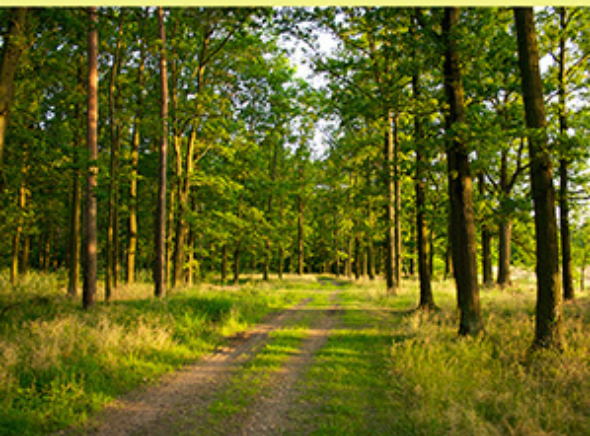


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

BLUEWOOD

Elin Austen

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

BLUEWOOD

By Elin Austen

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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BLUEWOOD

By Elin Austen

Photo Description

Two dragon shifters kneel close to each other. One of them is in dragon form and has bright violet-colored dragonhide. The one in his human form has long hair and is straining to lay their first clutch of eggs. They both have visible horns.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

In this race of dragon shifters all genders have the ability to become pregnant. This male couple is about to have their first clutch of hatchlings. Please tell us their story.

I would be happy if some of these could be included, but it's no requirement: telling partner about pregnancy, naming hatchlings/babies, baby-mischief.

Do nots: historical, GFY, friends-to-lovers, cheating.

Sincerely,

Maddox

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, alternate universe

Tags: dragons, eggs, hatchlings, mpreg, shifters non-wolf/cat

Word Count: 14,525

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BLUEWOOD

By Elin Austen

Prologue

The two male dragons fly higher and higher in the night sky, the iridescent violet dragon playfully chasing the emerald green dragon. They find a strong upper air current to hold them aloft as they come together, synchronizing their wingbeats and flying as one. Their hearts thunder to the same rhythm and their breath combines as a single cloud of fog in the cold air. Both have a single external opening between their hind legs, called a vent. The violet dragon mounts his lover from behind and pushes his mate's tail up as he sets his claws into his mate's dragonhide, holding him steady as he presses their vents together. His arousal causes natural slippery moisture to pass from his body into his lover's. He rubs their vents together, starting slowly and speeding up as their arousal peaks and nerve endings fire off, telling both bodies they are ready. With their vents tight together, his muscles clench and his corkscrew penis explodes out of his body and forces itself into his mate's twisting oviduct. Tiny barbs in the head of his penis scrape inside his lover and trigger ovulation. The barbs hold him in place as he pumps semen deep into his mate. The green dragon clamps his internal muscles tight, wanting to hold his lover in place a little longer even though he can feel the penis softening and the barbs retracting. The air current they are riding dissipates, and the two dragons finally part. Sated, the violet dragon follows his mate home, knowing he isn't quite finished.

"Gods, that was good," whooped Ogdred as soon as he shifted from his green dragon form back into a human. His lover Amadeus shifted as well, leaning his well-muscled human form against the limbs that framed their treehouse in the forest. Tired as he was, Amad wanted his mate to climax as well and stalked towards Og, amethyst eyes flashing as he admired Og's now very human penis. Og's dark green eyes tracked his mate as Amad stepped close and hungrily kissed him. Amad finally broke the sensuous kiss and sank to his knees, pulled him forward and swallowed Og's rock-hard cock.

"Oh... Oh," Og sighed as heat surrounded his aching cock. Amad swirled his tongue around that sensitive area right under the head, sucking hard as he gently tugged Og's balls and massaged his shaft.

"That's... uh... the only drawback... oh... to fucking in dragon form," gasped Og. "My dick can't... oh!... unfurl and ejaculate... uh... while you're inside me." He panted as his climax approached. Amad gave one hard pull on Og's sac and he spurted, filling Amad's mouth with cum.

Amad swiftly got to his feet and caught Og as his knees collapsed. He lifted Og and carried him to their bed.

“Ever wonder why dragons and ducks are the only creatures with a spiral dick?” Og asked sleepily as Amad gently placed him on their bed.

“I don’t know. Maybe our species are related,” Amad answered, sighing contently as he spooned Og from behind. Exhausted, they were soon lulled to sleep by the night sounds of the surrounding forest.

Chapter One

Ogdred smiled gently as he left the healer's office and texted his mate Amadeus, '*6 eggs & no flying*'. His phone buzzed just as he finished emailing the sonogram image to Amad.

"Six eggs? Are they all viable?" Amad asked excitedly. "And what the fuck Og, no frying? Those are our children you're joking about!"

"Flying, you doof!" Og told him. "Doc told me the eggs are pressing on my air sacs, and that's why I've not been able to get into the air. He also told me shifting at this stage would probably bring on labor. So no more dragon form for me until after the eggs are here. And he can't tell from the sonogram if an egg is viable," he explained. "You know the chances are very small that all our eggs will hatch. Doc says we'll be lucky if we get a fifty percent hatch rate and often live hatchlings die from dragonrot before their first shift," he added soberly.

Amad sighed over the phone. "I know, my love. The odds are not in our favor. We'll count ourselves lucky if we have one healthy child." Og heard an alarm going off in the background of Amad's location. He listened patiently while Amad had a quick discussion with someone at his ranger station deep in the shifter zone forest. "Og? I gotta go. There's a smoke plume on the mountain, and I need to go take a look from the air. See you at home later, okay? Love you!"

"Love you, too," he murmured to the closed connection. Og tossed his knee-length blond braid behind him and drove off to pick up a few groceries and collect the delivery boxes from his and Amad's Internet shopping spree. Og eagerly headed out to his dad's organic chicken farm to share the good news.

"Congratulations, Og!" said Pop as Dad set their lunch on the table. "Six eggs is a good size clutch. My largest clutch was four eggs, and two of them hatched. All told, through two centuries we've had several hatchlings survive for their first shift."

"Were they all boys?" Og asked.

"All boys, just like your eggs will be. I don't know what it is about female dragons. There aren't many of them hatched," said Dad as he gently stroked Pop's hand.

“It’s like nature saves up the life force for a special egg every generation, and then a queen hatches. Better hope you don’t have a girl, Og. If Queen Lilianna knows a white dragon has hatched she might decide to kill her competition,” Pop told him.

Og stood so fast his chair fell over. “Gods! Would she really do that? I’ve noticed she seems unstable lately, but I attribute that to the overcrowding problem in the shifter zone she’s been dealing with.”

“I’ve heard rumors every few decades or so about a white hatchling disappearing,” murmured Dad. “The queen is almost five hundred years old and she knows she should step down but I don’t see any indication of her doing that. And the overcrowding will just get worse. The humans are more successful than ever with forcibly relocating shifters to the zones, and only the gryphons have been strong enough to carve out their own territory. A lot of shifters died when the anti-shifter laws were passed, and humans were allowed to hunt us if we were in our animal form outside of the zones.”

“Queen Lilianna remembers when shifters could go where they pleased in a wide-open continent. Now dragons get blamed for every human catastrophe, from air dragons causing severe weather to earth dragons causing earthquakes. Humans are still frightened of us, even though they hunted the fire dragons to extinction and contained the rest of us,” Pop added. “Now the other shifter species in the zone are maligning us, accusing dragons of using too much of the limited resources because we’re so big.”

Og’s fathers spent the rest of their lunchtime giving him advice about raising baby dragons. Og was singing as he drove to the home he shared with Amad in the forest. He parked the truck on the fire trail and left the packages for Amad to unload and haul up into the interwoven branches. Og stripped and stretched the kinks out of his back, then waddled down to their hot spring, eased into the steaming mud and sank down until he was completely under the mud. He surfaced and sighed in contentment as he lay back to look at the sky. The hot mud pit was bliss to an earth dragon like himself and was especially soothing now that he was swollen with his first clutch of eggs. He dozed as the mud erased the scent of the city from his skin, hair, and horns, and soon Og only smelled the fresh green of forest, soil, and plants.

