in. Her heartbeat sings out to me, and it’s so powerful yet gentle at the same time. I could also hear her breathing, sounding as fierce as a powerful gust of wind, and I realized the comparison between her breathing and mine was yet another testament to just the sheer overwhelming power she had over me. Did I mention the humidity? I don’t think I was clear enough on just how damn hot it is, but it’s soothing and that’s what matters. I haven’t felt a sauna in forever. Even just a hot shower. Every surface I touched was slick and covered in slime that made everything slippery. If I wanted to sit up straight against a wall, I had to put effort into keeping myself from slipping, so I give up and just let myself slide until I sunk into a spot, like how rain collects into a puddle. It was impossible not to get wet in this stuff, but thankfully there were hardly puddles to drench me in the stuff. I didn’t mind the stuff, and even if I did, I’d have to deal with it anyway. Yet one thing that I find so hard to wrap my head around is the concept itself. I was inside another being! Even more, I was safe. I don’t think I’ve ever felt safer in my life on the night we met. If it wasn’t for… the news I had heard… I think I’d feel even safer. I know I did before that.*

*Was I dreaming ever since I said yes to that offer to get tossed onto a ship with strangers? And if so, was the other night a nightmare? Or was it some test You gave me? If so, did I pass? Do I deserve her?*

*I don’t know if I can talk to her… she’ll tell me in the morning what I’ll already know. I’ve only been able to make her think I’ve been sleeping because I’ve been so afraid to move. It’s taking everything not to cry. I don’t want to put her in any more pain…*

*But I can’t keep this up much longer.*

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Peaceful and mysterious was the night. As the rain dripped from the naked trees, the mounds of snow built up over a three-day snowstorm merely two days ago broke apart, melting into slush.

Implausible was the right word to call the weather, and the denizens of the grand forest hosted unsure feelings of the eeriness it brought.

One family was filled with distress.

In a clearing of the trees, a gaping wide cave dug into the side of a rocky formation, dug generations ago by an unknown dragon, and expanded by current and previous owners throughout centuries.

Two dragons, with five sons and daughters and two guests, made it their home. The mouth was ridiculously gaping, as it had to be for something the size of a dragon to walk through with a natural posture. Four chambers were splitting from a single hallway, like flowers along a stalk.

Faith, one daughter, lied on her bed with a stomach full of one human. Her brother, Max, was in the room with her, lying beside her. The face of anguish never left, knowing she’d have to say goodbye to her human. She’d only known him for 3 days, but so much had happened. A lifetime’s worth of love, pain, happiness, and sadness had passed between the two.

She loved him.

Her brother tried comforting her, but the dread of having to tell Jake was too much… while they tried remaining as quiet as possible as not to wake him.

Yet her eyes jolted open and a pit in her stomach formed when she heard sobbing. Unmistakable sobs. Ones she never wanted to hear again. Her head drew close to the abdomen. “Jake?” No reply came, and it started to fill her with dread. “Please answer me, Jake…”

He tried to. He wanted to. He couldn’t. His throat wouldn’t let him. No matter how hard he tried.

And so the two waited in silence. Faith had to wait for Jake’s answer, and Jake had to wait for his spasm to lessen. Eventually, they did, and Jake was bringing himself as close to his surroundings as he could, listening to the heartbeat

“I’m sorry…” Jake mumbled the words out of his mouth.

Faith frowned even more, with burning anticipation within her. “Sorry for what, sweetheart?”

He knew he had to be honest with her. “I heard everything.”

Faith recoiled from this, with fresh tears streaming from her eyes. “Jake…” The scales on her nose caressed and nuzzled her tummy. “I’m sorry… I’m so so sorry…”

“It’s not your fault… none of it is…” Jake closed his eyes, focusing on her voice and heartbeat.

“I don’t care why. Not right now at least.” The dragon’s muzzle kept sliding against her underbelly, “I care about you. About your future, and I want it to be… with me…”

Jake’s hands kept in touch with his surroundings. “I love you, Faith… I don’t want to leave either…” he nuzzled his head into the fleshy wall to his side. “I don’t want to get taken away…”

“Taken away? But… your family… uh…” there wasn’t a way to avoid it. “Died?” It was after that did realize the foolishness in her act.

Jake tensed involuntarily, unable to keep a few tears back. “Yes… but I have family on Earth…”

“Wait, then… what happened?” a saddening confusion overcame Faith.

“When my parents were nowhere to be found I was placed in child services. I was given the worst people possible. Instead of finding my relatives, they shipped me off to the middle of nowhere…” then Jake broke like a damn. “Maybe if I was anywhere else… ANYWHERE… I would be back on Earth. Maybe!” The boy hid his face in the corner, adding his tears to the stomach’s moisture.

“Hey hey hey hey…” Faith compressed her stomach gently around her human’s body. “Listen…” the claws pressed in where she felt him. “Listen to my heart…”

It had already been a sound strategy to Jake, and he did what she suggested, and it wasn’t long before he was lulled into a docile state.

“That’s it, sweetheart…” she whispered in the best imitation of her mother she could do.

And so the silence of a million years passed, thoughts ranging through the solar cycles but no physical actions save for the beating of hearts.

“There’s somewhere I’d like to take you, Jake. It’ll be safe I promise.” Faith whispered her words as assuringly to his safety as possible. “Not some cold cave alone, but with friends of mine.”

“I don’t know Faith…” Jake’s voice would barely be heard by anyone but the enhanced ears of Faith.

“Can you give me at least one more chance? I can’t bear to leave you like this. Not when I know there’s at least something I can do about it.”

Silence passed by, enough that a moment was an eternity.

“Ok Faith,” Jake replied, and then went quiet.

With no hesitation, Faith calmly got onto her feet and walked out of the chamber. Before passing through the shield wall, she took a glance at the projector, seeing its indicator say it was very low on power. It would take weeks for the battery to recharge to full, but that was of little consequence now that the snow had ceased. It served only as an insulator to keep the cave warm for the hatchlings at this point. Emerging from the wall of energy, she headed out into the forest.

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It finally came into view. The den.

Faith smiled a little seeing the denizens outside it. Tall, on all fours, and covered in fur.

Wolves.

Or at least, so similar in every way but their size. They were gargantuan to any person, yet the overwhelming stature she had remained the same.

One of them ran towards Faith and stopped right in front of her. It was a silver-gray, with splotches of blonde like cold coins mixed in a pile of silver.

The dragon leaned down to it and received affection in the form of nuzzles and head rubs to her nose. “Hello, Arla~.” Faith spoke in a manner of barks and growls, not dragon language nor did it belong to any one of human origin. It was wolf-tongue, with every tone, length, and growl containing meaning that could be translated into sentences, much like how dragons spoke.

“I’m so happy to see you! Luna told me you were alright, but I’m so glad seeing it myself!” The wolf, Arla, sounded feminine and young in her voice.

