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*Jaji* J. Donnelly

# Chapter 1: Jaji, Dragon Prince

J. Donnelly



He was close now. He knew this hunt would end soon, but a single, careless snap could still give him away.

Jaji stalked with his fine-muscled body low the ground, feathered wings folded tight against his spine to keep the fingers of the underbrush from encumbering him. The thick fur between his paw pads cushioned his foot-falls into silence. Though graced with four, naturally

muffled, padded feet, he still meticulously placed each step, his toes gently bending the grass blades and shed twigs rather than stress them to break. He muted his breath, each gentle intake absorbing the wet, crisp scent of the forest.

He tensed, the musky, coppery scent of his prey whiffing to his nostrils. His ears pricked up, pinpointing the rustling ahead of him. Jaji dropped reflexively to his armored stomach, hoping that the dappled shadows would break up his bulky outline. His sleek ember fur, though stained black down his legs to match the onyx of his breastplates, lent little camouflage to the contrasting greenery. He dunked his face under the carpet of ferns, resisting the urge to sneeze and twitch as they tickled his wet nose. Since Jaji's white muzzle and cheek sacs added to his conspicuousness, painting his face like dry season clouds, hiding them under the foliage as he closed the proximity to his prey was a trick he had learned in his early days of hunting.

But as a dragon, the largest, most dangerous predator in the forest, only the elephants that roamed the southern savannahs and the mammoths on the northern tundra were safe from his fangs, and even then when he cooperated with his broodmates they could take one down. Each new hunt still sent Jaji's heart racing. This hunt in particular heightened his senses, for now he stalked a far more dangerous prey than usual, the only one that could hunt him back; another dragon.

She had eluded him for half the afternoon now, but no matter how far she had wandered ahead of him traces of her scent lingered. Her scent, undeniably dragon from the coppery twang of her feathers and the musky perfume of her fur, caught on the plants and brambles she brushed, snagged in the crusty trunks of the trees, and pooled in her paw prints. Not even a paddle across a stream broke the concentration of Jaji's keen nose.

Jaji slunk up to the source of the scent. He prepared for the killing pounce; bundling his hind legs, coils of sinew and muscle snapping into place; tucking his wings tighter to his body to avoid damaging the delicate feathers and membranes in the ensuing tussle; arching his thumbs back, priming his long, sickle-shaped talons. These hooked, raptorish talons on his thumbs were the length of a human-wrought sword, and just as keenly sharp. Along with his fangs, which were the size of north tundra sabercat's and still lengthening, were his lethal arsenal. His body stilled as stone to not alert his quarry in this critical moment. Only the waving tuft of feathers at the tip of his tail and the gleam in his blue eyes betrayed Jaji's brimming excitement.

The brush quivered and the source of the scent appeared at last. Instead of pouncing, Jaji paused in disbelief. No dragon emerged, but a fox. Caked in mud, out of its mask stuck a clump of blue dragon feathers absurdly pasted on. Because Jaji had not struck on his first impulse, the fox locked eyes with him and bolted with a frightened yip, taking the pungent smell of the feathers with it.

Jaji growled in frustration and stretched out of his hunting pose. His prey was clever indeed to make such a decoy, the mud masking the fox's own smell. He shuffled his wings as he wondered how long he had been following that fox instead of the dragoness he had been pursuing.

He jumped out of his own fur when a ferocious roar crashed out of the bushes behind him. Twisting around in time to dodge the dragoness's claws digging into his vulnerable back, he bellowed in return, cheek sacs inflating to amplify his roar. Leaves rattle off the trees from their voices. But the dragoness struck quickly, forcing Jaji's roar back down his throat before she could be stunned by it. The dragoness hit Jaji with ample force behind her forepaws, pitching him backward. Before he could even retract his claws or bare his teeth he was pinned under her. She had expertly dug her claws into the fur around his neck, her thumb-talons poised at the edge of his breastplates—a narrow yet weak opening in the natural armor above his jugular.