Og smiled as he remembered his first time in the spring. He and Amad had discovered the bubbling hot spring on their first date, a weekend camping trip arranged by Amad. Amad worked as a mountain forest ranger and spent weeks

at a time in remote sites, relieving the monotony by flying into the northern forest and exploring the wildwood. He had persuaded Og into accompanying him by telling him about the flowers blooming there, like none he had ever seen before. By the end of the weekend, they had both known they were mates and had been together ever since. Amad was an earth dragon, like himself, with an affinity for trees and was especially adept at forest ecosystems and all things wooden. He built their home in an old growth tree, gently urging the limbs to bend into the beautiful elongated bulb that graced the branches. Og had an affinity for soil and smaller plants and used his skill to keep the gardens at the dragon queen's palace blooming all season.

Og was idly considering options for baby-proofing their home when he got a whiff of something foul. He warily raised his head, urged the mud from his ears and horns, and stilled while he let his senses expand. He smelled guns, humans, wolf, and something awful he couldn't identify, but they didn't make a sound, and he couldn't see them. Using his affinity for plants, he felt moss and ferns being crushed under boots and knew where the intruders were. His heart pounded in his chest as he tried to think of what they were doing all the way out here. Under the mud, he carefully moved his hands and cradled his swollen belly. Og was naked, pregnant, unable to shift and fly, and could only hope the wolves couldn't hear his racing heartbeat. He risked a partial shift to his dragon skin and let the chameleon camouflage effect flow over his face, making him look precisely like the mud that surrounded him.

Click. Click. Og heard off to the side.

Click. Someone responded.

Og stayed absolutely still as several armed men in military gear moved stealthily past his mud pit. One of them stopped and sniffed, bending toward the ground. *Wolf!* Smelling Og's hour-old scent on the well-worn path between their treehouse and the spring.

Og wondered if he could outlast them and simply wait for them to leave, then his heart stuttered and his belly cramped in fright when he realized Amad was due back very soon and he had no way to warn him. He warred with himself, knowing that a shift all the way to dragon form to fight them risked his eggs in the process, when the men suddenly turned and silently rushed up the path. *Amad! Flying straight into a trap!* Og urged the dirt under their feet to shift, and they slowed as they fought for balance. Og quickly worked his way out of the mud, determined to save his mate although not knowing precisely how. He heard muffled grunts and cursing and then voices.

“Slap the GPS onto the net and leave him here for pickup. We’re needed at the primary site. They have the queen!”

“No shit? That’s a huge bounty! Let’s go!” There was no effort to hide their presence as they ran for their transport.

Og warily approached the large stinking bundle in the clearing. It was fuzzy white with bits of violet peeking through. He held his nose and leaned closer. Spidermesh. The white net was spun by a poisonous breed of spider shifter, and had been weaponized by humans decades ago, purportedly as an aid in capturing violent shifters. Only a small number of humans knew the secret to neutralizing the nets. Most shifters had learned the hard way that the nets were used to painfully capture peaceful shifters and relocate them to a shifter zone if they survived the net long enough. Og was confused. Why would they capture a shifter *inside* the zone?

Fearing the worst, Og cautiously reached out and touched a violet patch. “No!” Og shook with terror when he recognized Amad’s warm dragonhide caught within the deadly net. “Amad, don’t shift! Your dragon form is the only thing keeping you alive!” When dropped onto prey, the net sensed living tissue and closed around it while it paralyzed and absorbed the life trapped within. A dragon could lose their claws trying to cut their way out of the impossibly strong substance. Og knew he had a few hours at most to get the thing off of Amad before the net killed him and started the process of digestion, leaving only dragonhide and bones. He was weakening by the second.

“Living tissue, living flesh,” he frantically muttered to himself as he urged the mud off of himself and hurriedly pulled his clothes on, then paced and thought. *Can’t cut it, can’t pull it off, can’t fucking touch it. Is there a way to push the net away from Amad’s skin? Give it something else to feed off of and buy some time for Amad? Maybe it will work... worth a try.* Og reached out with his senses and urged a woody vine to grow closer, sending thin tendrils onto the graying patches of Amad’s skin and pushing between skin and net. He urged several more vines into the net, interweaving with other tendrils and accelerating their growth until there was a strong green lattice of tough vine separating Amad’s skin from the net. Og watched, holding his breath. The vines began to turn brown and die, leaving a strong wicker-like shell behind that held Amad within. *Yes!*

“Amad, love, try to shift back to human. The shift will help heal you.” Og held his breath as he watched the vine lattice sag inward a bit, but hold its shape.

“Og? Are you all right?” Amad asked weakly from within his vine shell.

“I’m fine and our eggs are fine. We need to get you out of that net.”

“Get yourself out of here before they come back. Please, love, save yourself and our children,” he begged.

“If they managed to capture the queen, none of us are safe. Where would I go? Where would our children be safe? You know how hard it is for a shifter to survive outside the designated shifter zones. And please don’t send me to your father. He manages to live on the outside because he had his horns removed and he can pass for human. Besides, I’m not leaving you.”

“From the air, I saw a whole ground force closing in on the palace from three directions. The only safe path is north. You’re an earth dragon. You’ll survive in the wildwood until it’s safe again.” Og silently cursed the defeat he heard in his lover’s voice.

“No. Not without you,” Og stated unequivocally as he examined the GPS unit and pried it off, carefully placing it on the ground so it would not trigger a change in position to whoever was tracking it. A plan formed in his head. He jogged back to the truck, and drove towards the clearing, hoping it would fit through the narrow footpath.

“*Fuck!*” He pounded the steering wheel in frustration when he realized he could not get close enough. He took a deep breath to calm himself and thought.

“If I can’t move the truck to Amad, I’ll have to move Amad to the truck,” he murmured, thinking out loud. Once again he mentally pushed strong vines towards the netted bundle, guiding their growth around it and then urging the vines to retract. He helped by pulling on the straining dying vines as the mass moved, inch by inch, until it was close to the truck. He impelled more vines over the vehicle to encircle the mound, and heaved while encouraging their movement until their relentless retreat pulled the bundle up and onto the back of the truck. Og halted the vines and cut them loose, whispering his thanks to the plants for their help. He jumped into the cab and desperately drove, finding his way northward along a narrow fire trail without a second thought.

Og urged dirt to shift and scatter until their tracks disappeared. It wouldn’t fool a wolf’s nose, but it might buy them some time.

“The fire trail ends here. There’s a streambed nearby. It should be shallow enough to navigate. I’ll pull some brush out of the way,” Amad told him an hour later.

“Are you sure? You can’t see from inside that vine shell.”

“I never get lost in the woods. You know that. Look to the left.”

Og saw saplings bend and pull out of the ground, and soon a way through the woods was cleared in front of him. He found the streambed and drove into it. Amad urged the uprooted saplings back into place, and Og once again shifted dirt and spurred the undergrowth into a tangle to hide the signs of their passing. He splashed their way northward in the trickling water. Before it got too dark to drive safely, Og stopped the truck and turned to examine the bundle in the back.

“Amad, I think the net is decaying. It’s gray now and I can see more of the vine shell, and it doesn’t stink as bad anymore.”

“Maybe it dies once it no longer has a live food source. Don’t touch it and don’t feed it any more vines. We’ll know by morning.”

“What do you think happened? And what the fuck do they want with you?” Og asked his mate as he rummaged for the emergency pack Amad always kept stored in the truck along with a change of clothes.

Amad sighed. “I saw multiple fire tornados in the forest, which isn’t natural, and I had just contacted the queen to ask for her assistance in fighting the fire with her clouds before it burned the mountain completely black. That new ranger, the wolf shifter, just waited for that call to end before he attacked me. When he grabbed me, I threw us both off the fire tower and shifted. I realized they used me to lure the queen away from her protection detail and I flew towards the palace to warn her. I saw the palace was under attack so I flew home to find you,” Amad explained. “They were waiting for me,” he added quietly. “Our place is not easy to get to. I don’t understand what they would want with a simple forest dragon.”

“Humans always want dragonhide to experiment with. But it’s more likely they didn’t want you spreading word of what happened,” Og commented as he settled in for the night. “Try to get some sleep, my love. I’ll take first watch.” Og opened his senses and got the feel of the nighttime wildwood, horns vibrating. He’d know if something intruded.

Chapter Two

“Og, wake up, love.” Og blinked in the faint dawn light that managed to filter through the heavy tree canopy above them. He looked back at the vine shell holding his mate.