“I can say the same for you. It couldn’t have been easy to hold out against that storm.”

“We’re fine. All of us are. People came here to bring us food, and they healed Jaro!” Arla made a spin out of excitement, like chasing her tail briefly as she flung rainwater from her fur. It seemed nothing could turn her mood sour.

“I’m happy things have turned out well! But Arla… there’s a reason I’m here. I don’t know how to put it though…” Faith looked away to the ground, and it was impossible not to notice the sadness on her face.

Arla seemed confused and concerned for her friend. It brought a tinge of sadness into her, seeing a friend in such low spirits. “I don’t understand. Luna said everything was fine.”

“Well, there’s something she didn’t tell you.” Faith took a deep breath and finally built up the strength to begin. Starting with the fact she held a sick and weak human in her stomach, Faith went on to describe how she had found Jake, her rescuing of him. What she hadn’t planned on sharing was her failure from the night before, but she overlapped and brought it up, so she had to keep going. She kept on telling everything without end, unable to stop herself. At points, she had started speaking in dragon tongue and had to be brought out of her trance to switch back to a language Arla understood. Arla heard the stories of their plight, and of how Jake reached out to heal her in her shaken state. By the end, Faith was laying down, curled around Arla with a wing up to keep her friend dry.

“Faith…” Arla looked at her friend with sad eyes.

“I don’t want to let him go… I love him… but I can’t take care of him myself. The other night proved that…” Faith wiped her tears away with a closed paw before resting her head on the mud. “Please Arla, I want him to feel welcome.”

The wolf came up to Faith’s closed eyes, so when Faith open them again she would see the smile on her muzzle. “Tonight, he’ll be part of the pack.” With that said, Arla ran off into her den.

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It was only about 10 minutes that Faith had to wait, but it would’ve been much shorter had Arla not had to explain the paraphrased version of Faith’s story, so her pack understood what was going on. Faith was thankful Jake had been asleep the whole time, for it made things easier to muster the confidence to do what she did, not to mention her human needed his rest especially. Her claws sluggishly danced across her abdomen, as if she was tickling it without passion. For a while, she fidgeted like this, until the sight of Arla returning caught her attention.

“They’re all ready!” Arla said with her tail wagging back and forth.

Faith took a deep breath. ‘Here I go.’ She brought her head to her tummy and gently prodded at it. “Jake, time to wake up. We’re here.”

It took quite a few tries, and Faith was starting to think Jake was in too deep a sleep to be woken peacefully until the stirring began.

“My friends are here. They want to all see you.”

Jake froze a little, but he managed to answer. “Ok…”

Faith knew he was putting on a brave face. She was proud of him. Arla led her over to the den, which was much too small for Faith.

Arla said something into the den, and several wolves came out one by one, all ready and waiting.

First telling Jake to prepare himself, Faith then leaned down, having a slight bulge make its way up her neck. Her wings spread forward, making a shield from the rain in advance. From her throat slowly came a shirtless human, shiny with a coating of drool. Faith made it easy and lifted him past her teeth with her tongue, allowing him to crawl off at his own leisure.

When Jake craned his neck back while on his knees, exasperated, he recoiled back and fell onto his rear, with Faith’s nose catching him.

The wolves were intimidating by their size alone. Being around 8 to 9 feet in height, they were taller than Jake could ever be. Though it was clear they were smiling warmly at him, fear had taken hold.

“Jake, this is Arla and her pack. They’re good friends of my family, and I’d trust them with my life.”

“Hello, there little guy!” Arla chirped, speaking excitedly in English.

“I… uh… hi?” Jake had no idea what to do or say, so he looked back at Faith. His answer was a gesture of her head to the den’s entrance.

“I’ll be right outside if anything, but you have nothing to be afraid of.”

Jake wanted nothing but to return to her stomach. It was so cold out, even if he didn’t have the chills of sickness giving him an overwhelming desire for warmth. He was scared of these towering, unknown creatures. Yet, the look Faith’s eyes gave him was incredibly reassuring, almost to like the night they met… it told him to trust her.

“Ok…” With shaky movements, both from fear and exhaustion, he faced the wolves. Jake attempted to stand up but immediately fell forward, not expecting it to be this hard to walk. The lead wolf caught him, letting him use her head for support. It was at this very moment that Jake began to feel different about these creatures. Even after hearing her speak, he saw in her eyes the intelligence that made her no different than himself. And so, with her support, he was led into the den.

It was a lot bigger in the inside, essentially a large circular room with a very low ceiling. If Jake’s eyes weren’t already adjusted to the dark and the moon hadn’t been showing at the right time, it would’ve been pitch black. Twigs covered the floor, gathered in large nests where groups of wolves laid down, looking at him. At the center was a simple lamp giving off heat, most likely donated by the rescue teams coming by on their relief journeys. The eyes of every wolf shined in its reflection, giving an almost ghostly appearance to the ambiance of the room. Except for nearby pups playing around, who then stopped out of curiosity of their visitor.

Arla helped get Jake settled onto an empty nest, then proceeded to lay down behind him so he could rest against her side. The busy tail covered Jake, encouraging him to lay back and rest, to which he did. Several wolves approached, laying down facing Jake, and before he knew it he was surrounded. A couple of pups ran at him, breaking his tension. They chirped, pawed, and licked at him, and he laughed as he tried to keep their small selves from overwhelming him. The mothers eventually lifted their pups away as Jake was getting too exhausted to play with them any longer.

The boy felt uncomfortable with this many eyes watching him, even as gentle gazes as they were. Instinctively, he shifted closer to Arla, turning to face her head.

Arla nuzzled Jake, her snout as big as his hand, attempting to reassure him. “You got nothing to be afraid of. After all, for someone who’s stayed with dragons as long as you have, some wolves shouldn’t be a problem now.”

“Well… it’s different.” Jake continued growing shyer, facing Arla’s fur.

The wolf propped her head between him and the eyes of the pack, keeping him close to her fur. “There, there. I won’t force you to do anything, but doesn’t company sound nice.”

“It does,” Jake could not deny. However nervous he was, it was far better than simply being with himself.

A grin spread across a furry muzzle as an idea came to mind. It was known to her that it wasn’t the best idea, but one she wanted to try more than anything. The wolf’s tongue slowly stroked Jake up from his chest to the temple, giving the side of his face a chromatic shine. “Mmmmm… you taste delightful~,” Arla spoke with words of relish.

“Um… what?” A swelling of nervousness grew in Jake as the wolves closest to him grinned.

Arla made a long lick across his upper belly. “Oh, you are one of the tastiest morsels I’ve ever met~. I’ve never had to pleasure of tasting something with skin~.”

Jake wasn’t scared, but he was nervous. He was suddenly reminded of the time Lily had endeavored to eat him but hadn’t. That was when he was new to the experience of getting eaten, however, since long thinking about it and his experiences with Faith, he felt much more open to it. Much more. Curious even. But now? He had no idea what to do. Therefore, the flush of pink that came across his face was involuntary. It didn’t help that so many were watching him.

