

DRAGON

Daddy Diaries

A Girl Grows to Greatness

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Preface

I'll be keeping what I believe humans call a "diary."

This feels a tad awkward. Doing something for the first time gets me all nervous and excited, and sets my heart thumping. And it's thanks to my precious little girl that I now feel this way.

I have lived for a long, long while. For thousands of years, as humans measure time. And yet until now, I've been all alone. Then, a little girl came along, a girl who brought my heart alive with that pounding sensation I never knew was in me.

Olivia. My soft, frail little Olivia. My oh-so-kind daughter. The cutest in the whole wide world.

She gave me a name. She gave me friends. She gave me a family.

She's made me so happy.

I don't ever want to forget about these days, which is why I figure I'll keep a diary. A diary kept by a dragon about his human daughter. Others will be appearing in it too, like the Dark Queen, and the Dark-Kin Knight, and the Headmistress, the little elven gardener, and all of Olivia's friends... So many wonderful encounters, I couldn't possibly fit them all here!

I'll start at the beginning and write in chronological order, and I'm sure I'll recall all sorts of things while I'm at it.

I know just the thing to write about first: the morning Olivia and I first met.

These are our personal records. I'll record these blissful days in writing so that I'll never, ever forget them.

—Eldraco

Chapter 1: Mr. Dragon Comes Upon a Cute Daughter

I am a dragon.

I have no name.

I have lived at the foot of this mountain since this world was still in the throes of chaos. The multitudes of dragons have declined in number, and thousands of years have passed since I last saw another dragon. The numbers of the little creatures have fluctuated over the years, such as the dwarves and elves that have drawn breath since the epochs of old, and the even-weaker humans. Not too long ago, someone named the Dark Queen built a large castle and started going at it with those humans.

Somehow or other, I was aware of these things, but as I spent my days quietly here at this mountain, they hardly affected me.

Once, that Dark Queen lady turned up with a proposition for me. “I shall make you one of the Dark-Kin Army’s top officers!” she’d said.

Also, there were times when humans deliberately came to me in droves and visited while I was taking a nap, bowing and shouting things like “Oh, Lord on High!” and “Praise be!” But it never took long for them to stop coming. Of course, that was probably because I ignored them the whole time, pretending I was asleep and the like.

In any case, my days were as peaceful as could be. I’d lie sprawled on the foot of the mountain, my favorite spot, and gaze up at the sky. Or I’d poke lightly at the beautiful flowers that blossomed on a warm spring day. Or I’d take a plodding stroll, apologizing as I trod over the soft moss. That was all there was to my daily existence.

Up until, that is, a wee human called to me:

“Daddy!”

* * *

“No,” I growled. “Who’re you? Where’d you come here from?”

“Daddy.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not your ‘Daddy.’”

I was at an utter loss as I walked with this tiny little human child at my back. It must have been no more than a few years old.

It was that morning I found the child. I had been sleeping at an out-of-the-way shrine and awoke to the sight of a small human sitting before my eyes.



The child's hair was light golden brown, and its cheeks were red. It stared at me with its big round eyes and an oddly joyful expression.

...That aside, I scarcely knew how long it had been since a human had drawn this close.

"Eep!" I exclaimed in surprise.

But the child didn't quail at my giant frame. Instead, the wee human simply cried out, "Daddy!"

This was quite the event. A human child had just entered my quiet, peaceful life, claiming to be my son or my daughter or some such.

The human was no bigger than one of my claws, and it didn't seem as though it could really speak either. No matter what I asked, the child would simply repeat the word "Daddy." Which was apparently referring to *me*.

"There must be some mix-up."

"Daddy" was a human word referring to one half of a parental pairing. I had no recollection of siring a child through a human, and I'd preferred being all by my lonesome for a very long while. There was no way I could have fathered offspring.

No progress would be made just by staring, so I put the child on my back and decided to return it to wherever it had come from.

It was my first time going out in two hundred years. I walked along slowly.

If I recall correctly, the last time I went out, it was because the humans were fighting for ages and ages around the mountain that is my den until at last I couldn't take it anymore. So I went out and said, "Keep it down, would you?!"

Two groups of humans were squabbling while carrying banners with different designs on them, but when they saw me, they fled right back home. I don't think another fight has broken out since, which is definitely a relief. Looking back, I think those banners were probably symbols of something the humans created called "nations." Those flags looked so stylish.

As I paced forward, the human at my back gurgled in high spirits: "A hah ha! Caught!" Judging by its voice, it seemed incredibly delighted.

You're really going to sing my praises just for walking? I thought to myself.

"Daddy!" came the human's shrill but gleeful voice. "Heh, Daddy! Daddy's da bes'!"

It didn't feel half bad, hearing that.

Each of my strides likely equated to about a hundred of this child's, were it to pitter-patter on its ickle legs. That must have been fairly fast, by human standards.

Moreover, I saw this human child walk a little earlier; it had waddled along unsteadily. I couldn't blame it for walking so limply though. Evidently, newborn humans are so wee and flabby that they can't even crawl right away.

Coming all the way up to my shrine must have been quite the trek. I wondered what its parents were doing right then.

"Hmm... If it came to the mountain after getting lost, then I'm guessing it must be from a village near here."

I stared at the human, watching, observing. The child laughed and smiled unflaggingly. There wasn't even a trace of fear toward a big dragon like me.