“Amad, there’s no net left. Just a dusting of gray powder. I’ll cut you free.” Og grabbed the utility knife from the survival pack and gingerly sliced through the dead twisted vines. Amad pushed the edges aside and squeezed through. He pulled Og into a quick hug and kissed him, whispering loving words in their own intimate language. Amad let him go and immediately shifted and flew into the treetops. Og busied himself cleaning the grey dust off the truck and packing up what little he had unpacked the night before. He felt a downdraft and glanced up as his bright violet-hued dragon lover glided to a stop and shifted in front of him.

Amad shook out his knee-length black hair and ran his fingers through it, trying to work out the worst of the tangles. “There’s smoke to the west and east of us, and the palace is south. We’re very close to the desolation. We can stay here and camp until it’s safe to return, or we can move closer to where the trees end and travel along the edge until we get to a safer area. I think we’re close to gryphon territory. What do you think?” Amad asked.

“I heard through the palace grapevine that Queen Lilianna pissed off the gryphons again. If it gets out that she’s been captured, they won’t bother honoring the non-aggression treaty that guarantees dragon safety near the gryphon border.”

“Let’s move closer to the edge and camp. Perhaps the wolves still avoid the desolation. We can always abandon the truck and retreat to the treetops. Do I have time to hunt? I’m starving.”

Og nodded towards the undergrowth. “I sense something nibbling on the plants. Perhaps there’s a rabbit or two that way.” He closed his eyes and concentrated. There was sudden thrashing and Og smiled. “Your breakfast awaits, captured in a vine snare. Enjoy.” Amad walked off, grumbling about taking all the fun away. Og admired Amad’s fine naked ass as he bent and fussed in the forest brush. Amad retrieved the struggling rabbits and started back to the truck when Og sensed intruders. *Four-legged, traveling fast.* He frantically motioned for Amad to get into the truck as the engine thrummed to

life. Amad dove into the seat beside him, and Og floored it, heading up the streambed. The only navigable path led straight towards the desolation, a vast supposedly barren area mysteriously closed to all shifters and humans.

Amad glanced behind them, trying to sense whatever spooked Og. He settled the struggling rabbits on the floor of the truck and opened his senses to the forest. *Fuck! Wolves, closing fast.* He held on to the frame of the truck as Og careened around larger rocks in the shallow water. Amad thought fast, mentally planning to extract Og from behind the wheel and shift. He thought he could carry him to the treetops using his claws in Og's belt. *Fuck!* Could he do that without putting pressure on Og's swollen, pregnant belly? A large black wolf found the streambed and followed them, getting closer. Amad could see a weapon pack strapped to the wolf. "Shit! Soldier wolves!" he cursed. They could shift and shoot them without having to actually reach them.

"Amad? What's that ahead of us?"

Amad squinted and saw clear daylight, unfiltered by a forest canopy. "I believe we're at the edge of the desolation, love. Keep going. I've explored up here and I know we can get closer. When you feel the boundary pushing you away, veer off to the side and we'll head for the gryphon territory. I know they don't like dragons, but they hate the wolves more than anything. They'll shred the wolves just for fun. Maybe the gryphons won't feel threatened by a couple of mild earth dragons."

The truck burst out of the wildwood and kept heading towards the barren area ahead of them. Cursing another boulder in the water, Og steered out of the stream onto a smooth bank and raced even faster into the wasteland. Amad watched behind them as more wolves ran out of the trees and continued the chase. The black wolf in the lead faltered and slowed, then circled around and attempted to follow only to slow again. Their frustrated yips could be heard above the sound of the wind whipping past them. Amad watched the lead wolf shift to human form and smoothly pull a rifle from his weapon pack.

"Og! Duck down, but keep driving!" Amad ordered nervously, still watching the unfolding maneuver behind them. He turned and looked ahead of them, cringing at the gradual slope of the stream bank. "Og, get above the stream! You're driving us straight into a canyon!" he yelled as the first shot pinged the ground beside the truck very close to a tire. The truck chugged as Og downshifted and drove up the bank to a flat plateau. Amad's breath *whooshed* out in relief as they sped across the high ground, leaving the wolves behind. Og finally slowed and stopped when Amad stroked his arm.

“There are no plants here, so I can’t sense anything coming. Do you?” Og asked his mate as he got out and kicked his boot against the hard ground. “I can’t even sense seeds in the dirt,” he complained. He bent closer and inspected the windswept surface, frowning. “Amad, this looks like pitted, cracked glass. What the fuck happened here?”

“It looks like extreme heat melted the ground and fused it, I think. We’re *inside* the desolation. How did we get through? Did you feel a push?” He asked.

“I don’t know. I felt overwhelming fear for you and our eggs. I wasn’t stopping for anything.”

“I’m taking a look,” Amad said and then shifted. He flew higher and headed off in a wide circular path.

Og watched him get smaller in the distance and tried his cell phone but had no service. He was desperate to know if their families and friends were safe. He worried about their options as he rubbed his belly.

Amad glided down an hour later, shifted, and grabbed the water bottle Og held out to him.

“I saw the edge of a huge lake due north of here, and the ground looks flat enough to drive on. Let’s head that way so at least we’ll have a source of water. I’m not sure, but I think I sensed some forest,” he said with a puzzled look.

“I thought the whole desolation was supposed to be barren,” Og mused. “Been that way for several thousand years. And at the boundary something pushes, keeping the shifters and humans out. At least that’s what Queen Lilianna always told us. Was she wrong?”

“Whatever it is, the wolves still can’t get in but that doesn’t mean they can’t shoot us if we stay too close to the boundary.” Amad shrugged and climbed into the truck. A few long, bumpy hours later, Og found the remnants of an ancient stone-paved road and followed it to the edge of the lake. “Our own Lakeshore Drive,” Amad quipped as they skirted the lake.

“There’s plant life here, and those flat places look like something was built there. What do you sense?” Og asked.

“Animals. And trees. And water. We’re close to the forest... but it’s not right...” Amad’s voice trailed off as he lost himself in the odd things he was sensing.

They found the ruins soon after, near the edge of a straggly forest. They stopped for the day. Amad took to the air to explore and Og set up their camp.

“This is larger than Queen Lilianna’s palace,” Amad told him after he landed, dropped a deer carcass, and shifted back to human. “Looks like a third of the walls and roof are intact, but the rest is cracked or crumbled in on itself as if a bomb hit it.” Amad remembered the rabbits in the truck and decided they wouldn’t be food anytime soon. The female was pregnant. He placed them into the vine shell that was still in the back of the truck. “Looked like an overgrown orchard behind there. Let’s go check it out and pick some fruit.” Og urged brush aside and they followed the resulting path into a haphazard grouping of fruit-laden trees.

“These trees grew where fruit dropped and sprouted. This hasn’t been a tended orchard for many generations,” Og said as he pondered the odd fruit he held in his hand. They quickly filled a backpack and continued to explore. From force of habit, he identified and categorized the plants he sensed underneath all the tangled brush and located the remains of a kitchen garden, long since gone wild. They collected a pile of vegetables and Amad roasted some in the campfire along with a haunch of venison. Og’s stomach rumbled when the scent of sizzling meat drifted over him, and he felt himself relax as he enjoyed the familiar tasks of camping.

Dark fell quickly, and soon they were lying on a bed of packed grass with Og nestled up next to Amad as they stared in wonder at the clearest night sky either of them had ever seen. After more than a day of fleeing for their lives and navigating the unknown, Og finally felt safe with Amad spooned behind him. He soon fell asleep with Amad’s hand rubbing his egg bump and his warm breath on his neck.

“Are these eggs for breakfast?” Amad asked the next morning as he rooted through the packages in the back of the truck.

“No! Dad gave me a flat of fertile chicken eggs when I met him for lunch. I wanted some laying hens eventually at the treehouse. I thought they would have broken after the rough driving.” Og checked the packing and found the eggs intact. “I don’t know how long we’ll be here, but I’d like to see them hatch. Dad said two more weeks at most.” He looked around. “And I’ll have to find a food source for them if we’re still here then.”

Amad grinned and held up a large bottle of lube. “I’m glad you always remember to pick up more of this up when you go shopping.” He then found the boxes from their Internet order, opened and rummaged through them, finding the electronics he had special ordered. He had found online what

amounted to a portable satellite dish antenna designed to run on solar power. When installed, it would have given them movies and the Internet at their treehouse.