“Oh, I can tell you like this~.” Arla’s jaws gently grabbed hold of his hand, proceeding to lick it thoroughly with her tongue. “You can’t hide it sweetheart~.” He had passed the test and using her eyes, Arla signaled the other pack members to join in. One of them grabbed Jake’s left foot in his maw, then swallowed, engulfing it within the throat. Another simply licked and tasted it as her own plaything. Lastly, one swallowed his arm to the shoulder, leaving his teeth nibbling on Jake’s shoulder. Arla had moved from Jake’s hand to his face, cupping his chin with her tongue and giving him a full view of her pulsating throat. There were no concerns or fear in Jake, which only told Arla to keep it going. ‘My, he’s a special case~.’ Faith hadn’t asked her to tease him, but she couldn’t help but try once he had opened up. The moment he grew afraid, she would back out. Except he never did. And boy did she love this! Sure, he was a blushing mess, but it was clear he hadn’t done this with anyone besides Faith. Nor had he been this… ‘indulged’ upon before.

He had no idea what to do. Feeling so embarrassed, Jake could only look upon the sight of Arla’s throat, wondering if she could really fight him down there and into her stomach. His left arm felt around the throat of the other wolf, feeling just how stretchy it was. Maybe it could? The appendage toying with his right was strong enough to just pull him in on a whim. Then suddenly, they all broke off their teasing onslaught, and Jake found himself pulled against Arla’s fur.

“Oh, my goodness! The whole time you were unafraid! You even liked it~!” Arla spoke excitedly for everyone to hear. The entire pack had been watching with smiles across their muzzles. It was in their nature to play with their prey, and it had certainly proved enjoyable to witness the playfulness shown to a visitor, especially given his reaction.

“Not in front of everyone…” Jake muttered quietly with closed lips.

Arla’s reply was a grin, followed by a massive, slow lick from Jake’s neck to the side of his face that made him shutter. “Oh, hush you~. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s quite rare to find someone as fearless and open as you are~. We would have stopped if you had said anything, but you didn’t~. Look at you, all flustered~.”

Jake tucked his head inward in a futile attempt to hide his face. ‘Why do I like this?’ His smiles were so strong his cheeks hurt. “Okay… so I’m… curious…” He wanted only Arla to hear this. “Just, please… I don’t want anyone else to hear this…”

“You speak to me; you speak to the pack~.” The wolf pried Jake from his furry hiding place, forcing him to face the gathered wolves. The ones that had joined in on the teasing approached, giving small licks and nuzzles.

Jake knew he wasn’t getting out of it. “I like it. I really do. Because… I’ve been alone for so long, but when that… um… that happens I don’t ever feel alone…”

“Sweetheart~…” Arla tucked Jake’s head beneath her chin. “You are a very special human to want to embrace it. No reason to be embarrassed. In fact, we welcome that~.”

“Are you… are you going to eat me?” Jake couldn’t help but ask if that was what Arla and her pack had in store.

“No.” Arla smiled as warmly as a gentle sun. “We have something better in mind~.”

One by one, the pack members laid down aside Jake and Arla, surrounding them both. Soon, the entirety of the cave denizens was together in one big pile.

It was so warm… and cozy… like being bundled in a soft blanket. Not only that, but Jake couldn’t get over surreal it felt. All of them, giving him this assurance and comfort that he could finally forget his worries. And so, with a wolf pup that had snuck into his arms… Jake fell asleep peacefully.

Outside, Faith peered into the den, a smile across her muzzle.

He did get some sleep after all.

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When Jake woke up, it was peaceful. No nightmares. No creeping cold or clammy sweating. Only a few of his companions remained surrounding him, but Arla remained as she was, her attention caught by Jake’s stirring.

It was still dark out, so it must’ve been extremely early in the morning

“Good morning~.” A lick across Jake’s temple woke him up faster. “Are you feeling any better?”

At first, Jake replied with sleepy groans. “Hey Arla…” His hand reached up and scratched the side of her head, earning pleasured growls. “I think I’m doing better…”

“I know the sun hasn’t even come out yet, but it’s time to go soon. We can see Faith whenever you’re ready. She’s just outside.” Arla’s voice spoke gently and sweetly, putting Jake at risk of falling asleep again. The risk increased tenfold when her paw pulled Jake’s head back into the softness of her fur.

Jake relished the feeling of falling into blissful rest against Arla’s blonde fur. “I don’t want to go.”

“Nor do any of us want to say goodbye.” Arla licked his cheek. “Such a sweet child.”

“I’m not that great. I’m just me.”

“Don’t say that.” Arla hugged him closer. “After what happened last night, I don’t think of you as anything less than special~.”

“It’s weird…” Jake giggled and hid his face in the fluff.

“Not here sweetheart~!” Arla wedged her nose between Jake and her fur. “We kept our young warm in our bellies through the storm. If you had stayed with us, we would have kept you warm just the same~.” A lick forced Jake back out of her fur, to look up at her. “You would’ve loved it~.”

A rosy pink covered Jake’s face. “I had my own stomach… gosh it’s so weird just talking about it…”

Arla giggled. “I guess you haven’t exactly talked much about it with anyone besides Faith?”

“And a bit of her family, like Lily.”

“Has Lily gobbled you up yet?”

Jake took a brief moment as he recollected his time with Lily. A small amount of regret pinged him, as even though they had made up, he had still hurt her feelings. If she had done it at this point, things could have perhaps been different. “No, though she did bring it up.” Jake didn’t want to cover the entirety of what had happened.

“Heh, I’ve been eaten by her.”

“Wait, you have?” Jake’s attention had been completely caught by those words.

“Oh yeah, Faith and Max too.” Arla smiled down at him.

“Why?”

“Oh well… for fun really! Mostly games, or because I asked to.”

“Just fun? That’s it?”

“That’s it really. Is something bothering you?”

Fun. Jake had only been eaten three times, and all by Faith. The first was done to save him. The second had been against his will. Lastly, the third was to comfort Faith, as he had been starting to open up to it. But fun? That’s why Lily tried doing it, he just realized, only she had been too hasty, forgetting how new it was to him.

“No, nothing’s wrong.” Jake smiled warmly at his friend.

Arla turned her head in curiosity, before smiling herself at his change in mood. “Well, we shouldn’t keep Faith waiting. Do you think you can walk now?”

“I don’t know. It changes really. I think it’s how hard my body is fighting this virus.” Jake braced himself, setting his arms down and pushing himself up. Damn, he was tired, evident in his shaking arms, but he managed to stand up. It took an effort to balance himself, but Arla was quick to act and offered her head for support. “Thanks.”

“Still tired?” She replied with some concern in her voice.

“Better than yesterday. I think.” And so, he moved in a limping fashion to the den’s exit with his friend by his side. Once out, Jake smiled at the sight of Faith, laying down to the side of the entrance, patiently waiting for him.