The mountain I reside in is called the Sacred Peak of Olympias. It has been untouched and unclaimed by humans since the world was rife with confusion and disorder. Its vista remains unchanged since the era dragons and other giant creatures such as myself existed in great numbers. To me, the place is my comfortable abode, but nowhere for a human this tiny to be visiting. Magical energy—or, as the small creatures call it, "mana"—suffuses the peak, and it appears as though the mana-rich air shocks humans' systems. Human adults are especially susceptible; they don't ever come very high up the mountain, since the air seems to be too much for them.

"Dahh..."

I had to wonder, then, whether this wee little human had come here by itself. But how, without adult assistance?

Well...I'm sure the child was with adults, messing about in the woods surrounding the mountain, and then got lost and ended up here. That must be it.

“Your father and mother must be worried about you...” I said, in the tongue of the humans. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring you back.”

At that, the flabby tot tilted its head to the side—an expression of puzzlement and doubt. “...Daddy?”

“Like I said, I’m not your ‘Daddy.’”

I’d heard how humans were raised by their parents up until they reached a certain size. By the looks of it, this human was still just an infant. Its parents must be worried about their missing baby.

Upon closer inspection, I spotted small scrapes on the child’s hands and legs. Human skin is frail stuff.

Slowly, ploddingly, I walked.

The village of Pias was a small settlement visible from the peak’s summit. At my pace, I knew I’d reach it in no time. No need to spread my wings. “All right,” I said, in as soft a voice as I could muster. “We’re almost there.”

The human seated at my neck (the part with my soft mane) responded by drooping its shoulders despondently. “...Daddy...?”

I see, I thought. It must have been happy because it didn’t realize the situation it was in, but now that we’re approaching the village, it must have realized it got lost. But again, I’m not your “Daddy.”

Slowly, slowly, I walked.

When Pias came into view, I found myself saying, “Ah! Oh dear.”

Being so big, I can crush a human village underfoot if I’m not careful. If I ended up slipping up in such a manner before this child’s eyes, that would be quite the pickle.

I growled quietly and clad my body in buzzing magical energy.

“Da, Daddy?!”

“Again, I’m not your ‘Daddy.’”

My vocal cords trembled even more clearly than before.

I made myself a little smaller, shrinking to a size that better suited the town. It

wasn't that great a difference, and now the child was a size I could comfortably hold within my talons. That said, adjusting my size is child's play to me.

It appeared as though the bigger dragons had disappeared as of late, so I figured assuming this smaller size would probably make me stand out less. Also, since the number of humans, dark-kin, and the like that attempted to climb the mountain has steadily decreased, and I liked it that way, I didn't want to be too conspicuous and cause a disturbance. "At this size, I won't turn too many heads, right?"

I lumbered on. The human child clambering up my back stared at me with wondering eyes.

"We're almost to Pias now. You'll be home again. And I'll be back to my peaceful life!"

"Ah..."

I resumed lumbering toward the town, making sure not to drop the fussy, grizzling baby from atop my head. It was then I realized the child was a "she," or at least, from what I could tell.

"Well now. Looks like you're a she-human. Come to think of it, what's your name?"

"Nay, mmm... Hm hm..." The child pondered. "Olih, veea..."

"Hmm. So you're 'Olivia,' eh? A splendid name."

Olivia. That's the little she-human's name. I'm sure of it. Ah, that's right, "she-human" isn't the word. If I'm not wrong, I think the word is "girl." At any rate, I was quite pleased a word besides "Daddy" had escaped the human's lips. Excellent. Now I'll be able to find her parents.

"Now then, Olivia, I have no doubt your parents are worried."

"Eh... Daddy...?"

I hastened toward Pias. I had to get the little one to her home, and fast.

* * *

"Ahh! Good heavens, it's a dragon attack!"

Once I was in the village, humans were holding staffs with pointy bits at the ends...“spears,” I think is the word.

All of the humans in the vicinity shrieked and hollered as they ran away.

“Uhh, you really don’t have to run...”

Oh well. The moment I finished escorting this clinging child to her home, I would return to the mountain anyway. That’s what ran through my head as I walked through the town.

That is, up until I made it to Olivia’s house.

I trembled with rage.

Winds whooshed down against me from the overcast skies above, and I was right on the verge of spewing dragonfire. To humans, these winds would be freezing cold or would inflict outright pain.

It was clear—Olivia certainly was a child of this village.

When I’d asked her where her house was, she silently pointed at a spot on the village’s outskirts. I plodded on over to the run-down, shabby house, only to overhear some obnoxious and crude cackling from within the shack.

“Ga ha ha ha!”

There was more than one person laughing; it was actually a fair number of human males. I’d heard this sort of laughter many a time back when droves of humans fought each other near the mountain.

“Is this your house?”

“...Uh-huh.”

I peeked through the window. They were having themselves a great big feast. Mug after mug of ale lined the table, and they were doing things that didn’t seem like very much fun to me, like downing their contents in one go.

I knew it in my bones right away: *I’m witnessing something deeply unpleasant.*

One of their number, a drunk male carrying himself especially pompously, was mouthing off: “Whew-ee, lemme tell ya, boys, it feels *good* gettin’ that

dumb brat off my hands!”

“Ga ha ha ha! I’m happy for ya! Now you’re a free man! It’s the easy life for ya!”

“Now you can finally go buy yourself a broad!”

The other men crowed along with him.

By “that brat,” are they referring to Olivia? My goodness. This gaggle of humans is far from worried about their child wandering lost in the cold outdoors. On the contrary, it seems that they’re actively relieved!