“I’m setting this up first. We need to find out what happened. We won’t have cell phone service, but hopefully our Internet email accounts should be accessible as well as Skype.” Amad spent the morning on the roof setting up the dish and solar power arrays and running the cable down into the stone building. Og explored the first floor and decided which areas were habitable. He cleaned and organized a room that had plenty of sunlight and a fireplace, moving their supplies in and collecting firewood. He set the chicken eggs in a corner that felt warm, hoping rats wouldn’t find the eggs first. Amad flew down from the roof and came inside for lunch.

“It needs to charge for several hours before we can turn it on.” He looked around. “This looks cozy,” he commented as Og handed him some leftover venison packed between bread from their meager supply of groceries.

“Can you sense any rats? I want to keep the chicken eggs safe. And mine as well, if we’re still here when they’re ready to come out.”

Amad reached out with his senses, horns vibrating, locating several nests. “I’ll clean them out today. How do you feel?”

“Full, and horny. The eggs are pressing on my prostate,” complained Og. “And I still have another week to go before I lay my clutch. Doc said we should put our eggs into the incubator as soon as they come out. We don’t have one here,” he said, fretting.

Amad pulled him into a hug and rubbed his back. “We’ll figure something out. Dragons have been born for many thousands of years, before incubators existed.” He lifted his mate’s face with a finger on his chin and looked into his lover’s troubled green eyes. “I promise you, we’ll get through this. Look how far we’ve already come,” Amad gently reminded his mate, and then smiled heatedly as he sank to his knees and pulled down Og’s pants, freeing his constantly semihard cock. Og shivered with arousal as Amad sucked him in, swirling his tongue around the head and licking off the precum. Og felt a shock of pleasure and groaned, gripping his mate’s shoulders, and shuddered through his climax after only two hard sucks. Amad tucked Og back into his jeans, and kissed him. “You might consider not wearing pants for the next week or so, until the eggs come. I’ll be happy to take care of any boners that pop up. Take a nap, love. I’m going hunting.”

Amad flew over the forest, noting the abundant deer population and the resulting damage to the struggling forest due to overfeeding; the classic signs of a lack of predators. He saw a huge swath of towering, blackened trees and dropped down to investigate. He opened his senses, cataloging plants, animals, and water by habit, knowing immediately there was an imbalance. But he could fix this. Although the huge trees appeared dead, he could sense their age and the life within the deep roots and under the fire-hardened bark. It would take him the rest of the season and all of the coming winter if they stayed, but now he had a mission. He shook off the odd feeling that they had been waiting for him.

The first emails they sent out with the new dish system were met with a flurry of relief and excitement from both families when Amad wrote they had made it into the desolation. Amad's surviving father was a noted musical instrument maker, and lived as a recluse outside the shifter zone. He was safe from the vicious fighting that frequently swept through the rugged, isolated land as long as he passed for human. Og's fathers responded from their organic chicken farm in the shifter zone. They emailed back that they were safe and had provided refuge for several dragons after the fire forced them out of the forest shared by all shifters in that zone. Og told them that the wolves were working with humans and relayed what he had overheard about Queen Lilianna's capture. The death or disappearance of a dragon colony's queen usually meant the dissolution of the colony. The dragons would either drift away and join a different colony, or live separate from their kind and endure a lifetime of abandonment issues that often led to suicide.

Chapter Three

Og felt the first labor pains five days later. He panted, feeling bursts of sharp pain all morning as Amad coached his breathing. “Lay on your side, love. I’m going to stretch you.” Amad squirted lube onto two fingers and gently massaged Og’s pucker. It was purple from straining, and Amad pressed a fingertip in, gently rotating it and spreading lube inside. He pressed in further and grinned. “I feel an egg! Get on your knees and spread them,” Amad ordered as he helped Og into position kneeling over a pile of soft grass. Amad inserted a second finger and scissored them, and a perfect pale green dragon egg plopped out onto his waiting hand. He had barely placed it into a woven grass nest when a second egg, and then a third, slipped out. “You’re halfway there, love! Three gorgeous eggs!”

Og smiled tiredly and craned his head around, trying to see into the soft grass nest he had lovingly crafted several days ago. Amad nudged it forward, and Og sighed happily as he gazed in wonder at what he and his lover had produced. He felt something big shift inside him, and groaned as pain ripped through his bottom. He would have sagged to the floor if Amad hadn’t been holding him. Amad tried again with his finger. “I can barely feel it. It’s not dropped into position yet. Take a rest, love. You’re doing so good!” Amad praised him as he rubbed his swollen belly and kissed his neck. “Lie back down for a while. Let me know when you feel the urge to push again. Do you want some water?”

Og sipped the offered water, and after a short time decided to get up and walk around. “I feel so restless. Maybe I should shift to dragon form. I can handle a larger egg that way.”

“But then the egg has farther to travel down the spiral oviduct and there’s a real possibility you’ll be egg-bound, and right now we don’t have the option of surgery. I wish we had all our toys. I could open you up with that giant pink dildo. I’ll bet that would make the egg drop real quick, no matter how big it is.”

Og snorted water as he laughed, then bent double as a cramp hit him. Amad eased him onto his knees and urged him to push. Amad again inserted two fingers and rubbed in a circle, loosening Og’s channel until he felt the egg. “Push, love, push!” he urged as he used both hands and hooked four fingers into Og’s anus and pulled it open as wide as it would go. The tip of the egg appeared. “Press on your belly, love, just one more big push as hard as you can!” Amad eased the taut ring of muscle up and over the partially exposed

egg, and it finally dropped out with a load moan from Og. Amad wiped blood off of it and placed it into the nest. It was cream colored and half again larger than the first three eggs. Og moaned and pushed out another egg, smaller and perfectly spherical. Amad placed it in the nest, puzzled at the odd assortment. With an easier push, a miniature egg dropped out almost as an afterthought.

“That’s all six, Og. Lie down and rest. If Doc was right, you’re all done. How do feel?”

“Sore. I think next time you’ll be the one sampling the giant pink dildo,” Og joked while he looked into the nest. He sobered quickly. “Three normal eggs. One oversized egg. One barely big enough to be viable and I’m pretty sure that last one is a cock egg and isn’t even fertile. It’s too small. Measure them, please.”

Amad gently measured the length and width of each egg and jotted down the numbers. Dragon eggs came out in a leatherlike shell that expanded as the young dragon grew within. It hardened just before hatching. If an egg didn’t get larger, there was no dragon inside. “I think you’re right. We’ll follow tradition and just give each hatchling an egg name until their first shift. If they make it, we’ll give them formal dragon names suited to our clans.” Amad looked over at his mate. “Shift for a while. You’ll heal faster.” Og did that and stretched his wings in pleasure. For the first time in weeks he leapt into the sky to fly and hunt while Amad settled their clutch into the warmest corner of their living space.

Their days quickly settled into a pleasant routine. They explored what was left of the huge building and blocked off the smashed area to keep out the weather. They found metal and stone and earthenware items that made their new place less of a camp and more of a home. Amad made them a bed of packed grass covered by a canvas tarp from the truck. The solar-powered satellite dish system came with an outlet that let them recharge Amad’s new tablet. They measured the eggs every day, and all but one were getting larger, bit by bit. After a week the smallest egg collapsed in on itself, and Amad silently removed it. Dragon eggs needed seven months to incubate before they matured and hatched. The hatchlings were expected in the spring.

“Dad says there hasn’t been any more military activity in the zone. Do you want to go back?” Og asked one night as he lay in Amad’s arms, pleasantly sated after a heavy round of sex.

“Your dad also said the queen was still missing, and just because he can’t see activity doesn’t mean there isn’t any. The humans and the wolves are just being more discreet. They wouldn’t have mounted that battle and then simply stopped. No one has managed to follow us into the desolation, so I feel safer here. And we still don’t know why they captured me. Is there a reason you’re thinking about going back?” Amad asked.

“We’re living without our colony, and we haven’t begun to figure out what happened here. I don’t mind an adventure, but we have the eggs to consider. Do we want to raise the hatchlings in this wilderness?” Og quickly got to the point.

