

Six guns remained trained on the alien computer where it continued to lay, with its only movement being to drag its head around to observe the culmination of the events it had set in motion. The alien continued to be oblivious to the gruesome injuries inflicted upon it, which even then, continued to ooze precious blood.

Alex and the Delta conversed and then called out for Luke and Lucy to bring them some towels and antiseptic. Tom added on to this where they could find a gallon of hydrogen peroxide as they poked their fearful faces around from the side of the barn. They gave shaky nods of their heads before heading up to the house holding tightly clasped hands, absolutely terrified by all that had just occurred.

Attention returned to Jesse as the medic and Alex conversed above him before turning to Irma who had laid her head upon Jesse's and was making a quiet, but continuous, rumbling deep in her throat in the hopes that the hum would help soothe the new dragon.

"We don't know what a normal heart rate or blood pressure is for you now. Irma, we need to measure yours so that we can tell how Jesse is doing."

"Doo it."

Pulling two pairs of stethoscopes out the medic handed one to Alex and they began to probe about Irma's chest. As soon as the diaphragms had touch her chest they shouted in pain and ripped the instruments from their ears. The medic wrapped the chest pieces in thick gauze in order for them to try to find the best place to listen to her heart beat again while Brian and Serena watched intently. The Delta found the prime spot at center mass about two hand spans upwards of the curve from the front of her raised neck to the underside of her chest.

After listening for one minute Alex went back to listen at the same spot on Jesse, while the Delta conferred with Brian and Serena about how best to take blood pressure. They asked him what he had and he brought out a simple blood pressure cuff. The two Doctors looked at it dubiously before taking it over to Irma's left foreleg. After adding another two end to end with the first, they were just barely able to get it over the bottom half of her leg. It took them four attempts to get a consistent reading. Going over to Jesse they repeated the entirely new medical procedure they had just established. Not even knowing the real value of the numbers they had gotten except to use them comparatively.

The medic turned to Irma to allay her fears. "His heart rate is declining as is his blood pressure. We think that he is no longer in pain. But we won't know for certain until he awakes."

"Wake him, I want tooo know he'sss alright."

"I don't think that's a good idea right now. He may still have enormous amounts of residual nerve pain throughout his body. Give him time, and allow him to awaken naturally."

Irma nodded, as did Kim and Tom. Turning, the two parents trained their wrathful gazes upon Thumper as it continued to lay next to the barn, bleeding freely.

"I don't think enough of you hasss broken yet, let meeee help." Kim snarled

Tom blocked her with his own body before addressing the limp form of the alien himself.

"Explain yourself." He said coldly.

"I, apologize. I allowed my frustration to take hold and I lashed out in a manner that served no purpose."

Tom roared in furious anger. "That'sss it? That'sss your explanation? You almost killed him! You have ripped him away from hisss life! Haven't enough sssssuffered alreedy? Yuuuu hav theee powerssss of aaah god, and yuuulosseeeyuurrrtemprr? Thatssnotgood enuf!"

Thumper closed its eyes briefly before re-opening them.

"No... It is not good enough. This subroutine will be taken offline for diagnostic evaluation. This subroutine/myself/I/we will be offline shortly. It will require 1.25 hours"

As soon as it had said this the golden eyes went dark as the head collapsed to the ground and the body turned a lifeless gray. One of the ODA walked forward to muzzle thump it right in the eyeball. There was no response and the soldiers relaxed for the time being.

Ulysses exhaled heavily and then looking around gave voice to what everyone was thinking. "Well, this turned into a real shit show. What do we do now?"

Tom and Kim, sitting on each side of Irma, looked up but offered no response.

Alex helping clean Jesse with the SF medic using the hydrogen peroxide and towels brought by the twins simply shook his head.

Brian and Serena both looked as pallid as the ghost they looked like they'd seen and could offer nothing sensible.

Canvassing the rest of the soldiers present offered up only a variety of opinions that either ran to target practice on Thumper's body or burying it to see what it would do when it awoke.

It was Irma who offered an actionable path forward as both her parents looked down on her where she had stayed as Jesse was cleaned.

"Seeee to my Jesse. Tie Thumper down."

