



Scratch surveyed the chaos. Elves were really quite stupid at times. Why had the criminals thought they could outrun a dragon and hide their stash of drugs? They must have realised he was a registered and qualified Skilled Investigator from the Guild. He proudly wore a lanyard announcing his status and he had shouted to them on his public broadcast wavelength, suggesting fairly forcibly that they should surrender.

However, they had run instead, and now they were scattered around the field where he had caught up with them, all lying on their backs staring up at the angry dragon, their packages strewn around them. There was a small firepit in the centre of the field. He had merely wanted to frighten them into submission but it seemed he had terrified them so that they all collapsed, just as though they were theatrical puppets and their strings had been suddenly cut. He sighed and reminded himself to see the farmer later to compensate for the field damage. He called for back-up. He had a new partner, someone he was learning to

communicate with privately. Alvon evidently heard his mental message and was soon with him. Alvon carried handcuffs and made short work of restraining the drug dealers. Scratch carried cuffs too but was still nervous about injuring someone if he tried to cuff them and they resisted. He gave Alvon his cuffs – neither carried enough for this group.

They really were puppets, Scratch reflected. The puppeteer was still a shadowy figure and he hoped they would be able to get one of this crop of villains to tell them enough to work out who was ultimately responsible and where they could be found. He suspected, however, that the mastermind was human and comparatively safe in the human realm.

The dragon, like his fellow investigators, felt angry about drugs. They were a human thing, not an elvish one, but they had recently crossed the border into The Kingdom, no doubt lining the pockets of those who manipulated the dealers who themselves were greedy and uncaring about the distress they sold. The users were elves who wanted release from grief or depression and did not understand that human drugs would provide neither. The usual effects on elves were a worsening of either or both but by then the dealers were long gone.

Scratch wished he had Genef by his side but she was off with her new husband, Vikor, enjoying what both humans and elves called a meadseason. Why mead was involved he couldn't imagine but he hoped there would be eggs. He half understood the explanation given frequently and patiently that elves and humans did not lay eggs as dragons did, but surely eggs must be involved somehow. Otherwise, how could there possibly be baby elves? In any case, Genef was unavailable and Rath, who had been a superb mentor to both of them, was abroad doing something complex and dangerous whilst his husband was desolate and lonely at home. So Alvon had volunteered to work with Scratch and although they got along well, Alvon was not Genef and Scratch felt somehow adrift.

He created a cage with his talons and Alvon ushered their captives into it. He would take them back to the Guild House and get others involved in interrogating them. He couldn't be expected to question a dozen of them all by himself and Alvon was not experienced enough yet to conduct an interview without his mentor present. In some ways Scratch wished he could be that mentor. Then he would have more control over Alvon's training and time management. But he knew he wasn't yet at a stage where he could mentor anyone, and he supposed he should just be glad someone had offered to take Genef's place temporarily and that their mentor had liked the idea.

He delivered his load of prisoners to the Guild House quite roughly, simply opening his talon cage and tumbling them out onto the central courtyard. He didn't much care if they were bruised or shaken. They had caused a great deal of distress and deserved a little bit of misery in return.

He messaged Fel to say he'd soon be back at the apartment he shared with Fel and Rath. At least, he occupied the roof. First he would stop for some of those delicious pebbles on the shore. He needed to recharge his fire, after all. He could also catch some fish for supper though he would keep his own share back. Fel would only ruin them with cooking. Why elves liked burnt food was beyond him.

"One consignment of drug dealers," he told the elf on duty at the Guild House doors. "They'll all need to be interrogated and I just hope we can find their overall leader."

"Could be human," responded the elf and Alvon, who had also arrived, nodded. Scratch had already come to that conclusion but he nodded too, noticing that the prisoners shivered when they saw his great head bobbing.

"I could find him, her, them," he said. "I could snatch them and bring them here."

"Maybe," said Alvon, "but wait till you have permission."

Scratch sighed. Once upon a time he would have gone ahead and done whatever his dragon soul deemed appropriate to people who hurt other people whether the victims were

elf, human or dragonkind. But he knew he must stick to the rules of the Guild. After all, he was a fully accredited Investigator now.