“We have months to see what happens in the zone before the hatchlings arrive. In the mean time we have food, water, shelter and lube. I’d like to wait it out, even spend the winter here if you think we can do it.”

“We also have freedom from all those restrictions in the shifter zone,” Og reminded him. “I’m beginning to think we’re better off here than in the zone. We’ll stay, love.”

Amad smiled.

Amad spent whole days in the forest, gently urging the few young trees he found to grow at an accelerated rate until they were large enough to be out of the reach of hungry deer. He flew all the way across the huge lake and found a healthier forest. He transplanted saplings and moved deer. And he worked on the ancient, giant, blackened trees, coaxing the few live cells to grow and multiply, repairing the damaged cambium layer, and strengthening the roots and sending them deeper until they reached the water table he sensed. When he was satisfied a tree had what it needed to heal on its own, he moved to the next one. He wondered what the trees would look like in the spring. So far, he could not identify the species.

Og often joined him and helped with the smaller forest plants, removing the overgrowth of trash plants and adding more diversity. Og also worked in the abandoned gardens near the old stone building. He marveled at the ancient strains of fruits and vegetables, knowing these non-GMO crops would go for a fortune in the human world. He couldn’t identify all of what was growing, and that was saying something to a trained botanist like himself. His dragon form was drawn to the wonderful scents, and he found a pink tuber to be especially delicious.

The chickens had hatched and were quickly growing. Amad built a coop for them in one of the outer rooms. He built a hutch for the rabbits as well, knowing the meat was the preferred food for dragon hatchlings.

The dragon eggs continued to grow, and Amad carved a small keepsake box for each expected hatchling. Once they hatched, Og could place pieces of their shell in their box as well as their egg tooth when it fell off.

An email from his father warned Og that several dragons had been inspired by Amad and Og and were planning to make a run for the desolation, hoping to fly past the soldier wolves and get through whatever barrier was at the boundary. They found themselves looking at the sky to the south many times during the day.

It was raining the night Sam and Gregor made it into the desolation with news from outside and carrying supply packs sent by Og's dads.

"We stayed in dragon form and kept to the trees near the gryphon territory. The gryphons chased away the soldier wolves when too many of them showed up near their border, and we took the opportunity to try a flight to the boundary of the desolation. We kept on flying, heading for the big lake until we scented you," Sam explained.

"We have news that Og's dads didn't want to put in an email. They think their email is being monitored. We'll talk more after we hunt. I'm starving," added Gregor. The two sleek air dragons rose as one and headed towards the forest.

The supplies included an assortment of solar-powered items, sacks of rice and flour, tools, some heirloom seeds from his dad's collection, hygiene items, lube, and clothing. "Look at these," Og said as he held up five sets of baby clothes suitable for a human toddler after their first shift. Amad smiled gently at his mate and leaned in to kiss him. For the first time, Og felt that this might be their new home rather than a temporary place to wait out the wolf trouble plaguing the shifter zone.

"We hear things in the air. It's getting dire in the zone. The dragons are systematically being culled," Sam and Gregor told them. "The bear shifters have been forced out of the forest as well. And the wolves are still looking for Amadeus. That's why they're still at the boundary, waiting to catch you if you try to return."

"What the fuck for?" fumed Amad. "I just take care of trees."

“Sam and I have a theory,” said Gregor. “You don’t just take care of trees, Amadeus. You take care of the whole forest. Didn’t you heal the whole west side of the mountain forest after it was decimated by fire a few years ago? Normally it takes decades before forest-dwelling shifters can live in a fire-damaged forest again.”

“Yeah. So?”

“We think the wolves intentionally set fire to the section of forest usually inhabited by dragons. The dragons have nowhere else to go and their queen is missing. They’ll leave or die, won’t they? And when they’re gone, the wolves can reclaim that whole section of the forest for themselves. Wouldn’t it be nice if they had someone that could quickly heal the forest and make it habitable for the wolves in a much shorter time frame?” Gregor looked pointedly at Amad.

“Then I won’t!” Amad spat. “And if that’s true why did they shoot at us?” “I think they were trying to shoot out the tires, Amad,” Og said. “Either that or they were pretty bad shots for trained soldiers.”

“Maybe they believe holding the queen as a hostage will entice you to do as the wolves wish, instead of executing her outright,” Sam offered.

“The queen isn’t leverage over me, only Og is. We’re staying here,” Amad flatly declared as he pulled Og over and onto his lap. Gregor simply nodded his understanding.

“Now that we know the boundary is letting dragons pass, we’ll head back and start leading dragons in. Not all of them believe it’s possible to come here, and many don’t feel they are strong enough to survive without a colony but we’ll explain that they may not be alive very long if they stay,” said Sam. Sam and Gregor left the next evening under the cover of darkness.

Over the next several months, a trickle of dragons made their way into the desolation and to the big stone building. They dropped off supplies, rested, and hunted. A few stayed nearby and added something to their little community, finding ways to be useful and self-sufficient. Most set out to explore the desolation. Several dragons made it a habit to bring back fallen trees. In dragon form, Amad used his claws to cut the trunks into boards of varying sizes.

All of them visited the nursery room and gazed at Amad and Og’s clutch of eggs with wistful smiles. They all knew it had been several generations since such a healthy clutch was laid.

“What’s your secret, Ogdred?” asked Roarke, an earth dragon who had worked in the zone as a glassmaker.

Og shrugged. “I really don’t know, but sometimes I think it’s because we fucked in dragon form.”

Roarke grinned like they all did when Og answered that way.

“By the way, the wood-fueled furnace to fire my glass is finished. It won’t be long before I have glass made and cut to fit the open squares in the stone walls, as well as repairing the rose window in the nursery,” said Roarke.

Og smiled, pleased to soon have sunlight in several of the rooms instead of the darkness caused by the wood shutters Amad had first installed to keep out the weather. “It will be lovely to see sunlight through that ornate round window. I often wonder if it originally held colored glass.”

Between the two of them, Amad and Roarke built a wood-framed sunroom with glass walls and ceiling and wooden planters. Og transplanted a variety of plants from outside, using the room as a greenhouse for their winter vegetables and animal fodder.

Chapter Four

Winter came upon them with crushing cold and heavy snowfall. Most of the dragons curtailed their exploring and came back to the stone building. They chose rooms and settled in for the winter, drawing maps of what they learned about the desolation and discussing it amongst themselves.

“This wide plain will be good farmland. When the snow melts the earth dragons will clean out rocks and trash plants, and smooth the land for crops after they aerate and till the soil. Og can selectively force accelerated growth, so crops will be ready for use soon after. Perhaps we’ll have a miller and a baker join us in the desolation by then,” Amad told them. “And if this area in the mountains does turn out to be mineral deposits, we’ll look at options to mine the gold ore. I confess I’ll be happy to have a source of currency the humans will honor.”

Winterslag, the lethargy thought to be a remnant of their ancestors’ urge to hibernate, made for quiet days with occasional flights out to hunt for deer. Amad and several other earth dragons with an affinity for wood spent time crafting furniture, including a large bed frame for Amad and Og. They were the only mated couple so far, and their winter nights started early and often ended in hot sweaty mutual satisfaction. Og wondered how long it would be before he and Amad started another clutch of eggs, and grinned in the dark.

Martin, an earth dragon with an affinity for rock, worked steadily to repair the damaged stone building. “This here is a palace, ya know,” he told them one day. “See these carvings in the stone? I read about ’em. Saw something similar in pictures of Queen Lilianna’s palace. This here is a royal crest. Don’t recognize it, though. And that earth dragon, Hiram, that’s been fixin’ the floors, he says he thinks the floors here are made of dragonwood.”

Amad’s eyebrows rose in surprise. He’d read about it. Dragonwood was extremely rare and once it was seasoned with dragonfire it became as strong as stone but retained the lovely warm shades of the original wood. It was historically only used in palaces. “Those trees are as extinct as the fire dragons,” Amad mentioned. Even with his affinity for wood, he now knew why he found it almost impossible to repair the occasional cracks and gaps in the ancient palace floors. Hiram must be a powerful earth dragon to be able to urge a change in a dragonwood board.

“We think this was a dragon’s palace,” said Martin, revealing his *pièce de résistance* as he moved aside and pointed to a finely rendered fresco on the stone wall. Amad’s mouth dropped open.