He couldn't defend or attack in this position. Jaji could only look up at the dragoness, his former quarry. She was completely plastered in the same thick mud as the decoyed fox. Her lips curled back in a victorious, vicious snarl. Matted in such battle paint she made the image of a true, primeval killer.

But she did not sink her claws home. She didn't even cut into his skin. She entwined her talons comfortably in his plush mane and leaned down, her ferocious snarl softening into a smug grin.

"If this was a real hunt, Jaji, you would be dead," she whispered in his ear.

Jaji snorted, "You cheated! I was supposed to be hunting you for this practice."

"It's not cheating. It's improvising," the dragoness retorted. She settled down, resting her entire weight on Jaji's stomach. "What else is a poor little prey supposed to do when pursued by a big, strong drake?" she said coyly.

"So you cover yourself in mud?" Jaji huffed. "You look like a dog with mange after a drought."

"You're just sour because you didn't think of it first," the dragoness purred. She teasingly inflated her blue cheek sacs like a belligerent toad, cracking some of the dried mud off her face to reveal her much darker coat.

"Get off me Ishira! I can't breathe!" Jaji growled rather than admit she was right. He bunched his hind legs under her stomach and kicked her off. She rolled over and landed lithely on her feet, much more graceful than Jaji flailing over on his own. He stood up and rigorously shook the leaves and twigs out from his feathery brown mane, which ran all the way down his neck from his head to his multi-jointed shoulder blades. Each feather of his mane was an earthy umber color fading out to a halo of crimson at the vanes. He plucked out a particularly stubborn stick from the of the matching drake feathers on his elbow with his dactyls—the three small, clawed digits at the wrist joint of a dragon's wings.

"Am I going to have to find your sire and tell him that you ripped out your feathers for a practice hunt? I'll tell him, 'Hey Jak, Ishira can't fly home, so can you come all the way

out here and carry her back in your teeth like a cub'?" He did his best to jeeringly feign disinterest while he actually studied her technique carefully.

Ishira flicked her tail, one of the few spots not completely covered in mud, under his nose to show that she had plucked some of her tail feathers. Though not as vital to flight as their wing feathers, they still provided crucial balance in the air for a dragon.

"Thank you for your concern, but you're dead, remember Jaji?" Ishira jibbed.

"At least I'm not a cheater," Jaji growled. To cover his shame he began preening his ruffled mane feathers.

"Okay clearlings, the hunt's over," Ishira called over her shoulder into the forest.

The nearby underbrush rustled and trio of dragon clearlings trotted up to them. Unlike cubs, their flight feathers had grown in to replace their downy infant fuzz. They were able to fly, though only had the stamina for short distances. Jaji had ignored their scent during the false hunt, well aware that they had been trailing his tracks to observe how he stalked prey. Like their name suggested, the clearlings were colorless, their fur as blank as ice. Even the thinner skin on their muzzles, wings, and undersides was translucently pale, their watery veins their only hint of color while their feathers shimmered as white as morning mist. They chirped excitedly, their star-colored eyes bright with excitement.

"That was amazing, Ishira!" the little drake piped up. The clearlings crowded around Ishira and Jaji. Lacking individual pelt colors at such a young age, they were only distinguishable a male, who had a full mane of white feathers down to his shoulders and plumage on his elbows like Jaji, and two females who had shorter crests only on their heads like Ishira. Since they still suckled, their panting breath smelled of creamy milk. They were the reason Jaji and Ishira were practice hunting; they were coaching this brood of clearlings for their own approaching first hunt. The first hunt would be their first major step into maturity and into the Drack Clan. Once they had completed their first hunt, the whole clan would learn their names, not just their parents, older cubmates, and broodmates.

"Now, as I demonstrated, a powerful roar when attacking can give you a vital advantage. Prey will often freeze in the wake of a strong roar and if it becomes disoriented it won't fight back, as Prince Jaji displayed," Ishira said.