“Enjoy yourself?” Faith asked, and her words to Jake were like milk and honey.

Some second wind took over, and Jake dashed from Arla, nearly tripping as he ran to her chest.

This took Faith by surprise, but she embraced the affection, enveloping her human in scales with her arms and tail.

“Thank you…” Jake spoke softly but passionately. “I needed this…”

“Jake…” Faith brought her nose down to gently nuzzle his head. “I’m so happy…”

Then Jake spoke in a hushed tone, hoping Arla wouldn’t hear him and Faith’s superb sense of sound could catch it. “I get it now. I do.”

“What are you talking about?” Faith giggled, joining in on the whispering excitement.

“Why you eat people just for fun.” The boy chuckled, amused at what was happening.

“Oh boy… that teasing really went to your head.” Faith gave a nuzzled that would’ve pushed Jake to the ground had her arms not been holding him in place. “But I’m happy because not every human that comes here gets it.” She held Jake tighter, squishing him into her scales. “The ultimate sign of trust, and the closest gesture of love,” she sang the words directly next to Jake’s ear. “Kept so safe in ways that doom others. Enveloped in warmth…”

Jake heard it. He had heard it before. The massive pulsating of her heart sounding so gentle from there…

“Of course, you already know that~.” Faith chuckled, and with how possessive she had become in the moment, it sounded malevolent. Her tongue licked her chops of the excessive drool seeping out from her mouth.

Jake had heard it, and that’s when he slipped out of his trance. The heartbeat had hastened and thrums emanated from her throat. For a few seconds, nervousness welled inside Jake, before he suddenly closed his eyes and relaxed with a smile. “There’s nothing I can do to stop you…”

It was only then that Faith realized what she had been doing. She was craving her human, but not for food, out of possessiveness. “Oh… I…” Yet she had no words to respond to the acceptance Jake had shown. “Jake… I… didn’t realize what was happening…”

“I would’ve been okay with it…” He placed his hand onto the yellow chest. “I already told you I was starting to like it…”

“You’re too special~. Not only that but so very brave~.” A paw digit rubbed the back of Jake’s head.

“I have no reason to be scared of you… you’d never hurt me Faith…” Then he looked over at Arla, who watched it all with joy and amazement. “Plus, some encouragement opened me up~. Arla, can you come here please?”

The wolf walked over, her smiling snout facing Jake’s exposed face.

Jake asked for Faith to release him, to which she did but left a paw aside him for support. The boy hugged the wolf, wrapping his arms around her neck. “Arla, thanks~. To your whole pack too~.”

“Don’t mention it~. We were all happy to take you in and open you up too~.”

“There’s… something I want to do to thank you…” The hint of a blush showed up on his face as he prepared to speak the words. Jake glanced over to seek at Arla’s side, spotting her abdomen and making a quick series of predictions through his head. “Could… could I really fit in there?”

A wide-eyed look of surprise was on Arla’s face before her signature grin came back. “Jake, I can fit things much bigger than you in there~.” She gave him a quick, slobbery lick, flustering him up.

“Could I…” yet a blockage formed not in his throat but in the nerves responsible for sending the instructions to his windpipe. He knew he wasn’t going to get another chance. Soon he would be gone here… forever most likely. “Could you eat me?” Jake shut his eyes tight as he said the words, and then a small feeling of relief followed, though it wasn’t enough to make him relax.

Nothing came from Arla, and Jake imagined this look of disbelief, that why would he ask such a thing? A familiar, wet appendage slowly moved across his chin, putting Jake at enough ease to finally open his eyes, then everything changed.

Arla’s mouth was slightly open, to let out her tongue to caress his face softly. As a result, those grinning teeth shone in the sunlight on one side of her face, like quartz under a light.

His heart was beating so hard, but for a different reason now.

And while Jake couldn’t see her with his back to her, Faith had an equally wide smile.

Arla broke the silence with these almost seductive-sounding words. “Oh, would you tell me why~? I’m quite curious~.”

She wanted him to talk more? Did she not realize what he took for Jake to speak that sentence earlier?

Why did he want this? He had talked about this with Faith before, giving that whole big speech to her. At the time she turned feral and had eaten him, he had actually felt safe as he knew she would return to normal. Plus, a couple of addons about closeness and comfiness. Most of all, he didn’t want Faith to continue guilt-tripping.

But that was why he wanted *Faith* to do it. Not this new friend of his.

Why did he want this?

And for a moment that felt like forever as Jake searched his head for the answers, his heart began to calm as he found serenity in his findings and sorrow.

“I’ve been alone for so long…” he crossed his arms, looking away to the ground, “and when Faith tried to keep me warm, it was the first time in… forever that I felt someone touch me. At least in the affectionate way.” As Jake looked back at Arla, he was unable to keep the tears from his eyes, nor did he bother trying. “When I was certain I was going to die, Faith did something unimaginable to save me, and I trusted her. After that…” he paused to take a deep breath, realizing how much emotion poured out, “I was safe. More than that, I was held so close, closer than I ever could possibly imagine!”

Finally finishing his outpouring, Jake suddenly became light-headed, falling against Arla’s chest for support, kept there by her paw.

Arla’s teasing expression had been wiped clean, as had Faith’s smile. The two watched the sobbing boy with slight frowns, taking in all the information.

“Jake…” whispered Faith, “will you please come here?”

Jake wiped his eyes and looked to his dragon, seeing her arms open and a mother’s expression on her face. A second’s pause, then he ran for her, colliding with her chest, becoming concealed by the green scales of Faith’s forearms.

She leaned in ever so closely. “I listened to you once, but I never thought about what it was like to be that lonely. Oh, sweetheart, you like being held, don’t you?”

No response came from Jake as he continued expelling his emotion.

“Especially in my stomach, swept away from the world,” she sang it like a lullaby, “into warmth and closeness.”

The crying had eased down soon after this, and a pair of eyes that had shown they’d been part of so much looked at the yellow orbs in the sky. “Geez, you people really do it all the time.”

The comment earned a chuckle from Faith. “It’s a way of life here. It’s always been that way. No one knows how the symbiosis part started, but we all could do it, so I guess it made trust a lot easier.”

Pausing to think for a moment, Jake gave his own, quiet chuckle, smiling again. “I don’t even know what to say now.”

“How about, ‘ready Arla?’” Faith uncovered Jake, forcing him 180 degrees with her tail.

The wolf was standing right there, tail wagging slightly behind her.

No hesitation, pounding heart, or timid voice, Jake just walked to her, chuckling again at what he was about to say. “Ready Arla?”

“You just had to ask~.” She leaned down to Jake’s head level, spreading her jaws open wide.

Jake had already seen that throat, pulsating with every breath her powerful lungs took. The saliva gave everything a chromatic shine in the sunlight, spread across the maw in strands like a spider web. The tongue seemed to beckon him, clearly a tease by Arla, and he could almost hear her thoughts.