A male I could only assume was with them asked smirkingly, “Ya sure it won’t come back to bite ya though? Ditchin’ the kid in the Olympian woods, I mean! They do say the place is ‘sacred ground’ or whatever. I heard from an ol’ biddy that nobody sets foot in them parts ‘cause there’s a big *holy dragon* squattin’ there!”

“Ya been readin’ too many folk tales lately? There ain’t no way there’re dragons livin’ in the wild!”

“Geh ha ha! Ya don’t gotta worry ‘bout that. I was *smart* about it, see,” boasted the absolutely not smart-looking braggart. “Ever since she was little, I’ve been tellin’ her she’s actually the kid of a dragon, an’ that I was just raisin’ her ‘cause I found her one day. And she bought it, boys, hook, line, an’ sinker! When I took her to the edge o’ the woods, she went in of her own accord, shoutin’ ‘Daddy, Daddy’!”

More rank guffawing ensued. My mind went blank, and I felt dizzy as I came to grips with the situation. I found myself entertaining the notion of destroying the entire village. *How...how can they be so horrid? They abandoned a child this small, this limp, with eyes this kind? I have to protect her.*

I didn’t know if I could tend to her needs. I was just a dragon who’d lived for a good long while, and nothing more. But I pitied Olivia.

“I hope ya know she ain’t the only one who’s hurtin’ here?” continued the man. “I never thought my woman’d die givin’ birth to her. And then I got saddled with takin’ care o’ the little twerp... Always mumblin’ and screamin’... Ladies spend so much time with buns in the oven, it’s no wonder they’ve got

that self-awareness as a parent. Meanwhile, I was basically just told to be a kid's ol' man outta nowhere! When you fellas have kids, be sure to tell your women this... Hee hee hee... Tell 'em, 'a good mother raises both her kids and her husband'!"

At some point, I'd started holding Olivia tight in my arms. I may have assumed a slightly smaller form, but my body was still large. I was careful not to hurt Olivia with my scales, but I couldn't *not* hug her close.

Olivia had to have been able to hear what they were saying too, but she said nothing and simply hung her head. I pictured this child, who was still at an age where she could barely speak, carrying on living after getting exposed to this outrageous and hurtful exchange... This was beyond the pale.

Are you going to return this child to a home like this? I asked myself.

"It's all 'cause she gave birth to her, an' then went an' died on me! That's the root o' my bum luck! That freeloading brat can't even do stuff around the house! All she does is cry all day! That pest's beyond useless!" That human male seemed to be in as good a mood as ever.

Quietly, I distanced myself from the dilapidated house.

"...Daddy?" Uneasy, she looked up at me from within my arms.

I smiled down at her. *I see; she doesn't see that male as her "Daddy"... Good.*

Now I knew why Olivia had come to me. She had believed the male's drivel, *believed* herself to be the daughter of a dragon. And to think, she had traveled all the way to the shrine on those tiny little legs.

"It's gonna be okay, Olivia."

"...Ooo?"

I told her, in my softest voice, that she needn't worry anymore, and I apologized for trying to take her back there. For it was then that I vowed to make her the happiest girl in the world. Starting today...

"...I'll be your 'Daddy.'"

"Daddy!"

Olivia was wearing awfully thin garb for winds this stormy and gelid. But even so, she looked up at me and smiled like a spring flower.

“...Olivia.”

“Daddy!”

The second I saw that smile, a light began burning in my heart. *Don't worry. I am your Daddy. Now let's go back. Back to our home.*

With Olivia still in my arms, I approached the house where those he-humans continued carousing and drowning themselves in booze.

“Hrah!”

My tail lightly tapped a section of one of the walls. And I do mean *lightly*.

BAM!

“Huh?” Startled by the loud clattering, I looked back...to find that the wall had been blown clean off of the house. From their perspective, they were drinking their drinks when, out of nowhere, the wall got blown to bits. The humans were petrified, still seated around the table now bared to the wintry weather.

Oops. I forgot human-made structures break that easily... It had been too long since I'd last visited a place with humans. This won't do. If I'm to be this wee human's Daddy, then I need to modulate my strength... I suppose there's nothing to be done about damaging this house. But on the other hand, maybe they kind of deserved that anyway.

“I've got to mind my strength. I'll do better next time!”

“Hee, Daddy's great!”

I placed the giggling Olivia on my back, and before the he-humans could give chase, I hurried at great speed toward the small lending library in the village. I rushed inside...or rather, I would have, were it not for the fact that my body wouldn't fit. I rapped ever so gently on the door with my claw. All I could say was “Gimme some books on parenting, please!”

The shopkeeper was an elderly human. He hadn't run away during the commotion earlier, so perhaps he was hard of hearing.

At my behest, he picked out a bevy of books on raising children and gave them to me in paper bags.

“Sir, I couldn’t help but notice how large your nails are.”

Perhaps his eyesight was poor to boot. A stroke of luck for me. And why not ask him a question while I was at it?

“Um, might I be able to outright buy these? It’d be tough for me to return them,” I asked the aged human. “Will these be enough?”

Just in case, I’d brought some shiny gold bits and bobs I’d heard humans use when exchanging things. I tendered them through the gap in the door, the gold jangling between my talons. I may not look it, but I absolutely love sparkly, glittery, pretty things. I had steadily amassed a collection of gold, silver, jewels, and gems over years and years and they covered the floor of my roost.

The shopkeeper seemed floored. “That’s *gold!*” he cried. “For that much, you could take *all* my books!”

“Really? In that case, throw in some cookbooks too.”

“There’s this one and this one. Oh, and this one’s popular too!”

“Okay, I’ll take some picture books as well.”