"I wasn't disoriented! This was supposed to be a basic hunt; I was the hunter chasing you, the designated prey. Then you went and attacked me. Do you think a clearling will encounter a deer running out of the forest roaring at them? No! You're teaching them bad hunting, Ishira," Jaji groused.

Ishira ignored his grumbling and continued, "And it is always important to take the utmost advantage of your surroundings. You will find things to help you hunt and to protect yourself. Take this mud for example." She extended her wing, dirt flaking off her long pinion feathers.

The clearlings crowded around her wing and tentatively sniffed the mushy concoction. Their noses crinkled in distaste. "That stuff smells like dead grass and dung."

"Ah, but you can't smell me, now can you?" Ishira said. "If you cover your scent and hide, your prey can't detect you through smell or sight and it will be much easier to stalk them. Also, if you mask your own scent other predators won't be able to follow your trail. A pard, a bear, a python, or even a sasquatch would be more than eager to make a meal out of a little clearling," Ishira warned. While Jaji and Ishira were just starting to shrug out of their juvenile years, they at least could look and elephant in the eye. The drake clearling, the largest of their wards, was the size of a healthy cougar, but had more baby fat than the

muscle mass of the wild cat. Once their diet changed from milk to meat, however, they would enter a rapid growth spurt.

“Or a wolf!” the drake clearling piped up, chomping his jaws in mock fashion.

“Or a lion!” The larger dragoness clearling let out a roar like the large cat but it came out a mere squawk. The brood of clearlings chirped and giggled.

“You laugh now, but wait till you feel their fangs in your hide,” Jaji said. He turned around to show the clearlings his left hind leg where a patch of his black fur had grown in a dullish grey in a ragged patch. “See this? This is a scar I got from a tiger on my first hunt.” The wound had healed fine, but the discolored fur stood as a distinguishable reminder.

“Wow! That’s cool!” the drake clearling admired.

“Prince Jaji’s so brave to meet a tiger on his first hunt!” the smaller dragoness clearling said.

“Tell us the story. Please, Prince Jaji?” the drake clearling pleaded, his tail thumping in the dirt excitedly and sending a cloud of beetles buzzing away.

“Oh, but you’ve all heard it before. Wouldn’t you rather see a real hunt, if someone doesn’t cheat?” Jaji rolled his eyes at Ishira.

“Forgive me for bruising your ego, *Prince Jaji*.” Ishira shrugged back. Jaji knew Ishira included his princely title in front of their clanmates as was customary, but when they were alone he took it to be an endearing tease.

“Please, Prince Jaji!” the clearlings cooed, tilting their heads in a fashion well-practiced to melt their dam’s and sire’s hearts. That same look had tugged him into cub games before.

Jaji sighed, knowing he would have a tougher fight regaining the attention of a distracted clearling than if he were tackling a charging water buffalo. “All right, all right, but only one more time.”

“I wonder how big the tiger will be this time?” Ishira said. The clearlings giggled as they clustered around Jaji’s feet.

“All right, five monsoons ago, I was a clearling like you, sitting before the Marking Stone, listening to King Skor tell my brood the Hunting Tales. I was excited to taste my first meat and gain my pelt colors and I couldn’t sleep for days! When my cubmates weren’t teaching me stalking I spent my time toughening my wings by jumping and gliding off the Marking Stone Throne, out of trees, or whatever other high perches I could find. I needed to fly as far as I could, since I planned to go to the Shadowtone Peaks.”

“Ooooooh, that’s the hunting grounds King Skor and Prince Skra used, isn’t it?” the clearling drake asked.

“My older cubmate Patri went there too. He came back Tortoise-pelted, though,” the smaller dragoness clearling mused.

“Yeah! I’m gonna catch a bison—or a cougar! My dam and sire will be so proud of me!” the drake clearling purred.

“Me too! Or a lion!” the larger dragoness clearling repeated excitedly.