‘C’mon Jake~… you know you want to…’ said the imaginary voice of Arla Jake couldn’t help but think in his head.

The boy reached a hand in, finding everything so surreal. Arla’s tongue guided his hand to the throat, sounding a squelching noise when he reached it. “Oh my God…” whispered Jake. Now he took the time to feel it while an entire pack of wolves wasn’t overloading his senses. The way the throat contracted around his arm was like a body hug of pillows. Warm pillows. And she was so gentle with him, but this was only the beginning. He hesitated, though not out of fear, before bringing his other hand into the gaping abyss, only instead Arla released the first hand. It turned out to be a trap, one to draw Jake close to first send him reeling back with a lick then pinning him to the ground beneath her paw.

Arla wanted him to watch as her smile grew wider and wider, showing off more of her throat while it drew ever closer. With every second, she knew her prey wasn’t afraid, even when she gently shut her jaws around his head. She kept him there, insulating him with her hot, steamy breath. This was to slowly let him adjust, and long after it was clear to continue, she swallowed. A powerful contraction in her throat latched onto Jake’s head, pulling him in.

Jake squinted out of reflex but quickly relaxed. An air pocket allowed him to breathe, albeit it was incredibly hot and humid. Another swallow had him sitting up for, as did another, and a follow-up.

Globs of drool dripped to the ground, either flowing down Jake’s body or simply dropping from her maw. By the gods, he tasted so heavenly… for there was a taste in humans, unlike anything she had ever had. So, this was skin… no fur, hide, or scales, but skin. She had to control herself, to make sure this human had it easy for the first time. Steadily, she eased more of Jake into her throat with consistent swallows, making progress down past his chest.

God, it was tight, but not unbearable. The pressure exerted upon Jake was simply the body trying to retain its original shape and force him down. Feelings of rippling flesh traveled across him, and he felt the teeth touch his waist, applying gentle strength. Gravity shifted as Arla raised her head back, pointing to the cloudy sky, and eased down the legs with swallow after swallow, growling quietly under it all that it vibrated the boy.

A tight ring passed Jake’s head, entering a slightly more spacious space. Immediately, he knew this was the stomach, and yet still wonder if he’d fit. It was so small… but when his head pressed against the back of the stomach… it expanded so easily! More of him came, stretching it even further with no signs of the slightest limit. It was at that moment that Jake realized he was only scratching the surface, both in the stomach’s capacity and in the sheer ability of consumption of every creature on the planet.

Upon the feet being the last, final thing outside of the throat, Arla took her sweet time, playing with them. It proved ticklish, making Jake wriggle in her throat, and this only furthered the pleasure she experienced. Growling louder, wagging her tail left to right, and salivating streams of spittle. Yes, it was heavenly to her. After having her fun, she pressed her tongue against the last of Jake and… GULP!

The boy’s body was starting to bend forward, and by the time the entirety of Jake was out of the esophagus, his back was facing the floor and he had curled up in a fetal position. It was so tight and while he could push out with ease, when he relaxed the flesh just pressed against him, keeping him tight. Her heartbeat pounded nearby, and while it wasn’t as loud as Faith’s it was indeed close. His weight made a sag within the gut, and every movement Arla made caused a sway. Yet there was a key difference between Faith’s and this one: gurgles and churning. It occurred to Jake that he had been kept in Faith’s storage stomach, away from any digestive functions, but with Arla, it was just her stomach turned off. It groaned, making noises, and the walls moved a bit, rubbing against him. It was… relaxing…

“Oh… never once have I had a human before…” Arla’s voice sounded everywhere, slightly muffled yet still completely understandable. “But you are delicious!”

A smile on Jake’s face couldn’t be helped. “I just… still can’t believe this happened…” he stroked the nearby flesh with his hand. “It’s so nice and warm… like Faith’s but smaller.”

Arla’s foreleg reached back and pawed at her sagging gut, massaging Jake’s back. The smile on her face was so visible that any more than Jake would’ve been able to see it through the flesh and hide. “You look adorable like this! Just a lump on my body I can cuddle with!” She quickly laid down, rolling onto her side then back. The motions throbbed her belly, tossing Jake about as it sloshed back and forth.

For the boy, it was like being inside of a water balloon after you shake it, the way the momentum goes back and forth. The sheer suddenness meant there was no way for him to brace himself, and so he slapped against every surface.

When her belly settled to a simple rising and falling with her breathing, Arla’s paws reached down and crossed them around Jake’s bulge, hugging and squishing it. Her stomach contracted, squeezing her gut boy even further within her flesh. The affection continued as Arla leaned down to nuzzle and lick the fur which separated them. “My own personal gut boy… so delicious~…”

While this happened, Faith watched it all with a smile. Happy at the friendship, at the openness Jake was giving, and that Jake was happy. She was supposed to head back, but she could disobey and give Jake some more time.

Eventually, Arla had to stop when Jake became so tuckered out, yet joyously happy. So happy he was on the verge of tears as he came as close as he could to his surroundings that were Arla.

“Awww…” coed Arla, letting her prey relax in her gut. “You’re such a cute, tasty little sweetheart~.” The wolf ended with a kiss to where Jake’s head was. “You can rest in my belly~.”

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*This place… smaller than I remember? The heartbeat and breathing are closer but weak. The groans of the digestive stomach are all around me now… WAIT!*

Jake jolted, attempting to get upright, but he couldn’t. Immediately, the fleshy cavity held him in place.

He panted, almost hyperventilating until the memories finally caught up to him, and he let himself go limp.

*Not a digestive stomach… just Arla’s… it just groans, unlike Faith’s storage stomach…*

*…*

*I had actually thought I was digesting inside of Faith for a moment…*

*…*

*I don’t think I’ll ever be inside Faith’s stomach again… and it’s funny to think how much has happened involving it in just a few days…*

*I love it in there…*

*Not to say Arla’s isn’t nice. It’s very snug like I’m being hugged all the time. The walls do move, and I think it’s because it’s an actual stomach, just turned off.*

*But I’ll miss Faith’s… she… I won’t ever forget our first time… or the next one… or the last…*

He couldn’t help but sob. Clinging to the closest, fleshy wall, Jake made spastic crying movements, letting out his tears, until a pressure across his back caught his attention.

“Jake?” came Arla’s voice.

“Oh… I’m sorry I woke you, Arla…”

“What’s wrong sweetie?” she let her paws move across her bulging fur. “Everyone else is asleep, so you can tell me.”

There was a long pause of silence from Jake. “I’m going to miss Faith…”

“I know. I know…” Arla nuzzled her belly as she kept stroking it. “You two have forged a special bond.”

“They don’t care… none of them do…”

“Who?”

“Everyone who manages me. Why do you think I was stuck in an orphanage for years? They didn’t even send me back to Earth… and they’re going to send me back I KNOW IT!”