Unfortunately, a considerable percentage of those picture books were full of humans in the nude, which was of little interest to me, so I politely declined to take them. I bought only the books whose titles mentioned raising kids or things related to that.

“Hmm. Wonder why that old man seemed so surprised,” I pondered aloud, as I plodded along the way back. ...*Maybe I gave him too few nuggets of gold?*

Chapter 2: Mr. Dragon Becomes a Parent

“Daddy! Teh heh, heh hee hee!”

This was my second day with my human daughter. With Olivia. I was minding this giggly, flabby little thing now, and although the nighttime was full of startlingly loud cries from beasts and an endless, distant howling, they all melted away whenever I saw the smile on her face. She always ran falteringly over to me, completely devoid of any fear of the dragon.

Olivia’s presence made me feel warm and fuzzy, but I was also indignant. I was now hell-bent: my impossibly cute little girl *would* lead a happy, fulfilling life.

What’s with those he-humans? I can scarcely believe they could abandon a girl this cute.

I didn’t know the first thing about childcare. That being said, I was extremely confident in my reading skills.

* * *

“Hmm... I see, I see...”

I leafed through the pages with a claw. Books for humans are quite tiny, but dragon eyes can discern most anything, so I could read the text regardless.

Here in the shrine where I had made my roost, it wasn’t just gold and silver and treasure that was piled up in tall heaps. So too were the books on parenting I’d purchased at the rental library in Pias. At the moment, I was reading the eighty-seventh such book, entitled *Your First Baby*. I wanted to absorb the contents of these books while Olivia was still sleeping, and all that play had tired her out.

I am a dragon. I’ve been alive for a long time, but I know little about humans, and I’d become Olivia’s “Daddy” totally out of the blue. As such, there was only one thing I could do, and that was research. I wanted to learn as much as possible.

Of course, I could also picture how things might play out in my head. And I could strive to understand Olivia.

I am a dragon, and Olivia is a human. We belong to separate worlds. And yet now I was Olivia's father. I swore to myself that I would serve in that role—at least, that is, until she got older and bigger.

I would make this small human's childhood a happy one, and I would prepare her to lead a happy life in the human world someday, once she reached adulthood. In doing so, I would make the days we spent together into memories we could look back on fondly.

"All right, let's read another while Olivia's still asleep. Perhaps we'll go with this one next. Let's see here... *Homemade Sweets Your Kids' Friends Will Love...*"

* * *

I read so many books, and I learned so many things. I learned that plant roots were to be boiled until they were soft before she could eat them. I learned that humans keep clean by bathing. I learned about washing laundry and about illnesses. There was still so much left to learn, but in my studies, I prioritized all of the things that would keep her alive and healthy.

"Teh heh heh! Look, Daddy! Look!"

With a big grin on her face, she picked up one of the glittering jewels on the shrine's floor and showed it to me.

Yes, yes, I see it. I'm looking. But I mean, it's my jewel. I know it exists.

Her expression looked more pleased than ever before. She seemed full of energy.

"Er, well, we can't exactly live in this grotto forever, can we?"

A long time ago, small creatures that were longer-lived than humans—I forget whether they were elves or dwarves or dark-kin, but regardless, they hewed the rock formerly at the cavern's entrance and made the place into a gorgeous little shrine kind of thing. But at the end of the day, a grotto's a grotto. It was spacious enough and suited me fine as a den to sleep in, but I got the feeling it wasn't a good place for a human child to live. Because of that, I decided to

search for a house for us.

Apparently, human domiciles weren't just for fending off the elements. It seemed they were also nice and cozy and comfortable, and warm or cool when they needed to be. I was reminded of the run-down shack where the man that abandoned Olivia lived. Those walls were full of holes and they really didn't seem capable of protecting its residents from the whistling winds... I wanted to find sturdier, larger, and safer housing for her.

My current book was a great deal smaller than one of my claws, and the text within a great deal smaller than the book, but I read it all the same. "What humans cherish most is the presence of a person who gives them love and affection despite all the work it entails. And a nice snack is a symbol of that love... Hrmm, I see, I see!"

"Hrmm!"

It seemed Olivia had woken up at some point. She giggled.

...She mimicked me! How cute. Apparently, humans acquire language from those around them.

I let Olivia play around my neck and with my mane as I flipped the pages. *It'd probably be easier to read human books if I could assume human form.* I scratched my chin, shifting my weight gingerly so as not to rock my back. Olivia was still having fun with my mane, which she had come to adore.

She mumbled incomprehensibly. "Daddy..."

I could feel a warm spot on my back. Olivia snored quietly amidst my soft mane. She'd dozed off again. Human children fall asleep so frequently. They even have a phrase for it: "a well-slept child is a well-kept child."

I'm sure you'll grow up in no time, Olivia.

Her sleep-breathing was so tranquil and at ease. I could hear her wee heart beating.

My eyes fell back down to my tome, and a thought crossed my head: *Boy, I sure am glad I let sweet Mr. Morning shine on my mane every day. Otherwise, it'd never be this fluffy.*

Chapter 3: Mr. Dragon Reads Her Books

“She should really be exposed to language in more ways, besides just chatting with me.”

“If you read a book to your child, you can have them acquire language in a way that’s fun for both parent and child.” So it said in one of the books, and I decided to try it right away. Among the books I got from the lending library man were a handful of children’s stories. I’d told him I didn’t want picture books, but it seemed a few slipped into my haul by accident. I wasted no time opening a book alongside Olivia, whom I placed sitting between my forelimbs.