Ulysses nodded his head and motioned two of his soldiers to come with him. They walked around to the far side of the barn where their equipment drop was and came back with several items. Using multiple flexi-cuffs and zip ties they bound the offline computer's legs to each other. Then, driving several three foot long stakes into the ground they worked together to run rope crisscrossed across the alien's back and tightly tied at each corner stake.

"I don't know how long that'll hold a creature that size, but it's the best we have for now. I don't suppose you have a tractor or something do you? We could pin it down with the bucket."

Tom flicked his tail dismissively. "It doesssn't matter what we use, Thumper can change it'ssss form and teleeeport at will. The only thing we'reee doing is showing it what we mean tooo do."

Ulysses raised his hands and then let them drop in defeat. He turned to his Echo and told him to call this up. Higher command must know that this 'Thumper' had gone rogue and shut itself down for an apparent diagnostic test. Also to report that they had one more transformation occur right in front of

their own disbelieving eyes. Another soldier rifles quickly through Jesse's destroyed jeans and produces his wallet, he slips the driver's license to the 18E.

The commo specialist took a number of photos, both of the newly cleaned Jesse, his ID, and the ashen derelict Thumper. Taking the SD card out of his digital camera he plugged it into the accessory dongle that was hooked to his sat. phone, uploaded the data for transmission, and then placed the call.

Alex asked Kim about next of kin for Jesse. She swung her head side to side negatively. "Father isss dead, mother hasn't beeeen heard from in yearsss."

She looked down at the star crossed lovers sadly.

"Aaall he has, isss Irma."

Irma burst into a fresh round of tears hearing this reminder as she continued to nudge at Jesse's head and lick his crown encouragingly.

The commo guy relayed a command for the Major. "Uly, Group is ordering us to immobilize the alien for transport."

He rolled his eyes despairingly before commenting to Kim "I should've gotten out when you did." Kim gave a halfhearted rumble of amusement while Ulysses grabbed the satellite phone and stalked off to communicate the folly of his commander's order.

For the next forty minutes this was how time passed. The gentle humming of Irma and the distant bickering of Ulysses the only sounds to disturb what was otherwise a peaceful sunny autumn day. A day that had been marred so far by major calamity, and as would be discovered shortly, calamity that had not run its course.

Irma's humming came to an abrupt halt when Jesse suddenly made a violent shiver before beginning to awake.

Jesse? She called anxiously. Jesse, can you hear me?

There was no response from the traumatically turned twenty something, even as he continued to show increasing signs of wakefulness. Stretching to his full length with claws curled and tail shivering the new dragon extended his wings above his head before retracting them to his back.

Subliminal clues began to appear that told Kim that something wasn't right here. She couldn't remember after Irma's, Tom's, or her own transformation the ability to take complete and casual control of their own bodies. Jesse was demonstrating an unnatural affinity for his new body. She hoped she was wrong.

"Irma... Get away from him, ssssomething isss not right."

"What? What do you mean? It's Jesse!" She protested.

And then Jesse opened his auburn eyes revealing narrowed pupils that did not contain a trace of awareness. This was not Jesse, this was a wild animal that had just awoken surrounded with no clear avenue of escape.

Everything went straight to hell.

Kim immediately began yelling at everyone in ear shot. "Get back, get back, give him room! Lower your weapons! We've got this!"

The creature that Jesse had become leapt to his feet and before Irma could react had bitten her neck and thrown her screaming into the group of soldiers still milling around behind her.

The panicked soldiers reacted in the way that they were trained. They opened fire on their aggressor. Bullets that skipped off hardened scale did nothing to harm the wild creature but they sure did enrage him and draw his attention.

Mantling his wings with his head lowered almost to the ground the hissing demon stalked forward towards the soldiers who, even then, were lining up their shots on soft points. From that range there would be no missing their targets, they were aiming for the eyes and the mouth. The target that was Jesse's mouth grew in size as he opened it further to roar his challenge at the soldiers. His wings began to spread wide while the immense strength of his rear legs coiled for the leap that would almost certainly lead to at least one fatality.