“Their pelts are boring! I want to eat a firebird, so I can be as pretty as my dam!” the smaller dragoness clearling said.

Jaji nodded knowingly at their antics, as it was typical that clearlings would fantasize about their future pelts. A dragon clearling gained the coloration of the first meat they eat after weaning, marking the color of their pelts after their first hunt a primary status symbol—especially since it was life-long and it was traditional that the clearling had to catch

their first prey by their skills alone. Weaker dragons would claim the colors of common animals such as iridescent insects, flashy birds, and drab small game. The strongest, most accomplished clearlings retuned with more formidable coats: tigers, wolves, bears, boas, water buffalo, pike, sasquatch, mammoths, elephants, lions, even rhinos and hippos if a clearling traveled far enough to reach foreign savannahs and mountains. Clearling dragonesses did tend to take more colorful animals as prey since they were fond of their exotic patterns, but even birds were usually more favorable among dragonkind than insects.

"That's exactly why I planned on flying to the Shadowtone Peaks and take down a tiger just like Prince Skra. I wanted more than anything to prove my strength like my cubmates before me, and my sire and dam before them," Jaji said.

"Once I left my claw marks on the top of the Marking Stone, I flew four days straight to the east to reach the misty forests on the Shadowtone Peaks, and it took me two more to even pick up a whisker scent of a tiger. Once I did I prowled him for hours, mimicking the tiger down to his every footstep. I wasn't as strong as Prince Skra had been on his first hunt, so I knew I couldn't overpower the massive jungle cat—and he sure was huge. His paws alone were as big as my head!"

"That's a feat, considering how inflated your cheek sacs get when you start boasting about this story," Ishira jibbed.

"I realized I had to be cunning, calculating. If I waited for a prime moment of distraction I could strike quickly." Jaji flicked his sickle talons back and forth. "Even a tiger's pelt can't deflect a dragon's claws, and if I could get one good slash at the throat it would be down.

"I watched until the tiger at last stopped at a stream to drink. I sunk low to the ground," Jaji said as he hunched his shoulders down to demonstrate, "and I prepared to pounce. As soon as the tiger lowered his head I charged out of the brush—talons deployed to strike!

"But, before I could sink my claws or fangs into him he turned, jaws bared to catch me! He knew I was coming!"

The clearlings gasped in fright. Ishira licked some of the mud off her shoulder, unmoved by Jaji's bravado.

"You see, I had been a little too, *um*, impatient in my stalking," Jaji said as he drummed his dactyls and toes admittedly. "I thought the tiger couldn't see me, but he could hear and smell me the whole time—just like Ishira was telling you just now. Fortunately I moved fast enough and he only snagged my hind leg. Before the tiger could lunge for a killer bite around my neck, I lashed out with my claws and struck the bruiser across the snout. He flinched and I took my chance to climb up a tree. He circled around, yowling for my blood, but luckily he was too stupid to climb up the tree after me."

"And you're not forgetting who got stuck in the tree in the first place?" Ishira quipped. Jaji glared at her, but she only smirked back. "Was it two or three days before you could get down?"

"No! It was only a night!" Jaji huffed, continuing his story. "I stayed in that tree for the rest of the day and all through the night. The tiger didn't give up his complaining the whole time either. His roaring actually started to give me a headache after a while. Anyway, he finally left when the sun was high the next day. I was cautious, though, and didn't climb down until I was certain he had abandoned his hunt for my hide."

"So you got the scar instead of the tiger," the larger dragoness clearling commented.

“Yeah, but, somewhere in the Shadowtone Peaks is a tiger with a scarred nose himself, courtesy of my claws,” Jaji said boastfully. “I may have not got the tiger, but I did still have a successful hunt—with an injured leg—and didn’t come back with some dull coat.”