“A lon’, lon’ time ago...?” She repeated after me.

“Yes, Olivia. You’re very good at this.”

Each time I read a line, she would look up at my face and grin broadly.

“Dis is fun, Daddy!” She kicked her feet.

You’re a cute one, Olivia.

* * *

A few days later...

“Da dragons of old were...very...noble beings. Dat was especially true of da dragons living in da Sacred Peak. Da age dey were worshipped as gods was a long one.” She read it fairly smoothly, and this wasn’t even a picture book, but rather a tome about myths and legends.

I’d bought it thinking she’d read it once she got a little older, but there we were. *Wait, could my daughter be gifted?*

I got lost in Olivia’s voice as she read on. “Olivia, you’re amazing. You’re *reading a book* right now! You’re a prodigy!”

She beamed. “Teh heh heh! I’ll read more for you!”

She looked so proud of herself! It was so cute, I was this close to melting.

* * *

A few days after that...

“The wise ones whose great intellects left a shining mark in history were called the Six Sages of Riariis...”

Olivia listened intently to my voice, her tiny hands squeezing tufts of my mane. “Daddy, did the Six Sages of Riariis really exist?”

One wouldn’t expect such a clear and projected voice out of a body and a mouth that tiny. It was adorable.

I dragged up dusty old memories from my mind. “Good question, Olivia. They do exist. In fact, your Daddy’s met this one here once. The one named Vandilsen.”

Her sky-blue eyes started sparkling. “Daddy, you’re amazing!” she exclaimed, looking up at me.

I was melting again.

It kind of seemed as though every time I read aloud to her, she just got cleverer and cleverer. *Do humans typically grow up this quickly?*

I must say, Vandilsen—my oh my have you made something of yourself. When you came to this mountain, you were a fledgling of a mage.

* * *

Several days later...

“Ah...”

The title of a parenting book I was flipping through caught me off guard: *The Merits of Dragon-Style Education*.

I’d added it to the pile of books I bought off the village lending library, as I figured it’d be useful. I *am* a dragon, after all.

The following encapsulates the gist of what the book told me: “The dragons have lived for eons, since time immemorial, and a dragon’s voice carries a power most wondrous. When they give voice to pearls of wisdom, that wisdom becomes their children’s own. We humans don’t have the power of a dragon,

but..." (The following text explained the importance of conversing with one's children.)

Well, I'll be! So a dragon's voice has the power to transfer wisdom to that dragon's children? That was the first I'd heard of this.

"C-Could Olivia be getting so smart...because I'm reading aloud to her?"

What with this, that, and the other thing, I'd never had a mating partner or child, so I couldn't be sure what was written in these pages was true.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" asked Olivia, smiling up at me from within my embrace.

I could see it in her eyes. The wisdom. And also...her unshakeable faith in me. She was just too cute.

"Oh, nothing. You know what, Olivia? Why don't I make you that milk soup you like for lunch?"

"Yay! You're the best, Daddy!"

"I'll add in some honey when you're older. It'll make it tastier."

"But I want some in there now! I want honey!"

"You can't yet. Honey can be poisonous to small human children. I read it in a book called *The All About Baby Food Encyclopedia, Unabridged Edition*."

"I...I see..."

Her shoulders drooped, but she didn't insist further. Olivia was no longer a newborn baby, and a little bit of honey would probably be okay, but I wanted to be as sure as sure could be. Human children are even weaker than I'd imagined. I felt sorry for her, but for the time being, I didn't want to take the risk. That being said, it wouldn't take years and years for her to be able to eat honey without cause for alarm. Humans develop much faster than we dragons do, and they reach adulthood in only about twenty years. Twenty years! I could see twenty years passing by after nodding off for a spell.

Olivia had told me she was around four years old then. That meant there were about fifteen years left of her childhood.

“Could it be, then, that...”

I wondered whether treating her too much like a child was a good idea. *Maybe I ought to teach her a smidge of magic and other stuff I know*, I thought. Recently, the human world has come to value strong and independent women, or so I was told by a self-help book I purchased. I didn’t know what “strong and independent” referred to exactly, but I knew that when the birds living in the forest become adults, they start scrounging up food for themselves by their own power, and they fight enemies that enter their territory (albeit at times with help from their comrades). I reckoned that’s more or less what “strong and independent” means. And I wanted Olivia to grow into an adult capable of living long and strong, both by herself and alongside others. Moreover, I wanted her to be happy.

These thoughts ran through my head as I heated Olivia up some milk soup. I managed to cook by spitting flame onto the pot I’d obtained. As for the milk and mushrooms, I’d gotten the mountain animals to share some with me.

Olivia looked on with stars in her eyes as I moved the tiny ladle with my big claws.

“Tee hee! I love love love your milk soup, Daddy!”

She all but skipped with joy and I gently stroked her head. That happy, warm feeling was seeping into the depths of my bosom again.

It occurred to me once more that I truly needed to search for a house for us, and quick. The shrine that I’d been living in all this time could hardly be called an ideal environment for a young child like Olivia. I wanted Olivia to grow up in a place with a clean kitchen, shelves full of books, and a room with a warm bed for her. I resolved myself anew as I watched Olivia drink her milk soup. She clearly found it to be a delicious treat.

Soon, the cold of winter would recede, for spring was at hand.

Chapter 4: Mr. Dragon Acquires a Home

“Daddy! The sun’s up!”

Ickle Olivia was up early. She typically woke up even earlier than me.

Her minuscule hands patted my face. “Wake up, Daddy, wake up!” she repeated, like some kind of song.