Before he could make that leap the combined mass of both Kim and Tom slammed into his side, knocking him off balance and into a slide across the ground on his flank. Ulysses had come running around the edge of the barn at the first sound of Kim's yelled warning and paused to take in the situation as he saw Irma struggle awkwardly from the ground where she had been thrown. There was something that she was obviously trying not to damage further beneath her. He saw Tom and Kim working together to pin down Jesse. At the same time Irma was off to the side with rivers of tears running down her snout while she keened loudly. He quickly put two and two together.

"Hold your fire! Hold your fucking fire! Let them handle this! Get everyone away from them! Get the nerds, get the children! Get them back!" He shouted the rapid fire directions to his team which were already acting before the words had left his mouth. Two of the soldiers had already clipped their rifles up and on the run grabbed Luke and Lucy on their way up to the house. Ulysses ran to grab a disoriented Alex who was bleeding from a cut that ran across his forehead and down the side of his face. The Major ushered before him the two scientists who looked caught between curiosity and terror.

Ulysses looked around wildly to get a head count, and the blood drained from his face. He was missing four troopers. Remembering the sight of Irma and her thirty five hundred kilograms being hurled into the soldiers his heart stopped beating.

No...

"Alex, get to the house! It's right in front of you, just keep going." He pushed the disoriented disease specialist in the direction he needed to go and immediately took off back to the source of the snarling roaring catastrophe playing out on the side of barn.

Edging slowly around the side of the barn he peeked with one eye to see both Kim and Tom locked into a deadly standoff with the feral Jesse. Every time the former human attempted to raise his wings to take off one or the other of the two facing him would dart forward to unbalance him and keep him from launching. But they were outmatched by a creature that had none of the reluctance nor unfamiliarity with his body that they did. Jesse seemed to be everywhere at once. A whirling, slashing,

biting, maelstrom of dangerous intent. Intent that wanted nothing more than to just get away. That could not be allowed to happen, but it would take all three of the Schwarzkopfs to restrain him.

But why wasn't Irma helping them? He looked, and the iron fist that was gripping his heart relaxed its hold. His four missing troopers were huddled behind Irma who held a wing over them as cover. She watched, sobbing piteously, the sight of her first and only love reduced to a feral animal fighting with her own parents. He had to get them out of there so she could help. He looked around and then at the barn wall. He knocked on it until he was able to draw Irma's attention over the squalling, hissing, snarling melee behind her.

"Irma, give my guys a way out so that you can go help your parents. Pin him down! We can tie him down just like we did with Thumper!"

Her tear stained snout bobbed once in understanding as she looked around for a way to get the injured soldiers next to her out of harm's way. She craned her head backwards to look at the wooden wall behind her. The flimsy, wooden wall behind her powerful rear legs and tail. She brought her head down to tell the mix of healthy and hurting soldiers beneath her wing her next move.

"Iii'm going to make a hole in the wall behind yuuu. Beee ready to run."

One gave her a go-ahead signal after making sure his brothers were ready.

With her head raised and looking behind her to aim, she brought her tail up, and then whipped it downward violently. Four of the planks in the wall crumbled inward in a shower of splinters. Through this hole Ulysses' reaching arms came to grab the first of the walking wounded. The remaining three scampered through the hole supporting each other and freeing Irma to go aid her parents in corralling her love so that he could be helped.

Turning towards the scrap continuing on in front of her, she paused to consider her action with tail twitching apprehensively. Shortly, she decided on a course of action and screamed loudly.

Jesse!

The lost one that was Jesse paused momentarily with his paw raised for another swipe at Kim who was already bleeding from multiple cuts. In his brief hesitation Tom and Kim were upon him. Biting his neck Kim whipped her body around to fall across his shoulders pinning his front half. Tom leapt to land right on his hips and secured Jesse's tail by wrapping it with his own. Secured against the ground at last Irma walked forward to attempt to communicate with him.

Jesse please! Talk to me! I saw you hesitate, there must be some part of you in there that remembers me. Please, give me some sign that you are still you. Me... You... Together...

Even as he continued to struggle against the weight of the two bodies upon him he kept his eyes fixated on this new dragon. The wind shifted and with nostrils flaring he took in her scent, it was familiar to him. Something deep in his mind sparked to life, and while it wasn't complete recognition or any magical reversal to his situation, it was a start.