Ishira frowned at this. “Now, keep in mind, it is not shameful for an injured or weaker clearling to take a more ‘mundane’ first prey. What matters is that you return safe and sound to the clan, to your dams, sires, cubmates, and broodmates with the skills to hunt for yourself.” She then smiled charmingly. “Why don’t you tell them how your first hunt really turned out, Jaji?”

The clearlings looked expectantly between Ishira and Jaji. He hastily nodded to not look foolish after being put on the spot. “Oh, yeah, Ishira is right, of course your life is more important to the clan than your pelt, and you shouldn’t throw it away needlessly at a prey you can’t catch. I was just getting to that.

“After, well, sulking for a while, I suddenly picked up a scent. I’d never smelled anything like it before here around the Home Dens. I was curious. I forgot about my run-in with the tiger to followed it. After much limping and scrabbling over a cliff I found a creature sleeping in a tree.”

“What was it Prince Jaji?” one of the females asked in awe.

Jaji grinned, looking down at his own red and black fur, the white frosting his face, and the brown feathers that filled out his mane and wings. Dark, earthy brown stripes banded up and down his tail and across his pinion feathers, patterned from the tree-dwelling creature. “It was a wah, a forest shadow.”

“Wait, was it a shadow, or was it real?” the drake clearling snorted dubiously.

“They are too real! I heard one of my sire’s dragon maidens call them a ‘red panda’. But then another one called it a ‘wah’, though, and they started arguing about. Patri had to huff at them to get them to stop,” the smaller female interjected.

“Then why are they called ‘forest shadows’ if they already got two names?” the drake clearling asked.

“Do you want me to tell the story or not?” Jaji growled impatiently. The clearlings nodded and hushed.

“Now, I was so entranced, so intrigued by this creature that I knew, then and there, that I wanted to have that wah’s pelt even more than I had wanted the tiger’s. And it was small, no bigger than one of the raccoons around here, making it within my means to hunt. But, I quickly learned that it would be almost impossible to catch!”

“The wah woke up, and before my eyes vanished into the shadows. I swear by King Jamura’s first feather, it completely disappeared! I’d kept my ears alert and heard movement below me. The wah had appeared on a tree behind me—instantly—without a sight or sound.”

The clearlings gasped. “It was magic! It had to be magic! I bet it was magic!”

“Nothing else could explain it,” Jaji said. “I knew this animal to be magical somehow for it to disappear and reappear that swiftly. Not even a dragon can move that stealthily.

“I crept up to the wah with much more caution than I had the tiger. Even though I had not claimed the tiger, I had learned a valuable lesson from losing it; patience. If I startled this prey it wouldn’t have attacked me. It ate leaves and its teeth and claws were rather small, not like ours. But, it would dive back into the shadows, disappearing from my grasp forever down some otherworldly burrow I could never hope to reach.



"I settled down and waited. And I waited a longtime. I watched every breath the wah made, every twist of its whiskers, counted each leaf it crunched up and ate. I also kept my eyes on the shadows, carefully noting how they moved."

"Why Prince Jaji?" the smaller clearling dragoness asked.

"Because I'd seen that's how the wah moved. It had entered the shadows and come back out a different shadow, and if the shadows weren't there it couldn't disappear on me.

"I waited for hours for that one second when the wah lost its focus, so absorbed in its feeding that it'd grown inattentive and the shadows were out of its reach. I pounced!" Jaji hopped forward with a bridled roar for effect. The clearlings scattered in surprise, giggling and chirping in delight as they flocked back together at Jaji's feet.

"Despite my injured leg I easily lunged out and snatched it right out of the tree! I made a quick and painless kill with my fangs—it's key to aim for the spine or neck when making such an attack, using your fangs to break the neck or crush the throat.

"Oh, just wait till you catch your first prey! I relished my first kill, the blood and meat and delicious, delicious bone more flavorful than any dam's milk!" Jaji flared open his wings, flaunting his feathers, red and brown stripped on the dorsal side and dusky black underneath. Though dragon wings were feathered like the great birds of prey, his still-growing wingspan dwarfed an eagle's to the size of a pigeon's. "I'm the first dragon in seven generations of the Drack to catch an elusive wah."