I was being a bit of a sleepyhead, so when she found I was still nodding off, she tugged and tugged on my thick goatee and continued singing, “Wake up Daddy!”

“Hrmmm... Morning, Olivia.”

“Morning, Daddy!” She beamed.

Lately, her vocabulary had grown a great deal, even outside book-reading time. “Daddy, let’s go see the flowers today!” Her arms stretched wide and she smiled as brightly as the sun in the sky.

“Sounds good. Let’s go see them. The pink flowers Daddy likes are in full bloom at the moment.” I aimed to show her the scenery I’d enjoyed alone until now. This was a desire that came naturally to me. Olivia would be an adult one day, but in the meantime, I wanted her to experience all the wonderful things that I knew about, plus the wonderful things I didn’t. Surely, after all, they would serve as assets to her.

I’ve lived for many millennia, and yet this was the first time I’d felt this way. I was so looking forward to seeing her grow and mature. Yet at the same time, I had a new worry. Olivia is a human child, and given her short life span (compared to a dragon like me), her way of life would also be different. Consequently, I knew that there were differences between a comfortable environment for a dragon and an environment conducive to raising Olivia, and I needed to etch that fact into my mind.

For example, our dietary needs are different. Apart from the soft ferns and ripe fruits and berries I enjoy on occasion, I lived my life feeding off the mana in

the air. Olivia, meanwhile, would grow big only by enjoying milk soup and many other foodstuffs besides. In addition, I can sleep for however long I wish—days, years, centuries. Olivia falls asleep once every night. Finally, I can live without difficulty when left to my own devices. Olivia can't live without outside help. Nor, for that matter, can any human. They live through mutual understanding and by sharing with each other. Sometimes they become friends, and at times they get into fights and squabbles. They gain allies and mating partners. That is how humans live their lives. They are individuals, but they are also a collective.

I learned that through the books I read, and watching Olivia removed any doubts I might have had. As such, I endeavored to interact with Olivia while in human form whenever I could.

Olivia refers to me as “Daddy” whether I’m in dragon or human form, but of course, she was curious about my appearance. My hair, the same blend of silver and purple as my mane, is often done up in one bun. And while my mana-dense eyes remain red in color, I look every bit like a “Daddy”... Or at least, I think I do.

If by some chance anybody said, “That girl was raised by a dragon, so that’s why she’s such a barbarian!” I think I’d bawl my eyes out. My deluge of tears may just create a lake. That, or an ocean. I vowed to give Olivia the life she, as a human, needs.

And that being the case, continuing to live in that shrine-slash-grotto would no longer do.

“Flowers! Flowers!”

I was in human form, her hand in mine as we walked along the side of the mountain. The blossoms were in their full glory.

Olivia was engaged in a peculiar method of walking called “skipping,” and she jumped and hopped all around me.

I had a marvelous suggestion for her. “Hey, sweetie.”

“What is it, Daddy?” she replied, eyes glinting with her absolute trust in me.

As her “Daddy,” I wanted to give her human education and culture, and, if possible, the strength to outpower bad guys, as well as kindness, honesty, and a

wonderful life... Suffice it to say I wanted to give her a whole world of such gifts.

“How about we go look for our new home?”

“A new home?”

To that end, the first thing on the menu was to find a human dwelling. We had to get a hold of a house of our own.

* * *

Olivia tilted her head in puzzlement at the word “home.”

I led Olivia by the hand as we walked through the woods of the Sacred Peak of Olympias.

Evidently, when humans make small huts or cabins, they use wood, for she said, “Daddy, is this our ‘home’?”

“N-No, Olivia, what’re you saying?! That’s a hollowed-out tree, I think!”

She was pointing at the hollow of a large tree that was so battered that I shouted in surprise. I recalled the dilapidated cabin in Pias, and my heart ached for her. Olivia’s image of a home was probably a crude and shabby hovel not much different from a tree cavity.

Several months had passed (as measured by the human calendar) since she and I started living together, and not once had she called that wretched Pias hut her “home.” In all honesty, I think that’s actually a good thing. That den, filled as it was with sleazy laughter and the odor of booze gone bad, was no place for my little one.

“You’re allowed to have a bigger home than *that*,” I informed her.

Her head tilted to the side. “A bigger home?”

“Yes! A house so big, it won’t break even if I inadvertently revert to dragon mode! Like, I dunno, *this*,” I said, shifting to dragon mode to amuse her.

While I swore I’d never carelessly revert to my dragon form as I raised Olivia into a splendid human lady, there are times when, in my half-asleep state upon waking up, I do end up slipping up and assuming dragon mode. *It’d be terrible if our house breaks*, I thought. *I am a sleepyhead, after all.*

“A bigger...home...”

At those words, Olivia’s eyes started sparkling and her wee nose twitched.

Ahh, that expression means she’s happy. I’d figured that out recently.

“You mean like a *castle*?!”

“A castle, huh...”

In the children’s storybooks I’d bought her, there were beautiful illustrations of large castles, complete with stained glass, chandeliers, and princesses in towers! *Guess Olivia has taken a shine to those illustrations. Honestly, yeah, a castle’s a pretty good idea. With a house that big, we should be fine, even if I revert to dragon form.*

“Do you wanna live in a castle, Olivia?”

“I do!”

“Gotcha. In which case, you’ll be a princess, won’t you?”

“Yep! And you’ll be a prince, Daddy!!!”

I nearly choked. “Agh!”

“Daddy?”

“Oh, no, nothing, Olivia.”