His struggles stilled and though neither Tom nor Kim relaxed an inch, Jesse was still able to drag Kim's head along as he stretched his neck out to sniff at the one who seemed so familiar. Irma approached with her own head held out to allow him to get a closer whiff of her own musk. He rumbled lowly, but made no intelligent sound. Closer Irma came, close enough to touch their snouts to each other, which she did after hesitating briefly. Rubbing the length of her muzzle along his, he inhaled deeply through his nose locking her scent into his addled mind. He was now sure of it, this was one that he had mated with before. His low rumbling rose in intensity and Kim released her hold to ask a question.

Irma attempted to warn her mother.

No, do not release him!

But it was too late.

With an enormous heave, Jesse's head retreated from Irma's own as he rolled in place, throwing the married pair off his body. In a gust of wind and a rustling flap of wings he was gone. Leaving his broken lover behind crying out after him.

Jesse! Jesse, NO!

But he was gone, and Irma was driven to desperation. Beginning to flap her own wings vigorously she reared up onto her hind legs, coiled them, and launched herself high into the air bringing her wings down to push herself skyward.

Ignoring the trilled warnings of her parents, her steely determination drove her onwards to chase her beloved Jesse. Following her awkward flight the parents ran after her on the ground nimbly dodging through the trees and brush with their elongated bodies twisting and turning through the cramped forest.

In the air Irma's keen eyesight was easily able to pick out the black spot in the sky that was rapidly dwindling. Far outstripping the airborne neophyte with his ingrained instincts.

In a last ditch attempt to get him to stop Irma coiled her neck and then thrust her head forward unleashing a tremendous roar that could be heard for kilometers.

The visibly startled Jesse paused in his escape to hover in place while looking at the fast approaching Irma. He trilled loudly and she was just barely able to pick out in his call the vague idea of a question.

Who you?

Irma! She screamed, with her hopes rising just a little that she might reach him.

The uncertain dragon glanced back and forth from her nearing form and to the direction he was going. Hundreds of meters below them the crashing sound of her parents could be heard followed by their shrilled calls.

Irma! Irma! We cannot see you, what is happening?

Jesse snarled savagely at the sound of their voices but did not retreat. Irma finally reached him and glancing quickly at his use of his wings attempted to replicate his movements but with much less finesse as she bobbed wildly like a yoyo.

Jesse, it is me! Sniff!

Again she craned her neck forward allowing him to get close enough to sniff deeply at her. Another ill formed thought was transmitted as he trilled again.

Familiar... Come

He looked down for a second, and then spotted a hunting cabin. Curling his tail in a flicking motion that Irma supposed was to indicate follow, or come, pulling his wings in he dropped through the air to land right in front of the cabin. Irma followed along awkwardly and plowed into the ground jaw first when she wasn't able to pull up at the last minute correctly. Jesse glanced at her with a brief look of concern flashing in his eyes before turning back to look at the cabin with a cocked head.

With head low, eyes searching, and nose sniffing suspiciously, Jesse approached the front porch. No one had ran out the front door with a rifle yet so Irma supposed that it was unoccupied. But she was startled by what Jesse did next. Locking his neck straight out, he made a sudden dash right through the front door taking most of the wall out. From inside, crashing noises could be heard as various pieces of furniture flew past his tail twitching in the opening.

Distantly, Irma could hear her parents call out to her with panic in their voices. She rose up onto her hind legs and stretched her head upwards to notify them of her location.

I am here! I am okay!

Her parent's distant, but rapidly approaching response was an acknowledgement. Jesse paused in his rooting about to double back and stick his head out suspiciously alongside his tail. Irma would have laughed if the situation wasn't so dire. He had half of a table in his mouth that he opened his jaws to let fall on the porch before nosing it into the yard. He returned to his interior decorating for a few moments more before the rest of his serpentine body entered the structure as he curled about inside.

Familiar... Come

Cautiously she approached the hole that led into the dark interior. Inside she could make out auburn eyes looking back at her followed by the bulk of Jesse's body arrayed along the back and side wall. He looked at her and then looked meaningfully at the open space next to him.