“Gods, I wish my Da was still alive,” murmured Amad as he gazed in wonder at the paintings of dragons Martin had just uncovered that morning. “He was a historian and specialized in shifter history. He kept on publishing his scholarly articles even after the humans outlawed the subject. They said it was a terrorist activity,” Amad snorted derisively.

All the dragons admired the paintings of fire dragons, marveling at the images of beings that died out over a thousand years go. They worked all winter to help Martin clear the rubble, excited about what else they might find. They were vigilant about keeping the nursery warm. The fire never lacked for logs, and in the cozy room, the eggs steadily grew larger.

After months of cold daylight and long frozen nights, the winter snows finally receded and the resident dragons once again took to the sky to explore the desolation. Amad flew out to check on his giant trees and was happy to see buds poking through the blackened bark. One day they would be branches with leaves. He felt an enormous sense of satisfaction and decided he would publish the journal he had been keeping about his repair effort.

A small mottled green and brown dragon landed near him and shifted. “Amadeus,” panted Hiram, “Ogdred says to come home quick. One of your eggs has a pip,” he said excitedly and then glanced around at the trees in curiosity.

“Yes!” Amad yelled and punched the sky, shifted, and flew straight home.

Og looked up and wordlessly held out his hand as Amad stepped close. They held hands as they watched the tiny hole in the green egg gradually get larger. The little hatchling worked hard at cracking his shell, stopping periodically to rest. Martin brought them food at midday and sniffed away a happy tear before clapping both of them on the back. By evening, the egg was rolling slightly and the crack extended almost all the way around. With one strong lurch, the egg cracked and a tiny green dragon head emerged. He blinked his amethyst eyes, looking around until his eyes settled on his parents.

“*Tchtchtch*,” he clicked at them, and tilted his head.

“Hello to you, too, little one,” Og cooed. “He has my dragonhide and your eyes, love. Isn’t he gorgeous?”

Amad reached out a finger and nudged some shell off the baby’s head. “He’s so perfect!” announced Amad. The baby squirmed inside his remaining

shell and it turned on its side. He worked his way out and stretched his wings, still damp from his shell, and then struggled to his feet. "See if he'll eat," Amad suggested.

Og shifted to dragon form and lay down, and Amad carefully picked up their treasured baby and held him to Og's nipple. The tiny dragon latched on, bit, and sucked. Og winced as the blood nipple did its job and fed warm, spicy dragon blood to the baby.

Amad watched for a while, smitten with their tiny son, then he stood and started to collect the pieces of shell for the hatchling's nearby keepsake box. He looked closer at the remaining eggs. Two more had pips. "Og, love, it's going to be a long night."

By morning, three perfect green baby dragons with amethyst eyes were tilting their heads and vocalizing at the steady stream of dragons bearing gifts for the newborns. Martin and Hiram had gotten word out, and most dragons presently in the desolation flew back to view the babies and congratulate Amad and Og. Martin took a picture of the new family with Amad's tablet. Amad emailed it with the announcement to the new grandparents and several of their friends. Later, Martin again brought food for Amad and Og, and a small dish of fresh minced rabbit meat for the babies to try. The oldest baby pecked experimentally at the rabbit, then took a bit in and swallowed it. He ate a few more bites before his legs folded under him and he drifted off to sleep. Og placed him gently into the new nest-shaped crib given to them by Hiram. Amad was presently in dragon form and was taking a turn at feeding the other two hatchlings from his blood nipples.

Og examined the two remaining eggs, a pale blue almost perfect sphere and the much larger cream-colored egg. He saw no pips yet, and he would continue to worry about the smallest egg until it hatched. Its leatherlike shell had expanded as expected, but it was now stretched so thin Og could actually see inside the egg. It looked like a cloudy bubble with a tiny dragon curled up asleep inside. He fervently hoped the eggshell could withstand a bit more growth before it hardened for hatching. All parents wanted their babies to be a safe size before they entered the world.

"Any changes with these two yet?" Amad asked as he walked over buttoning his pants. His nipples healed when he shifted back to his human form, but they were still red and swollen. He rubbed them absently as he looked at the eggs, too.

"No. Do you have a preference for the babies' egg names?"

Amad grinned. “I like Bubble and Godzilla for these two, even though they’re not here yet.”

“I like Squeak for the one that says ‘*eeek*,’” Og said, smiling.

“That’s cute... Bubble and Squeak. I thought they’d all make the same sound. Guess not.” He shrugged.

Amad dragged their grass-stuffed mattress back into the nursery so they could be available for the round-the-clock feedings. After a week, all three babies preferred the minced rabbit instead of the blood nipple.

“I’m glad they’re on solid food. I’m tired of getting my nipples chewed every few hours,” Amad said as he squeezed his mate’s ass.

Og smiled. “I don’t mind. My dads raised several hatchlings through the years, and they swear the blood nipple made the babies healthier even though the practice was discouraged by modern healers. Fuck ’em. Healers don’t know everything. Nipples are there for a reason, right?”

“Still, it’s easier they can now be fed solid food, and on the same schedule. Every four hours. Eat, poo, pee, sleep. Repeat. I still think we should call two of them Poo and Pee,” Amad joked.

Og groaned. “I let you get away with ‘Sneak’ for the one that keeps slipping over to his brother’s dish and grabbing a bite of rabbit. That’s barely acceptable as an egg name. We’ve one more name to think of. Be nice.”

Amad winked at his mate and nodded towards the first of the babies to hatch. “He looks like a strong fellow. Let’s call him Bruiser.” He peeked into the brood nest to check the remaining two eggs before he went to bed. “Og? Does Bubble’s shell look different?”

Og peered at the egg. “It’s clear and shiny like glass. I think it’s hardened. Measure it, please,” he nervously asked.

Amad did as requested, careful not to touch the fragile egg. “It’s exactly the minimum size considered safe for hatchling survival,” Amad told his mate as he hugged him and rubbed his trembling back. Neither of them could sleep, and in between feedings for the three hatchlings, they anxiously watched Bubble’s egg.

Bubble pipped in the morning. He struck the shell with his egg tooth a total of three times before the fragile egg cracked and the little pale blue dragon

stretched and rolled out of his shell. He blinked, and his cloudy amethyst eyes looked in the direction of his parents. He opened his wings and flapped them a few times, then folded them back against his sides. He made no effort to stand. Og felt in his gut that something was wrong with their newest son.

“See if he’ll eat,” Amad said quietly.

Og shifted, and Amad ever so carefully placed the tiny baby against his father’s blood nipple. Amad nudged the little mouth against Og’s nipple, and the baby finally latched on and sucked. He could barely get his mouth around the nipple, but he held on and ate. Og’s mind settled a bit. The baby wanted to eat. That was the first indicator of a healthy baby dragon. He looked closely at the baby, noting the extra long tail and stunted legs. His feet looked deformed as well. He closed his eyes and started thinking about what special accommodations they could make to ensure the baby would survive until his first shift. Og wondered what his human form would look like.

Bubble happily ate almost constantly from Amad and Og’s blood nipples. He grew bigger and filled out, but mostly he grew in length. His tail was longer than anyone had ever seen on a baby dragon. Even Og’s dads couldn’t explain it, and they’d seen a lot. Bubble sniffed at the offered rabbit meat but wouldn’t eat it.

Like they did each day, Amad and Og took the babies outside for a short time, letting them feel the earth under their tiny feet. Bruiser scratched in the grass and grabbed a twig. He managed to chew and swallow half of it before Og rushed to remove it from his mouth.

“Why is he eating sticks?” Og asked, perplexed by his son’s behavior.

“I don’t know, but my dad told me he used to have to keep me from eating the wood shavings in his workshop when I was a hatchling,” said Amad as he plucked Sneak away from the pebble he was trying to swallow. Squeak liked to eat dirt. “I’m all for letting them explore, but I don’t think they should be eating this stuff.”

When Squeak nipped at the end of Bubble’s tail and caused him to squawk in pain, Amad decided to move Bubble to his own nest. He set the water dish low enough for Bubble to easily drink, and found the baby routinely rolled on it and knocked it over.

Within a few weeks, they knew Bubble was in trouble. His pretty blue skin had turned grey and was as dry as old leather. He became listless and stopped

eating. Nothing they offered could tempt the little dragon to start eating again. His skin started to peel, leaving raw red spots on his hide. Dragonrot. No one knew how to cure it.