"What's that mean?" the larger dragoness clearling asked.

"It means hard to catch," the other dragoness chimed in. "But, I don't understand. If the wah could walk through shadows and you ate it, how come you can't walk through shadows too, Prince Jaji? Like how King Skor has the cobra's venom and my dam's feathers glow in the dark like the firebird's?"

Jaji frowned at this barrage of questions. Another trait of the dragon's first prey was that depending on the creature taken, sometimes the dragon acquired another characteristic. Fur quality, extra strength or speed, venom, horns, calloused paws, and bioluminescence were just some of the examples seen in the Drack Clan. "Well, not every dragon gains some trait from their prey. Besides, I've never heard of a dragon gaining a magic ability through a first prey before."

"Do you think it could happen to one of us?" the drake clearling asked. "I'm not sure I'd want a magic power. What if it kept me from flying or hunting, like, if I ate an armadillo and became as heavy as a rock?"

"I doubt that would happen," Jaji sighed, shaking his head at the ridiculous idea. As far as he knew, there had never been a dragon with a natural gift for magic in the clan, and only lesser animals and humans had ever displayed such traits. At least, that is what he'd heard from his clanmates, since he'd never crossed trails with a magical creature other than the wah, and certainly not a magical human.

"Yeah, magic's weird. And there's that rock by the lake, I can tell it has magic in it. It hums!" the larger dragoness clearling said.

"Speaking of the lake, I think we should get going. Prince Skra and Princess Lunari will be done soon too," Ishira said, cutting the clearlings' questioning short. The clearlings hopped to their feet and ran ahead through the puddles of sunlight while Jaji and Ishira followed at a leisurely pace.

The smaller dragoness clearling loitered a moment. "Ishira, how did your first hunt go?"

“Well, it wasn’t nearly as harrowing as Prince Jaji’s. I just thought about it for a while what kind of pelt I wanted, and after a little searching I found the butterfly. All it took was one bite to catch it.”

The clearling nodded in consideration and pranced ahead to join her broodmates. Jaji and Ishira kept their eyes closely on the playful cubs. The forest may be their clan’s territory, but other beasts still roamed the woods and glades and a newly-weaned clearling was a tempting target.

“So, that was impressive with the mud,” Jaji finally relented, giving Ishira a sidelong glance. “You’re a very sharp hunter, Ishira. I still don’t understand why you chose a butterfly as your first prey.”

Ishira chuckled, “Thank you for the complement. I’ve told you before, I chose to prey a butterfly because that was what I wanted.”

“But you could have easily taken a stronger prey. You would have more respect and rank higher in the clan if you had,” Jaji said. Though he had known Ishira all his life she still baffled him sometimes. A dragon’s rank in clan hierarchy was first inherited from their parents standing at birth, but a dragon could immensely improve their status by demonstrating their strength, wits, and skills with what first prey they managed to claim. Ishira was born to a lower couple in the clan and had claimed a timid butterfly, yet she had grown up as his closest broodmate. She had even nursed beside him at Queen Allura’s teat when her own dam Soleno of the Zebra pelt had been slain. After she had outgrew the nurseries in the Home Dens and had moved out like all his other broodmates, her sire’s territory over on Bear Peak bordered the royal grounds around the Home Dens. Jaji could easily reach her for their daily capers of hunting and flying about the Drack Mountains.

“Jaji, you worry too much about what the rest of the clan thinks. With all your concern over power and rank you’re starting to sound like the graying bull drakes. I don’t particularly care about my standing as long as I have clanmates and a den to return to after a long day. The butterfly was beautiful, and I wanted my pelt to be so.”