There was a squeeze in every direction as Arla’s flesh cradled his form. “No, not here,” whispered the wolf soothingly. “Think about me, Faith, and everyone else. Has everyone on this planet you’ve met cared for you?”

There was a pause from Jake as he thought about it, lingering sobs still occurring. “Y-yeah…”

“Things are different here. I know someone there will know what you need: love…” After that sentence, Arla pressed her lips against her gut in a kiss.

“You… really think so?” There was a rising hope in Jake’s voice.

Things were indeed different. In the time Jake had been on Uprora, since crashing down, not one sentient being had tried to hurt him. The plants? Well, though he struggled still with the concept, Faith had said they never meant him any real harm. They might’ve helped him. Was… that what they were trying to do when he entered the forest? They attempted to catch him because they wouldn’t be able to help outside the jungle? It was still hard to shake the fear he had of them, but he was willing to try to put that aside for rationalizing.

If beings a different species of him were far more caring than some humans back on that remote rock… then maybe there was hope…

“I know Luna will do everything she can for you… maybe even get you back to Earth if she can help it…” replied Arla, bringing Jake out of his head for a moment.

Earth… now that was a dilemma he had always had. Should he try to find his relatives rather than a new family? The tug between the two were sentimentality and sheer difficulty, with the latter so great that Jake would even consider adoption. He never actually wanted another family truth be told. The trip he last took with his parents was a surprise one, as they were ecstatic about surprising even the family relatives. Jake remembered his mom telling him that only they knew where they were going. Surely they must’ve tried to find him, even hired someone perhaps. It was probably due to a misplaced paper he wasn’t found. The theories were endless, especially since he didn’t have a lot to work with but distant memories.

Perhaps… he would find them one day after getting adopted… there was nothing wrong with that.

But still… a family without Faith became hard to imagine. In truth

“I… thank you…” Jake snuggled up as close as he could to the stomach walls, giving a small kiss, and he resisted the need to wipe his mouth. “I love you…”

“Aw… I love you too Jake… just try to get some rest for me please…”

Jake got himself comfortable, and resumed his rest, falling asleep quickly.

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Sunlight.

He never thought he’d be so against seeing it. Alas, it was so free of worry in there. It may have sounded childish to think such thoughts, but everything out there was intent on sweeping him away from the paradise that was the planet he had found himself on.

The grass was cold and wet. The wind was already starting to chill his saliva-soaked body. Almost immediately, scales rubbed against his back.

“From what I heard you had a nice time~,” came the familiar voice of Faith, happy and cooing the words.

Jake just gave an amused chuckle. “Did you know this was going to happen?”

“It was one thing I thought might happen. But no, I didn’t have many expectations on what they would put you through. Arla is one of the more voracious members of her pack anyways.”

“You had an idea then at least?”

“Come now, all I wanted for you was pleasant company~,” smiled the dragon.

“But…” Jake looked away and to the ground. “It’s time to go, isn’t it?”

Faith frowned, especially that Jake had cut right to the chase. “It is… it is…”

Jake turned around to Arla, immediately running up to hug the wolf’s chest, to her surprise.

Arla curled her head around Jake’s. “I’ll never forget you, Jake. Especially now someone as open and adventurous as you… you were so brave last night to let me eat you, and I only wish you could stay on this planet, let alone visit us again.”

“Maybe I’ll be able to come back someday,” replied Jake, hope in his voice as he stroked her fur with a hand.

After a while of this, Arla finally broke the hug, kissing Jake to the cheek with her canine lips.

Jake didn’t want to break it, unable to help but be clingy.

Faith forced herself to grab him via her tail, however saddening the act was. “Come on Jake, Luna will be waiting for us.”

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Jake made the journey sitting on Faith’s back, in the spot between her wings. Mostly he picked his fingernails or other forms of fidgeting.

Luna, Thunder, Max, Faith, and Lily, who rested her massive weight onto the back of Thunder, all took the journey to the Jungle. Amber had been left behind, trusted to be by herself until they return. Thor and Hope were napping soundly in Luna’s storage stomach, blissfully unaware Jake was leaving, and that Luna had no plans to break their hearts, and her own, with a goodbye.

The trail they followed was very old, as whatever artificial path had been formed was now only signified by sparser grass, a break in the trees, and stacks of rocks placed to signify the path whenever it had slowed and such. The trees in the forest largely resembled pine trees of Earth and were spaced out just enough that the giant bulk of a dragon could navigate through easily, with the occasional thicket to move around. The path was just wide enough for the family to move single file, and the spacing between the stones at both edges told that the path was designed with the intention to allow a dragon to travel it, even with the common knowledge they could fly. Jake thought of Amber, how she was a flightless dragon, then also hypothesized that then there could be other species on Uprora of similar size to dragons. In any case, it seemed the space that had been allocated to accommodate the greater beings was invaded by nature inch by inch over the years. Torn branches and an occasional crudely uprooted tree told that there was an act every now and then to remove emerging obstacles, perhaps by a different passerby each time. Still, it was a squeeze, and sometimes branches scraped across the scaly sides of the travelers.

One time Jake had gotten hit with a branch, the lower ones of younger trees just reaching dragon height, high enough to reach him, so sometimes a dragon ducked their head a few feet. After that, Faith kept a lookout for any low enough branches and tore them off as a toddler plucked grass off the dirt.

The ground was muddy, and the giant footfalls of dragons came with wet noises. While a person would be annoyed at having to pull their feet free with every step, the giant creatures paid no mind. One could even say they appeared oblivious to it.

Then, in the distance, a change in coloration stood out, catching the eye so well as a black sheep does in a herd. Green. Much brighter green.

“Please stop,” Jake said, knowing full well where they were heading.

The whole convoy stopped and looked at Jake.

Faith looked to her mother and said something in dragon language. Everyone continued moving, but Faith veered off into the forest. It was only a few hundred yards away from the trail did she stop. Using her tail, she lifted Jake off her back and onto an open palm held near eye level. Jake fit on her hand like a toy, though there wasn’t any space to move, so he sat still.

“I know you don’t want to go,” Faith spoke first.

“I don’t want to go in there…” Whimpered Jake, in the glow of the sun coming through her wing.

“You have to Jake…” Faith replied, keeping her head as close to the ground as possible.

“It’s not that… it’s the plants…” Jake hugged her nose. “I remember what you said about them, but I don’t know if I can do it…”

“I get it, Jake.” Faith cooed. “If you want, you could stay in my belly.”

“An appealing thought, but I don’t know if I should just use you as an escape for my problems…”

Faith’s answer was immediately shooting out her tongue, quickly cupping around him and pulling him into her mouth. “Don’t ever say that…” And then, she spat him gently back onto her paw. “I’m here for you, and I want you to be comfortable~.”