Chapter Five

Amad held Og close and wiped away the tears on both their faces. “We always knew we would probably lose some hatchlings. We’ve been fortunate so far, with only one of them sick. We’ll make him as comfortable as possible, and he’ll leave us knowing he was loved unconditionally in the short time he graced us.” Og nodded wordlessly and went to Bubble’s little nest. His brothers perched close by as if they knew.

“I’ll see if he wants to eat. Maybe he’ll take a blood nipple again, like right after he hatched.” Og gently cradled the slender hatchling and lay down on the floor and shifted, lying in the sunbeams as he nudged Bubble’s mouth with a nipple. Bubble flapped his wings and turned his head away, trying to burrow into Og’s armpit. Og moved his arm and the tiny dragon rolled into Og’s side and rested there, content. Og sighed sadly and closed his eyes, wondering when it would happen. After a few minutes, Bubble moved again, this time rolling onto the floor. Og turned his head just in time to see Bubble’s tail disappear as he rolled through a gap in the floorboards.

Og roared and shifted. “*No!*” Og screamed, and Amad came running.

“What happened?”

“He fell! Bubble fell through that damn crack! I had no idea he would even fit,” Og babbled frantically. Amad clawed at the floor, and forced the boards loose. A dank odor, ripe with dampness wafted up as they both peered into darkness.

“Get the flashlight. Bubble? Baby boy? Answer Papa,” Og sobbed. He heard a splash.

“*Rrrk?*” said a tiny voice from below. Og breathed a sigh of relief when he heard his son alive. Og’s pounding heart quieted some as he listened carefully for any sign of distress from his baby.

Amad came running and knelt as he shined the light into the void below. Water. There was a pool of some sort down there. He moved the light around until he found Bubble, calmly floating on the surface of the dark green water, his little belly now rounded. As they watched, a flash of silver swam near him and he ducked his small head into the murky water. He pulled his head up and briefly held a flopping minnow in his mouth before he raised his head and let

the fish slide down his throat. “*Rrrk*,” Bubble flicked his tail and glided through the water, barely making a ripple as he searched for more minnows.

Amad and Og stared at each other, speechless, and then watched Bubble quickly catch and eat five more of the little fish.

“He’s active and hunting and eating on his own,” Og said. “Just like the baby book said about what to expect from a healthy baby dragon. Do you think...?” Og asked hopefully, too nervous to believe the tide had turned for their Bubble.

“We need to get down there. We don’t know what else might be living in that water. I don’t want him by himself,” Amad stated as he got to his feet. He rested his hands on his hips as he considered the possible entryways into the newly discovered subterranean chamber. “I could jump down, but I’m afraid I might cause a wave big enough to sink him. I won’t take that risk.”

“*Tchtchtch*.”

“*Eeeek*.”

“*Sssh*.”

Bruiser, Squeak, and Sneak had hopped over to the gap and perched along the edge, experimentally nudging each other towards the void below.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Og scolded his sons as he herded them back to their playpen and attached the roof partition to keep them from wandering. He tossed in several strips of fresh rabbit and called out for Martin before he went to help Amad.

Og could sense the absence of soil and was able to determine the layout of the rock walls and floor below, and Martin was able to identify what he thought might be stone stairs. Amad found the entry to the chamber in the section of the palace he had walled off for safety’s sake. Once they cleared the rubble, the old carved wooden door was easily pulled aside and they could get to their son. They both carried torches, and found holders built into the wall. The chamber was softly lit by firelight in a few minutes.

“This looks like a naturally formed rock pool, and the water is fresh,” said Amad after he had walked around the perimeter and tasted the water. “And these fish come from somewhere. I can’t believe it’s its own little ecosystem here.”

Og was already naked and in the water, swimming next to Bubble and playfully spitting streams of water at him. Bubble squawked happily and

snapped at the spurts of water. Suddenly, his round belly deflated and he sank below the surface. Og panicked until he saw the pale hatchling dart around him and grab another minnow. As soon as he surfaced, his belly inflated and he was back to his new round form. He tired after a while, and floated sleepily near his Papa. Og gently lifted him from the water and examined him. His skin was slippery like gelatin, so different from the dry wrinkled skin that routinely peeled off of him, leaving raw patches. Og had suspected the moment he saw Bubble catch his first minnow with ease, but now he was sure. Their son was a water dragon, and they had done everything wrong since he hatched.

“We almost killed him,” said Og, voice full of guilt. Bubble was so much better after several days in the cool water. He was eating all the minnows he could catch, and he periodically nibbled on the water plants that grew on the rocks. His skin was now a sleek, darker blue like the lake, and the raw patches were healing nicely. His eyes were clear now that the inner membrane wasn’t permanently closed to save his eyes from sunlight.

“I had him in the sunbeam when that was the worst thing for his skin and eyes. I fed him red meat when he needed fish. And there’s nothing wrong with his limbs. He’s perfectly formed for a life in the water, and I put him outside on the dirt with his brothers. I feel so bloody stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, love. How could we know that two earth dragons could produce a water dragon? No one’s seen one of those for over a thousand years. They’re either extinct or hiding in a far better place than the rest of us. Makes me wonder if there are fire dragons in hiding as well,” he mused. Amad sat up suddenly. “We’ll have to watch carefully when Godzilla hatches.”

“We will. In the meantime, I’m taking the other boys outside to play in the dirt again. I think their skin looks better after a nice splash in the mud. Why did we ever buy into that human way of thinking? We’re dragons. We’re healthier when we can be our dragon selves and follow our instincts.” Og stretched. “Dirt is good,” he declared, and went to find some mud to play in with his sons. And this time, he wouldn’t stop Sneak from eating pebbles, and Bruiser could eat all the twigs he wanted.

That night, the babies woke Og up with excited squawks and clicks and squeaks. He frowned as he hurriedly examined their crib, Bubble’s earthenware washbasin, and finally the nest.

“Amad! Wake up! Godzilla is hatching!”

They stayed up the rest of the night, sipping hot tea as they watched the pip in the last egg get larger and cracks form. As dawn light shone through the rose window, a white hatchling finally pushed out of the shell. And then her twin sister struggled to her feet as well, with pieces of shell still sticking to their tiny wings. They blinked amethyst eyes at their astonished fathers.

“Queens!” Og marveled as he admired his daughters’ pearlescent white dragonhide. “We made two queens, love. How did we do that? And I didn’t know twins from the same egg were even possible. How did that happen?” Og asked curiously. “Do you think they’ll be cloud dragons like Queen Lilianna?”

Amad’s brow furrowed in thought. “I don’t know. Their white color means they can command two elements with strong, equal strength and that’s what makes a queen. Lilianna had water and air. We’ll have to give them lots of opportunities, and see what their instincts lead them to do. We’ll help them grow into whatever they’re meant to be.”

“Yes. No more mistakes like we made with Bubble.” Og shuddered. “I’m not calling either of them Godzilla. How about Zilla and Zulla for their egg names?”

Amad smiled and nodded. And then grinned even wider as Sneak dragged over a strip of rabbit and dropped it in front of his new sisters. The two females fluttered delicate lace-like wings as the boys each pulled a tiny bit of meat off and offered it to their queens. Dragon instincts, indeed. Amad knew he was looking at the start of a brand new dragon colony.

Chapter Six

Their daughters thrived on the blood nipples and then on fresh rabbit, and once again the other dragons in the desolation came bearing gifts and congratulations. They left smiling in wonder, shaking hands with each other and discussing the babies almost as proudly as their fathers. Amad took a picture of all six hatchlings, with Bubble temporarily removed from his washbasin and perched next to his sisters, and the three green babies lined up behind them like an honor guard. Og danced behind Amad, waving his hands and making silly faces at the babies. They tilted their heads, mesmerized, and they all stayed still long enough for Amad to click the shutter button on his tablet. Once. Then they all hopped in different directions at once and the moment was over. Amad smiled as he composed an email to send with the picture.