Aww how cute, he just wants to cuddle, Irma thought.

She shook her head to focus. This is highly volatile situation she reminded herself, she didn't know what could set him off again. What behaviors are seen as aggressive, which are not. She wished the two lizard nerds were here to give her some kind of guidance. She was really in uncharted territory now. She paused in the opening with most of her body trailing off into the yard as, with a loud rustling,

her parents entered the clearing behind her tail. They stopped briefly to shake their bodies, casting off large numbers of twigs and leaves caught betwixt their scales before looking around.

Oh Christ. **Tom began.**

Do you know whose cabin this is?

Kim nodded, looking worried.

You better go back and tell them to call law enforcement. They need to be here before he gets out here. That crazy fucker drives around with half an arsenal in his truck.

Why don't you go? You can explain the situation better.

She shook her head.

No, think about it Tom. That is a wild animal in there. A, male, wild animal that may not take kindly to another male being present. It might not hold true here but another female may not generate aggression.

Tom bobbed his and then walked forward to nuzzle her closely.

Be careful, both of you.

From within the dark cabin a long wavering growl could be heard at the sound of the conversation outside. It only marginally lessened as Tom turned tail to run to the southwest back towards their home.

Irma turned her head back to look at her mother.

What should I do?

Just... Just go in there and be with him. Maybe you being close to him will help him remember more. Make sure he knows the way you smell, and the way you feel against him. God damn it... I cannot believe I am going to say this... Fuck him, ride him like a horse. Lick him, kiss him, do whatever you have to do to get him to be at ease.

Mother! Irma responded, astonished. If a black scaled, black hided dragon could blush, Irma would have been as red as a fire hydrant.

Kim coiled herself in the yard to watch alertly as her daughter composed herself by smoothing down her scales. Irma disappeared into the recently created lair.

Ulysses was just getting a report from his medic on the results of the earlier fracas.

"Billy has a broken wrist and dislocated shoulder, Dan has two broken ribs, and Chris has a clean break of his fibula. Lastly Alex has a concussion and a laceration across the top and the side of his head that will need stitching."

"How long before EMTs get here?"

"I called twenty minutes ago. After telling them it was three injured soldiers at the Schwarzkopf's residence they told me it was priority one. So any minute now likely."

Ulysses nodded and went to check on the two soldier he had stationed overlooking Thumper's unresponsive form.

"Any change?"

"Watch its eyes. Every couple of minutes they flicker gold before going dark again."

"Well we only have a couple more minutes before that time it gave us is up, soooo."

Ulysses put his hands to his mouth and yelled loudly drawing everyone's attention. He made a circling motion in the air with his index finger and then pointed at the ground next to him. Almost instantly he had the other six healthy members of his team by his side.

"All guns on the alien. It should be awakening or rebooting or whatever soon."

And then, like so often recently, everything happened at once.

With an enormous crash that put everyone instantly on the alert, Tom broke out of the tree line looking around wildly before spotting Ulysses.

"Yuuu must call sheriff. Tell him to guard Nathan Alderback and explain to him that Jesseee has broken into his cabin and ransacked it."

At the same time that Tom had begun his explanation, Thumper's eyes flickered to life for good as color bled back into its bound body.

It looked down at the bindings before looking up at the weapons trained on it and the soldiers holding them.

"Expected, and reasonable, I apologize once more for the events of earlier. This subroutine has had part of its quantum core replaced and has had its empathetic capabilities enhanced. From this point forward I will be taking the feelings of others into greater consideration."

"And that is supposed to make what happened earlier okay?" Ulysses snapped. "You destroyed Jesse Pinkman's body and life, caused him to become feral, and almost had gotten four of my soldiers killed. Just saying your apologies is not fucking good enough."

Rising to its three paws, with the fourth continuing to dangle limply, Thumper easily dragged the tent stakes from the ground while snapping the plastic bindings across its legs like ginger snaps. It reached back with its head and dragged the ropes draped across its back off it before returning its attention to Tom and Ulysses.

"No, I don't expect it to be enough. But you will have to continue to work with us nonetheless. In time perhaps, I can regain your trust. However the vast majority of likely outcomes do not indicate that happening."