Her Daddy, the prince. Who could blame me for taking joy from those words? Of course, as her father, I wouldn’t be a “prince” as such. But the ready trust she exhibited by calling me that left me pleasantly embarrassed.

“Hrmm...” I mulled it over. “A castle, eh...” One did come to mind, but I was unsure whether I’d be able to borrow the place or not. “Hey, Olivia. As a special treat for today, would you like to fly with me?”

“Huh? You can fly?”

“I sure can,” I said, smiling her way. Putting her on my soft mane, I spread my wings wide. *Might as well try asking.*

* * *

“Wowwww! We’re so high!”

“You mustn’t let go of Daddy no matter what, Olivia!”

“Okay, Daddy!”

Though she was whooping it up, she showed no sign of disobeying that command. What a relief. Just thinking about what would happen if she tumbled off my back in mid-flight sent chills down my spine. Naturally, I intended to save Olivia from harm no matter what, but avoiding danger altogether is always best.

“Whoa, a castle!”

I touched down, having arrived at our destination.

“Whew... We’re finally here. It’s been so long since I last flew. I’m exhausted.” I heaved a sigh...though apparently it was a little too big of a sigh. It morphed into mana-drenched dragonbreath and hit the castle gates, which slammed open with a BANG!

Uh-oh. That’s not good. I need to be more graceful about it!

“Ah, uh, whoops! That was rude of me.”

“Daddy, you’re amazing! You can open doors without using your hands!”

“Never do what I just did, Olivia.”

As we spoke, panicked figures rushed out from past the gates.

“What was that bang?”

It was a woman in gallant armor. Her pink hair was done up neatly and she wore a stiff expression. By my estimation, she was very attractive by human standards.

I didn’t imagine that castle would still be in much use, but she came out as quick as anything. I wondered whether she’d been protecting this place the whole time. *Come to think of it, she seemed like a straight arrow when I met her some time back, though we didn’t chat for long.*

“Wh-Who goes there? Ahhh! A dragon?!”

“Good afternoon, Miss Clowria. Long time no see.”

The comely lady knight nearly jumped out of her skin at the sight of me. How many centuries had it been? *I just hope she remembers me...*

“Are...Are you the elder dragon of Olympias? Knave! Did you come here *knowing* this is the castle of Her Darkness, Queen Maredia? I take it you’re finally inclined to yield to our keep... I say, what is that creature on your back?”

“She’s my daughter! I’m happy you remember me.”

“Your daughter...? Is she...Is she *human*?” she said as she swung her blade this way and that. Clearly, she was flustered.

I couldn’t allow the slightest ghost of a chance that the sword could hit Olivia. “Please, stop.” I held it in place with a claw.

“Ahhh! My Hexblade!” she cried, at the sight of her bent sword.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry. I had no idea it’d bend that easily...”

It hadn’t offered any real resistance, and I don’t think Miss Clowria meant anything by it, so...I knew I’d done a bad.

“Ugh... Damn you, mighty dragon!”

So cried the dark-kin knight known as Miss Clowria. Ages ago, she had come alongside her boss, the Dark Queen, to see me after the castle was constructed. I thought she was quite a courteous individual, but I didn’t quite understand the odd phrase she threw my way (“yield to our keep”). Thinking back on it, perhaps she was asking me to be friends?

That was centuries, maybe even millennia ago.

As of late, I hadn’t heard much talk of the Dark Queen’s Castle...or rather, I’d heard tell that Miss Maredia had lost a quarrel with “the Hero,” and that the castle wasn’t being made much use of. It was true that it seemed awfully quiet for a castle. The castles in Olivia’s picture books always had lots of people living in them.

“Excuse me, Miss Clowria, but may I be allowed to speak with the Dark Queen a little?” I asked as politely as I knew how.

“What... *You* wish to speak with her...?”

“Yes. I have a favor to ask.”

“What favor? Speak it.”

“It’s nothing, I’d just like to ask if I could have this castle, is all.”

“...I’m *sorry?*”

“I’m asking if I could take this castle off you.”

“Excuse me?!”

In days past, many a dark-kin frequented the castle, but it appeared that as of late, only Miss Maredia and Miss Clowria still lived there. And if that was the case, well, the place was plainly too big for them. Hence my request.

“Might we live here until my daughter grows up? Also, the air quality around here is poor, so I’d like to bring it back to my mountain.”

“WHAAAAT?!” shouted Miss Clowria. And here I’d thought she was cool as a cucumber.

“Wow, Daddy! So we’re gonna live in this castle!” squeed a rosy-cheeked Olivia, who was at my back, as always.

Miss Clowria’s face, meanwhile, had paled in no time flat. *Oh, I remember reading about that face in All Better: On Nursing Children. I think that’s the out-of-sorts face. I guess maybe even a dark-kin like Miss Clowria can get flustered, huh...*

While I was pondering, Miss Clowria passed out.

“Good heavens, Miss Clowria? Sh-She needs help! Dark Queen! Miss Dark Queeeeen!”

I was about to try rescuing her while still in my dragon form, but I remembered to assume human form. Just the thought of what might happen to her if a claw slipped gave me chills. I remembered what had befallen the wall of the dingy shack Olivia used to live in. Even what I’d register as a playful flick to the forehead would probably...*eesh*.

“Are you okay? Don’t worry, I’m taking you into the castle now!” I scooped her up in my human arms. First things first, I had to transfer her indoors. “Olivia, follow Daddy inside!” I ran as fast as I could while constantly checking to see whether Olivia was still following me.