Jake chuckled as he wiped the globs of slime off his jacket. “I… thank you, Faith.” Opening his arms to gesture her to come closer, he hugged Faith’s snout as soon as it came into reach, coating it a little in the saliva dripping from him.

“They won’t hurt you, Jake. Nothing will. It’s against the ancient law. I understand that to your kind we appear like the animals in all your worlds, but we’re not.”

“I know, and that’s not the issue. It’s just… the day I crashed here…”

Faith gave a gentle push with her snout. “Do you remember what I said the night we met?”

“Every word. They didn’t hurt me, but I just can’t shake the fear…”

“Well, I’ll be with you every step. All you have to do is let me take care of everything. Do you think you can do that?”

Jake nodded. “Yes, I can.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah…”

Faith’s tail coiled him by the waist, returning him to his originally

Jake grasped the closest fin tightly and closed his eyes while his body slumped against his dragon’s neck.

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The trail they had followed through was just like in the forest: ancient, rocks to mark the path, but it was even more overgrown. Vegetation was rampant, but it could be managed. There were too many branches for Faith to tear off, so Jake just kept his head down, sometimes feeling moist leaves run down his back.

Still, Jake kept a close and fearful lookout for plants. He played as relaxed as he could to avoid the worries of Faith, but with his head moving constantly to view one side of the dragon to the other, plus his tight grip, it couldn’t be hidden for long, though there was nothing Faith could do but keep her frown from view.

As the foliage decreased over time, they eventually arrived at a nearly perfectly circular clearing, as if the jungle knew not to grow there. In place, a field of bright grass covered the area, and people of all manner were there like it was a simple park.

It was Jake’s first sight of the humanoid Uprorians, but only in general body posture was there anything human about them. Sure, there were different traits humans carried, for as long as human history, but these people belonged to different species entirely. Jake wondered how the evolutionary path of Uprora brought so many species of sentience onto the world. It was incredible to Jake. There were mammals, reptiles, birds, and others that appeared to simply be humanoid versions of Uprorian species. Most of them were evidently much taller than he was, the smallest were 7 feet, and he saw a ginormous dragon-looking one that had to be 10 feet from standing next to someone else.

Immediately, the dragons attracted attention. Nothing bad, with the worst just people being weary around their massive size. The entrance into the town was wide enough for the dragons, perhaps designed that way.

The buildings were all clustered, appearing that the town was packed together to fit the small space, that it wasn’t allowed to expand to the grass, let alone the jungle. It looked very rural, mixed with incorporated human things, like retrofitting sparse modern technologies into a medieval society as cleanly as if it had always been that way. There was no pavement, but bricks creating the roads, with wood and stone comprising many of the houses. There were a lot of lanterns, but some lightbulbs were embedded into buildings that would turn on at night. Stores had many windows displaying their wares, and it seemed their owners lived upstairs. Places to eat didn’t even have front walls, but Jake could tell there were metal doors to use during closing hours, definitely another human invention put to good use. Every structure was more massive than a typical human one, but when it came to living space for the large beings it was relatively small. Jake realized then how different scaling was for Uprorians.

“This is one of the few places building is allowed in the jungle. Of course, there isn’t any room to expand, so it’s sorta tight living, but needless to say, the environment makes it worth it.” Faith explained. “Nothing will grow into the boundaries, so no need to prune either.”

“How could that work?” asked Jake.

“To summarize it, the plants do the work.”

The large roads that could allow the dragons’ passages were very few in number, arrayed across the town like a spider web pattern, creating layers of rings, with only around 3 intersections passed by as they simply went straight for the town’s center. When they arrived, it was a park. At least, it would’ve been if not for the number of white tents propped up and mobile buildings placed. The entirety of the public recreational area was requisitioned into the camp where the effort to gather the crash survivors had their headquarters. Trucks and all sorts of motorized vehicles parked on the brick roads framing the place.

All the dragons got onto the grass and made a tight circle, and all eyes were on Jake.

“It is… time to go…” said Luna, with no joy in her voice.

Faith brought her human into her arms and close to her chest. She whispered caring words as Jake hugged her back and said in return how he’d never forget her. Max came next when the boy was set onto the ground, pulling Jake close with his tail and nuzzling his small form with a fluffy snout. It ended with a friendly lick. Lily, having slithered off Thunder, wrapped Jake up, giving a gentle squeeze that Jake never wanted to end. Thunder, though Jake was least familiar with him, was nevertheless affection despite his greater bulk. He complimented Jake on how he was strong to survive the ordeals thrown at him.

Then, at last, there was Luna. Jake walked up to her, unable to look her in the eye for most of the time. “T-thank you for everything… you all looked after me and brought me into your home… I won’t ever forget this…”

Luna slid into a laying down position and pulled Jake to her chest. “I pray you will find a new home, Jake. You are a wonderful person, and I have much to thank you as you do to me. Make no mistake, I love you.”

‘I love you.’

The words echoed in Jake’s head.

The sudden sound of sobbing broke the moment as Faith outpoured her emotions. She couldn’t hide it any longer.

Immediately, Jake ran to her, the tears that had been held back escaping. They said their final goodbye without any restraint.

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“Hey, kid!”

Jake opened his eyes, immediately sitting up.

A middle-aged man in a security outfit reeled back. “God, the Hell are you dreaming about?”

Jake looked around, seeing every set of eyes in the tent looking at him. Everyone, boys ranging from every age below adult, sitting up on their beds and staring at him. Some concerned, some annoyed, as well as a whole other range of emotions Jake didn’t want to know about.

“Keep it down, you’re keeping everyone up. The guard scoffed and immediately turned to leave to the tent.

Jake simply pulled the covers over his head. He couldn’t take this…

So, an hour later, he peeked to see that everyone else was sleeping. In silence, he put on his shoes and headed to the exit, wincing from the soreness of his arms, having received three shots to cure and vaccine him from the disease he had caught and more. The guard from before was sitting on a chair, with his head down and sleeping. Lazy idiot. With no other security in sight, it was easy to leave the park.

It had been so long since he’d seen a town, let alone one at night, so Jake was held in slight wonder at how the lights in every window, neon sign, and street lamp shone. The people he passed were inhuman, and yet their smiles were as recognizable as any sincere one on a human. He passed by an open café, where customers were drinking teas, coffees, and local drinks he didn’t recognize.

He realized he had been so secluded from civilization, he’d forgotten what it was like to gaze upon it all. It was barely different than seeing it all for the first time. And not even that, but the exoticness of it added a new flavor, that just balanced on the verge of overwhelming him.

There were very few motorized vehicles outside of the rescue efforts, mostly motorized bikes, with a rare truck every now and then. Lanterns were everywhere, flickering as they lit the area with natural flame, but the occasional electrical light shined far brighter.

Upon seeing two Uprorians, with their anthropomorphic but animal-like physiques, he staggered backward. Quickly, he composed himself. Jake had never actually seen the people-like ones so close before, and they were certainly a sight to behold. The last time a person was that much taller than him, he was a mere child.