Jaji sighed, envious of her light-hearted outlook. “You may feel that way, but I’m Skor’s youngest cub. The first hunt was so stressful for me. I had to prove my strength not just in front of him and my dam, but before the entire clan; they expected a cub of Skor and Allurato return with a strong pelt like their previous cubs. I wish I had known your tactics when it was our first hunt. Maybe I would have caught that tiger.”

“But you proved yourself fine, and the clan is certainly impressed to this day. Why do you think the cubs and clearlings still pester you for the story?” Ishira reassured with a laugh. “You only succeeded when you stopped being preoccupied and you did what you wished. Honesty was your best hunting trick that day. If you worry too much otherwise and that red fur you worked hard for will fall out, Jaji.”

It did not take long for the group to reach Drack Lake, the largest lake in the royal territory. It was a secluded watering hole clear, deep, and ringed by the thickest forests and mountains. The perfect water source for the dams and sires rearing their cubs in the nearby Home Dens, Drack Lake was only a short flight away, and in the driest, hottest part of the year a soothingly cool bath.

“Last one in eats duck bones!” Ishira yelled. Without formality she sprang into the water, leaving a massive, cloudy splash in her wake.

The clearlings eagerly followed her, chirping and mewing gleefully as they paddled in the reedy shallows. Jaji dove in after Ishira, the deep waters refreshing after a long hunt in

the sweltering shade of the forest. The air was warming each day as the dry season started creeping on after the temperate; soon the air would be thick with a heat and humidity that would only crack once the monsoon clouds reared their thunderheads. As he swam out to meet his broodmate, Jaji plunged his head underwater and snatched up an unwary bass. After a deadening crunch he swallowed the wriggling fish whole.

Ishira bobbed in the lake, carefully preening the last of the mud from her wings with her teeth. She was now mostly clean, her ebony fur exposed to dry. Her feathers were a dull mottled brown on the underwing like leaf litter, complementing her copper-colored breast plates. The dorsal sides of her feathers, however, starkly contrasted her humble brown colorings, such a vibrant blue it looked as if Ishira had gathered her feather colors from the sky itself. The hue colored her pinions, crest feathers, and tail feathers, all tinged in a rim of black at the vanes. Though she had preyed on a lowly butterfly, Jaji had always felt she had claimed a radiantly beautiful pelt.

Jaji paddled up to her. He slipped his head beneath the water and before she could retort squirted her in the face, his extended cheek sacs holding a copious amount of water.

"Hey!" Ishira chuckled. She swallowed a swig of water and spouted back.

"Thanks again for helping with the hunting lesson," Jaji said between sprays.

"My pleasure," Ishira smiled. "Other than the fact it was an invitation from a *prince* of the Drack Clan, it was a favor to a broodmate. Besides, Fala has enough to worry about with her mating tomorrow."

"Yeah," Jaji said. Normally it was tradition for the king's cubs who have already endured their first hunt to prepare the clearlings for theirs. But since Fala, the king's only dragoness cub and Jaji's older cubmate, was engrossed in preparing for her upcoming mating, Skor had consented to let Jaji ask Ishira to help him instead. Jaji didn't mind teaching the clearlings how to hunt, having had to entertain and watch them in the Home Dens these past years, but managing a brood of energetic, eager dragon clearlings alone could be tiresome.

Jaji swam closer to Ishira. "Wait, you still got some mud on your face." He leaned over and licked away the remaining traces of dirt from her velveteen snout, brow, and ears.

Ishira giggled under his abrasive tongue, but then her eyes locked on the sky. She gasped, her crest flaring in alarm, "Jaji! Look!"

Jaji snapped up to glimpse a silhouette of wings hanging in the cloudless azure over their heads. The clearlings halted in their play, eyes staring wide. For a heartbeat he froze, uncertain if the older dragon was lazily circling or keenly surveying. When the older drake's green eyes spied the two dragons floating in the lake his wings cupped, letting himself fall into a tight dive like a swooping hawk.

With dread Jaji realized the drake's reared talons were aimed straight for his throat.