"No shit!" Ulysses spat on the ground

"This body is injured and my overmind has forbidden me from repairing it as I normally would. Instead... A new subroutine will be here to assist you. My role as guide has ended. I am now locked into this form for the rest of its natural life cycle."

A new, and tiny, Thumper appeared next to the one who had created all this chaos. It began to speak.

"Treat the body of this one as you would any other living creature. His fractures need reset and stabilized, his wounds cleaned and dressed. I do not expect you to do so before your own brethren are seen to. But in time it must be done. He is now capable of death."

"Why is it not just wishing away its injuries?" Said the watching Delta caustically.

"He must face atonement for his actions. Our overmind has activated the pain receptors and nerve connections throughout his body, he is in a great deal of that pain even as we speak. He is no longer capable of the actions of which you think."

"Gooood" Tom snarled.

"Why do you refer to it as him now?"

"He has been stripped of his abilities. He is now no different than any other child of the egg. He has a sex, he has a biology. He is a creature no different on the molecular level than any that walks this world."

The injured alien computer, which had said nothing since the creation of its young clone, laid down and curled its head about to rest. Impassively, everyone noted the thin stream of tears leaking from the corners of its tightly shut eyes. Were they from pain, or loss? There was little sympathy to be found either way, at that time, for the now mortal creature.

The sounds of multiple sirens could be heard rapidly growing nearer as once more a pair of ambulances and several patrol cars descended on the home.

Ulysses turned to Tom "I'll notify these guys of what you told me and call the sheriff. What are you going to do?"

Tom turned narrowed green and red eyes upon the hatchling sized computer.

"Get ooon mi back. We'reee going back tooo my wife and daughter. Yuuu will start to make thisss right."

"Do you need any of my shooters to go with you?"

Tom looked thoughtful while Thumper Mk. II scaled his tree trunk of a leg, up his shoulder, and settled on his back.

"Nooo, it might make Jessee unstable. Ill can't guaranteeeee their safety."

Ulysses nodded and turned to deal with the first responders as they arrived to begin treating his soldiers.

Before leaving, Tom spied the two academics who were staring hungrily at the exiled computer subroutine. He stopped to think as Thumper crept forward to whisper in his ear.

"It will behoove you to bring one of them."

Tom turned his head to snarl at the new advisor. "liii've heard enough from your likeee for now."

The computer bobbed its head silently and retreated down his back.

But still, it was an idea worth exploring. Tom realized that they were dealing with a wild animal. A specialty of the two Herpetologists that may prove to be useful very soon.

He lowered his head towards the two "lii'm going back to Irma, and Kim, who are watching Jesseeee. liii need one of yu to go with meee for advice. It will beeee very dangerous. Decide quickly, I leave in one minute."

Serena began to raise her hand to volunteer before another voice cut her off.

"I'll do it." Brian said, and immediately began to head towards Tom's tail to scale up on to his back.

Tom turned back to look at Serena with a scaly brow raised in question. She smiled, winked, and patted his lower leg. They both shared a chuckle before Tom lifted his head to make sure his passengers were secure.

Thumper had clasped its immature talons into Tom's scales and was thoroughly locked into place. Tom briefly wondered if that was how newborns were meant to travel, before shaking his head. Dismissing it for now, he turned his attention to his second passenger.

Brian, who had no idea what he was doing.

"Ssscoot forward and wrap your arms assss far around my neck assss you can. Hold tight."

Tom began to canter towards the tree line as several EMTs watched in amazement before accelerating to a full gallop. He entered the forest with a yip from Brian as he clutched to the heavily muscled neck that was holding Tom's head straight out like an arrow. Piercing the brush they swiftly disappeared until not even the sound of their passage could be heard.

"That was pretty fucking cool." The SF Medic said.

Thinking he was getting close, Tom stopped to give a muted whistle. From nearby and just ahead the whistle was returned, equally muted. I wonder how these bodies are so unerringly good at finding their way he mused to himself. Thumper began to open its mouth, and Tom turned a savage eye upon it, Thumper closed its mouth.

“Both of yu, hop off. Watch from the treelineeee until we signal yu forward.”