They didn’t seem to notice his momentary surprise, and Jake was glad for it as they passed by. Complications were the last thing he wanted. He was standing on thin ice, both the metaphor for reality and his psyche as he was running away from his problems.

Figuring it would be best to take the most alone route, he took a left into an alleyway. At that moment, someone else had been exiting from that same place.

Jake’s hurry had him walking at considerable speed, and while he was knocked to the ground, the other didn’t so much as budge.

“My goodness! Are you okay!” The voice of a woman sounded with concern. Hands picked Jake up while he still tried to get his bearings again, placing him standing up.

Jake, again, reeled back a little in sheer surprise. In front of him was the upper body of a person, covered in green scales, attached to a serpent body stretching a considerable length. He did not look at her face, desiring to avoid eye contact wherever possible.

She brushed off his shoulder, checking to see any bruises. “Don’t rush around corners like that next time.” Then, keeping her hands on Jake’s shoulders, the snake woman seemed to inspect him more closely. “Say, I haven’t seen you around? You like one of those humans who crashed.”

“Well, I’m not,” Jake replied hastily, uncomfortable with talking to a stranger, especially given he was running from his problems, so he tried to break away as soon as possible. If she figured out he was running, he would be caught for sure. “Sorry for bumping into you.” He turned and went back the way he was heading, but the scaly hand stopped him.

“You alright?” asked the serpent. “I know you shouldn’t be walking around this late at night, but you don’t look alright.”

He grew angry and fearful that she was asking questions now.

“You are from that ship.”

Everything in Jake’s body froze save for his beating heart. Even his lungs could not budge. The very thought she would tell someone he had ran off was unbearable. Running would guarantee that, so he looked at her, making eye contact at last.

The first thing that he thought was… she was most certainly beautiful. The head of a serpent adorned with a cobra mane and patterned with various shades of green. Like gemstones, her gorgeous green eyes glistened in the small amount of light from the street. It was stunning enough that he had snapped out of his anguish and hasty state.

Taking notice of his calming, the woman gave a small smile. “You’re a handsome young man.”

Jake’s eyes widened just a tad. While he was awestruck by her beauty, she was complimenting his. Not only that, but it also felt a tad maternal.

“What might your name be?” she asked, never ceasing her smile.

“Jake,” he answered, realizing he did it without thinking beforehand.

“You can call me Mala,” replied the woman, gingerly stroking Jake’s hair to his surprise. “I can tell you’ve been through much. I know anyone with hair takes better care of it.”

His hair? It was then Jake realized the state he was in. He might’ve had a clean jacket and clothes, but his body was grimy having had nothing to clean himself but snow, rain, and dragon saliva over the past days since he had crash-landed on this world. There were no showers at the hastily constructed prison, though they did say bathing would be done the next day. It was a bit stupid to Jake considering he was out in the wilds and could’ve had any number of diseases attached to his skin. At least he didn’t have any fleas or similar pests. Arla may have left him clean, but since then he had gathered up mud in his journey.

“Well… more than it appears actually…” Jake answered honestly, recalling many of the worst events he had experienced. Had it not been for dragon saliva, he would look like an absolute trash heap. “I’ve had some cleaning, just not much.”

“You reek of getting swallowed,” giggled Mala.

That was a shocker to Jake, and he felt suddenly so embarrassed that it was slightly flustering. He had always noticed the smell he gave off after spending time in a stomach, and now someone else did.

“Oh my goodness. So, what was it that rescued you?” asked Mala, and unbeknownst to Jake, started to inconspicuously pull him to walk alongside her.

“A… a dragon,” Jake smiled recalling Faith, making him unaware that he was walking alongside this newfound acquaintance of his.

“A dragon?” Mala seemed amazed. “What were they like?”

“She… she was so kind. When she found me, I was going to die, but she saved me and kept me safe and warm. She… loved me like a son…”

The expression on Jake’s face made his feeling known to her. “And you felt her as a mother?”

A mother? Luna had been the mother and Faith would be the sister. Yet… it was Faith who was so set on looking after him. Held him in her arms so tightly yet gently.

“In a way…” he answered. “But I won’t ever see her again…”

“How about you tell me all about it?”

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Sitting in the open-walled café Jake had passed earlier, he only just finished telling his story to Mala, who listened intently.

“You’ve been through so much,” said the naga some silent moments later. She was sitting next to Jake and stretched an arm around his shoulder to pull him close.

It had felt good to talk to her, but it had left him in a numbed state. No longer was his proactive as before, but dwelling in the sad thoughts of his mind.

“I truly wish there was something I could do for you.”

“Either I find my old relatives, which I won’t even be allowed to do because on paper I’m an orphan, and still a minor, or I get a new family. The only family I want to be with is hers… and they can’t have me.”

“Are you… going to turn me in?”

“Normally it’d be the right thing to do, and it probably is, but I see nothing wrong with letting a boy enjoy some freedom, especially after what you’ve been through. They’ll catch you one way or another, so I don’t have to intervene, though you do realize that right?”

Jake sighed, and in the forest, it would’ve appeared as a fog coming out of his mouth, but the hot jungle made it invisible. “I know, and I’ve accepted my fate.”

“I do hope things turn out well for you Jake…” Mala rested her chin atop the boy’s head, tongue flicking out. The tail wrapped smoothly up his legs to his waist, and it felt nice as they squeezed gently. She kissed his head, before breaking off, standing up and leaving some money on the table for the drinks.

“Thank you,” said Jake, looking somberly at the table as she slithered off, clearly reluctant to leave him, but what else could she do?

Once the human gave the money, he put whatever change leftover in his pocket after inspecting their unique designs that held the faces of Uprora’s famous historical figures rather than those belonging to any human planet. After composing himself, he set out walking again.

It was past midnight by now, and the streets were largely quiet. If it wasn’t for some houses keeping their lights on, it could’ve been mistaken for a ghost town.

At last, he came to the edge of the town, where the stone tiles ended at a dirt path.

He didn’t dare go any further. So, he found a bench and sat on it, remaining in limbo between two things he dreaded.

To run away, or let himself risk being trapped again.

“What has my life become?” He asked himself. For he had the most extraordinary days in his life, and now he was about to be forgotten. Again. He wondered how his extended family on Earth were doing. They must’ve had tried something to find him, but as time went by, efforts waned. Jake accepted that fact. But he knew that if he let himself taken away again, he risked being discarded. He wanted to be with Faith more than anything, but that was no longer a possibility. “I can’t go back…” He whispered, settled on his decision. “But I can’t escape either way…”

Had Jake’s eyes been opened, he would’ve seen the green appendage slithering, like a snake, wrapping around his foot. By the time he noticed something was touching his foot, it was too late.

Jake screamed as the reoccurrence of his nightmare from the other day happened.

Some heard it, and the police investigated a reported disturbance. They found nothing.