The next day, Og's fathers sent several emails with photos of newspaper headlines. Both human and shifter papers had the headline "Dragon Queens Born in the Desolation!" above the picture of the hatchlings. The shifter newspaper was full of happy speculation about whether the huge area was now open to all shifters or just dragons. The human paper screamed warnings about the resurgence of the dangerous dragons and repeated the old stories detailing the gory sins of the fire dragons. Several columnists quoted holy book passages declaring the dragons were Satan's spawn and urged immediate military action to clear out the desolation and open it up for human settlements. Og was sick with worry. How could they protect themselves from an invasion or worse, an airstrike?

A day later, Sam and Gregor flew in escorting a flight of a dozen more dragons, each bearing a heavy supply pack. They also brought greetings from the gryphon king and an offer of an alliance with the infant queens. He had opened his borders to dragons wishing to cross his land in order to enter the desolation free of interference from the wolves. A heavy cargo truck was waiting to cross the desolation from the gryphon border, driven by a dragon shifter and bearing gifts for the two queens and their family. Amad dispatched Martin and Hiram to plan a roadway for what was expected to be the first of many vehicles along the new supply route.

Amad didn't know how to answer the gryphon's request to send an ambassador. "I don't control who or what can enter the desolation," he admitted

to Og. "I expect the only reason he's making a formal request is because they already tried to get in and they couldn't."

"Next he'll offer troops to help secure the queens' safety, and then he'll try to take over. He knows we have no army, no weapons, no massive stockpile of supplies. We're sitting ducks," Og said bluntly. "And what if the humans decide to nuke us?"

Amad had no answer. "I need to think. I'm going to check on my trees," he told Og. "You'll be all right for a little while?" he asked. Og nodded and Amad kissed him. He flew to the giant trees and made a low pass over them. All the trees he had healed were now sprouting branches and leaf buds. He flew to the largest of the trees, a towering giant wider and taller than all the others. He shifted and walked around it, still in awe of the giant even after many visits. He sat and leaned against the trunk and felt the thrum of life within it. It was much stronger than usual, and he attributed that to the healing. The feeling relaxed him, and he calmed enough to open his senses to the forest around him. His heart lurched as a presence streamed into his mind.

"You are the healer," it stated, not a question.

"Er... yes... of the forest," he clarified.

"There is new power now added to my own. Did you bring a queen for my land?" it asked.

"Not exactly. My daughters hatched a week ago. They are both white dragons, and still infants."

There was silence in his mind for a time, as though the presence was thinking.

"Very well. We will continue to guard the land until they come of age, and then they will help me. I grow weary."

"You... you're the one keeping everyone out? Except the dragons, of course," Amad asked.

"The trees guard the boundary, and I guard the trees. I sensed a healer bringing a queen to share my burden, and I asked the trees to let you pass. The trees spent precious life force to change the boundary from what it has been for so very long and decreed that none but dragons may enter my lands."

"Even from the sky?" asked Amad hurriedly. "The humans have great power now."

“*Those monkey men? Do they war from the air like gryphons?*” the presence scoffed.

“They make machines that let them fly higher than an air dragon, and they have the power of many fire dragons,” he told the presence. “And caring for the land is not a priority with them.”

“*Then we will keep them out as we do the gryphons and other two-natured creatures. Do not let war between dragons come to my lands. I cannot save it again, as I did after the last dragon war.*”

“There was a war here?”

“*Yes. My land was devastated; parts of it were melted by the blazing power unleashed by the fire dragons. When the water dragons countered their flame and held them back, they tried to burn my trees and thus open the boundary to their allies, the gryphons.*”

“What happened to the dragons? There weren’t any here when we came.”

“*Some fled my land to settle elsewhere. Those that stayed perished. Do not let this come to pass again.*”

“As they grow, I will teach my daughters what you have asked of us.”

“*I am grateful. I will grant you a boon. What do you desire?*”

He thought for a bit, then answered.

“*A most valuable request. Granted.*”

“May I ask, what do you call this land? We only know it as the desolation.”

“*How sad.*” The presence seemed mournful. It was silent again, for a bit. “*I call my land Bluewood, and I am the Dryad of the mother tree.*”

Amad pondered her answer as he flew back to the palace. He vaguely recalled a story, a fable really, told to him at bedtime by his Da many years ago. Amad felt a twinge of sadness at the memory of his other father, a long dead historian of some renown, killed when the humans first started forcing shifters into isolated zones. The fable was about a race of powerful dragons whose kingdom was safe and prosperous as long as they took good care of the blue trees. His child self had marveled at the powers exhibited by the storybook dragons, much grander than those of any dragon he knew, and he’d not thought much at all about blue trees. Now he wondered why his father had read that story to him so many times. Could it have actually been dragon history, suitable

for a child to hear? Amad decided a talk with his surviving father was long overdue. Perhaps he would even come to the Bluewood, now that it was open. He'd been away from his own kind for far too long.

Amad landed near the palace and strode in to give Sam his answer for the gryphon king, and then went in search of Og.

"It's here somewhere, sealed for protection," he told Og as they explored yet another underground passage. "I swear to you that only dragons can enter Bluewood," said Amad. "I can explain it better as soon as we find what we're searching for under the palace."

"I'm so relieved we discovered solid underground fortifications. It settled my mind to know that the keep is strong enough to withstand most attacks. Our family will be safe." Og was happy enough to just follow along and keep Amad company. Both their daughters came with him, perched on his shoulders with one softly humming at each ear. They refused to be confined to their nest and squawked unhappily until Og relented and let them accompany him wherever he went.

A week later they found it. Martin shifted the solid stone and opened the vast room for the first time in several thousand years. A library, protected from the ravages of time and filled with dragon lore and knowledge of their kind, just as the Dryad promised.

The giant trees had also finally produced leaves. After several thousand years of dormancy, the bright blue leaves of the Bluewood were visible for miles and reminded the dragons that their boundary was secure and would stay that way as long as they took good care of the trees.

Epilogue

Amad put down the parchment he was reading and mulled over what he had read about the problems hatchlings had if they were separated from their element. The symptoms described in the ancient text from the library sounded almost exactly like dragonrot. It reinforced what he and Og had noticed when they finally learned what Bubble's element was. Every time he made a discovery in the ancient library, he was saddened by the thought his Da was not alive to share it. *How he would have loved this place.* But he was cheered by the certain knowledge his Da would have been very, very happy that the dragons now had a vast territory they called their own. Amad was pondering some thoughts about why some hatchlings wanted to eat pebbles and if that's what gave a dragon an affinity for stone, when Og walked into their private chamber.

"They're almost a year old and all of them are flying well now, Amad. Their first shift can come any time," Og told him as he sat down next to his mate. "I think they all decided to practice their flying in earnest after Dad's chickens outflew them." Og grinned at the memory.

"And as soon as they shift into human toddlers, they'll be walking and then running everywhere. I'm pleased your fathers decided to relocate to Bluewood and will be available to help with the kids. They don't know of anyone else who had to raise six hatchlings at the same time. Everyone pitched in to help them get their new chicken farm up and running, no doubt persuaded by the promise of plentiful fresh eggs. Did they say what they did with the old farm?"

"They signed it over to the bear shifter couple that got burned out of the forest by the wolves."

"Are the wolves still holding the queen?" Amad asked, knowing Og's fathers kept up with their contacts in the zone.

"Yes, as far as anyone knows, but I prefer that, don't you? She's a dragon so she can enter Bluewood, but given the rumors of white hatchlings disappearing around her I'm happy to see her stay right where she is and away from our daughters," Og declared vehemently.

Amad nodded in agreement, and looked up when Martin rushed in.

"Amadeus, it's starting!"

They all ran to the nursery and saw Bruiser lying on the floor, squawking softly as he trembled through the painless yet unfamiliar sensations that rolled through his small frame. His siblings watched avidly as their brother worked to pull out his human form.

“That’s a good boy. You’re doing so well!” Amad comforted his son. “Don’t fight it. Just let it happen, and soon you’ll be just like Papa and me,” he said in a soothing voice.

A loud squelching noise echoed through the room as Bruiser’s clawed feet morphed into hands and feet, his limbs straightened, and his tail shrank into a very human looking rear end. His snout disappeared along with his green dragonhide, and a fall of long blond hair framed his newly emerged human face, topped with his little horn nubs. He sat up and looked around, blinking with his amethyst human eyes for the first time. He saw his dads, and smiled.

The End

Author Bio

Elin Austen writes for fun.

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#)