

# HATCHED



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Everyone said the soft, rubbery gray egg wouldn't hatch, but Ganther had sharding-well promised his dying mate he'd care for their dragonet, and he damn-well would!

Besides, it was all he had left of Mirelle...

He scowled, tucking the nuisance into the hollow under his arm to keep it warm. It hurt his pride to know his gleaming, scaled glory now had a lop-sided appearance—as if he had swollen glands—but he swallowed his annoyance.

Ganther had never paid attention to how a drakaina hatched an egg. All he recalled was that they remained in dragon form, keeping it near them for warmth, and so the ovum would hear a heartbeat and *sense* their draconic minds. Many delayed shifting again until their wyrmlings were ready to become Dragon Kin, too.

Thoughts of the comfortable king-sized bed nestled in the depths of his cavern made him sigh. Though he was accustomed to changing to his human form to sleep, he hardly grumbled about the hard stone floor at all, nobly maintaining his dragon shape to aid the hatching.

He only hoped the wyrmling would accept him as Mirelle's replacement.

But the egg remained smaller than normal, refusing to harden, or darken to the brittle green-black shell necessary for the growing dragonet to break out.

After a week, Ganther retreated into his chambers. Sinuous and graceful, despite his size, his large green scutes and lesser scales shimmered in the faint light from the cavern opening. He pulled the rubbery blob out to examine it away from the concerned glances, or sly smirks of the others.

*Perhaps I'm not warm enough?* After glancing over his shoulder to assure himself he remained unobserved, he breathed a small flame, enveloping his spawn.

Anger at the Lowlanders who had killed his mate and thrust him into this embarrassing situation kindled in his belly.

*I wouldn't be forced to do anything so undignified as hatching an egg if Mirelle were here. I am sure the other Dragon Kin males are laughing behind my back.*

He snarled, exhaling an involuntary burst of fire.

A tiny whimper teased his mind, startling him into extinguishing the flame.

Ganther's cheek scales darkened as he waved the orb to cool it. He hadn't meant to hurt—her. Yes, that brief contact made him certain he held a daughter.

*But at least I forced her to react!*

Encouraged, he re-doubled his efforts. Every day, he breathed a small flicker over the shell, warming it and *sending* reassurance inside. Soon, he began to sense her thoughts.

He *felt* how frightened she was of his anger, how traumatized by the mind-link which allowed her to experience her mother's death. It was disconcerting to realize he wasn't the only one suffering Mirelle's loss.

Chastened, he buried the rage which terrified his youngling, and soothed her as best he could. Somehow, sharing this pain eased them both and drew them closer.

To pass the days, Ganther began talking to her. He *sensed* her listening, huddled inside her shell, where it was safe, afraid to come out into the violent world.

He told her stories about her mother; how funny she was, how brave.

The dragonet listened, and slowly... timidly... his daughter's thoughts reached out, clinging to his.

After a few weeks, her casing began to darken bit by bit.

He watched with growing impatience, struggling not to rush the nervous mind inside, but eager to get on with it.

When the shell was at last hard and black, he waited in anticipation. The hours passed as he sat and stared. His excitement faded to puzzlement, then boredom.

As the second moon rose, he couldn't stand it. She wasn't even trying to hatch!

Though he could have broken it open himself, he instinctively understood it was important the choice be hers.

Ganther opened his mind and *sensed* her anxiety. He reached out a great claw and gave the shell a gentle tap.

This caused a startled twitch of the egg. A long moment later, a soft knock from inside replied. Again he waited. But she remained quiet.

He gave another rap. This time, she responded more quickly.

It became a game—tap—reply; tap, tap—reply, reply; until one of her responses cracked the carapace.

She stopped. Her trembling made the egg quiver.

Ganther flooded her with encouragement, and a wave of love took him by surprise.

She gathered her courage—he could *feel* her growing determination—and gave a hard, resolute knock. The shell snapped in half, and a tiny golden dragonet fell into his waiting front paws.

The enormous male lifted his head and bugled a greeting, which returned in a mounting chorus from the surrounding caves.

*[Her name is Laran,] he sent to the gathering Dragon Kin. [My daughter is born!]*