Thumper glided to the ground while Tom’s long, body length tail, reached forward and grabbed Brian by the ankle and hoisted him to the ground. Setting him down gently for once, showing the tail owner’s growing good will towards the hapless egghead.

Once they were hidden, Tom crept silently into the clearing to see his wife coiled around herself with head resting on her back, looking intently into the darkened opening of the gutted cabin. He moved forward and gave her a brief rub to assure himself of her health and then asked her quietly of the situation.

She went in there as soon as you left, they have not moved since then. There were some encouraging noises for the first ten minutes. Cooing and humming, but nothing since then. I think either one or both of them may be asleep. I can smell Brian, get him up here, and tell Thumper to stay the fuck away from me and my daughter.

The situation is even weirder than you think. The ‘Thumper’ that we knew earlier has been exiled or something. Stripped of its powers anyway. This one with me is apparently a different program, I think. It is hard to keep track of them when they keep changing how they refer to themselves.

Whatever

Tom turned back to look at the two hidden observers and gave a low whistle and flicked his head in signal. Brian scrambled forward with Thumper alongside him and hid behind Tom’s tail, peeking over it at the house. Thumper moved to be closer to Tom and Kim’s heads to communicate with them. Kim’s lip writhed at the close proximity of the alien, but she made no further actions. Tom pushed Brian forward to hear his opinion as well.

“Whaaat doo yu think?”

He looked around and ran to the tree line to grab a few branches full of leaves before returning.

“Whaaat the fuck rr yu doing?”

“Trying to camouflage my scent, I need to look in there.” He began to rub the leaves into his armpits, down his arms, and across his hair and face. Generally just about everywhere on his clothes and body.

Kim leaned her head down to sniff at him. And then sniffed thrice more before rendering her verdict.

“Don’t beee tooo long. The more I sniff you, the more I can smell the human yu rrr.”

“I just need a glance.”

As he walked carefully forward out of sight of the opening Thumper added his advice in.

"This event is extremely unfortunate, but it presents you with an opportunity. You have been tasked with recovering those that have had the misfortune of ending up like your daughter's lover. Now, with the one most familiar to yourselves, you have the chance to hone your craft. You have done well so far in having Irma engage herself as closely as she is able to with Jesse. His defenses are lowered, now is the time for her to revive who he was."

Kim hissed quietly in return.

How?

"A shared memory, preferably one with a tactile experience to it. I know of one if you cannot think of it yourselves. Just ask me, if you cannot recall the memory."

Kim remembered however, and she knew it would work perfectly. But it would have to be Brian to relay the message. Whom, at present, was underneath a window in the shattered front wall warily raising up slowly to have a look inside. After he observed for a few moments, and while Tom and Kim held their breath in suspense, he lowered himself again and then scuttled back to them to make his report.

"Irma was awake and looked straight at me when I peeked in. Jesse was asleep and relaxed in posture. He is along the back and side wall with Irma on his left side. He has his tail draped across her and Irma is pushed up against him."

"Whaaat dooo u think?"

"Large terrestrial lizards are solitary in nature, and fiercely territorial except during mating season. But these are not lizards of this world. They are either children of the egg or dragons, whatever you may want to call them. At this point I would posit that he sees her as his mate and includes her in his territory. Unfortunately Irma does not have her instincts, so I don't know what role she is meant to play here as the female. She may be expected to be submissive, dominant, challenging, accepting, she could be meant to be some or all of those things or something I haven't even thought of yet."

Kim gave him his instructions.

"Gooo tell my daughter: Comfort him like yu did when he had broken hisss leg."

"Wait." Thumper interjected. "Do not expect this help in the future, however you will want to take this with you."

A lovely, framed, 8x10 photo of Irma and Jesse proposing to each other appeared in Brian's hands. Kim's stern expression melted at the sight of it while Brian voiced his understanding and silently walked back up to the cabin. He looked in the window once more and then held up the picture to be seen. There was no sound, but he nodded his head and then moved to the corner of the gaping hole next to him. Irma's head appeared as she stretched out of the cabin. She delicately took the picture into her mouth and Brian whispered the message into her raised ear. She withdrew into the dark interior as Brian turned and fled back to relative safety. They waited.