“Ah! Wait up, Daddy!” Even at a time like this, she hurried along with a smile

on her face. She was so adorable. She must have been overjoyed by the real, honest-to-goodness castle, because, just like a princess, she ran with a mincing stride while pinching up her frayed-bottom skirt.

Oh, honey. You really do look like a princess! Wait...this isn't the time for that! I need to get Miss Clowria some medical attention!

Waiting inside the castle was a sad, empty hall. I'm sure that in bygone times, the hall was alive with the clamor of great big crowds of dark-kin.

I shouted as loudly as I could: "Um, excuse me! Is anybody there? Miss Clowria has fainted!"

It was then I realized that I can't shout very loud while in human form. In dragon form, I can just roar a bit and the rocks and boulders blocking my walking trail break into pieces. How inconvenient it is to be human.

"Is anyone there?"

"Is anyone there?" repeated Olivia mirthfully from behind.

She's the cutest. A smile curled my lips despite myself.

Just then, the space at the center of the hall warped and contorted.

Ah, a wee bit of magic, I thought. It was darkness magic, the forte of dark-kin. A pitch-black substance that seemed like a mixture of shadow and sludge flowed out from the distorted space, after which it began assuming a humanoid shape.

"Who dareth summon me?" spoke the solid black silhouette. "Fool who would disturb my slumber, know that you shall not escape this castle with thy life."

The shadow's rumbling voice was bursting with regality...is what I'd normally say, but this seemed more like it was just pouting over being woken up.

The shadowy sludge of a substance completed its coalescence.

"I am the Dark Queen Maredia. You fools must—"

She was a female of petite size. Or rather, she was a "girl." At least, that was what I thought until I looked closer. Her body was draped in powerful mana,

and poking out from between the strands of her floor-length black hair were...

“Ah, look, Daddy! She’s a sheep!”

It was just as Olivia said. She had two horns not unlike those of a large sheep. She was a dark-kin. Large gems adorned her curvy, curly horns in places, though there was something off about them. I got the sense they’d been attached in a hurry. They were a tad off-alignment.

“Wait, could you be...?”

I remembered those golden eyes. They shone like twin moons from behind her black tresses. She was the one who came alongside Miss Clowria to greet me upon the construction of the castle.

“Miss Dark Queen! I’m so happy to see you!”

She narrowed her golden eyes and stared long and hard at me, as I held Miss Clowria still in my arms.

A pause.

“EEEEEEK!” she shouted, her voice suddenly a lot more hysterical.

“I-I-I-I thought I sensed powerful mana! And then there’s that oddly gentle but sexy voice! You’re the Elder Dragon of Olympias! But then, how are you in human form...?”

“Yes, that’s me. I’m the dragon that lives on Mt. Olympias.”

Phew. The Dark Queen remembered me too! I waved a hand in her direction, which is a human greeting.

“Wha-What’s the big idea? I-I’m n-nice and comfortable living my shut-in life in this castle, so why, of all things, is the strongest ancient race here to bother me...?”

What’s a “shut-in”?

As I pondered this new word, Olivia clutched the hem of my robes and introduced herself. “My name’s Olivia. Nice to meet you!”

She even capped it off with a bow of the head. I could barely stand just how courteous and well-mannered she was proving to be! We did practice greetings

(while reading the picture books) for when she eventually met another human, so I suppose that had borne fruit. Her bow was perfect!

“Oh! I’m the Dark Queen Maredia.” She, too, proceeded to quickly bow her head. What an upstanding lady.

“...Wait, CLOWRIAAAA?!” As soon as she recognized it was Miss Clowria in my arms, she rushed over in a panic. “Wh-Wh-Why’re you carrying Clowria all princess-like?! Elder D-Dragon, don’t tell me y-you felled my dear friend—I MEAN SERVANT! You snake! Without Clowria, I can’t even take a bath!!!”

“M-Miss Dark Queen?”

“Uhh... Ahem! YOU DIDN’T HEAR THAT!”

In a split-second, she’d gone from having tears in her eyes to shooting me an affected death glare. “To have felled my right hand, the proud knight of dark-kind... I care not whether you’re the famed Elder Dragon—you shall pay for this! Now taste my dread and grisly wrath!” All this she said while attempting a commanding tone of voice, but she was chewing on her words.

I was baffled. She seemed more timid and nervous than when I last saw her. Her complexion had taken a hit since then as well, as had the self-confidence that had once rolled off her. Now she was a bit slouched over, and her hair was bushy like my mane when I neglected to groom it for a good bit. Miss Clowria, meanwhile, hadn’t changed in appearance... To think the two tiny dark-kin were living all alone in a castle this big. I figured it might be giving them a whole host of worries, and that maybe, I really ought to take it off their hands.

Then, something caught my eye. I squinted at the Dark Queen, and found two thin round panes hanging at her face... *Ah, wait, could those be “eyeglasses”?* I read about them in *Keeping Kids’ Eyes Healthy and Sharp*. They’re a tool used by humans with poor eyesight. Was she having trouble seeing as well?

It was then Miss Clowria opened her eyes and groaned. “Where...? This is...”

Nary a second later, the Dark Queen ran over and snatched her from my arms in a whoosh of motion. She may have been small, but that was quite the show of force.



“Clowria! Are, are you unharmed? Are you all right?” Tears. Evidently, she was worried from the bottom of her heart. She must truly love Miss Clowria.

“Your Darkness...I’m terribly sorry... I was vanquished! The shame of it...”

“I-If you’re okay, that’s all I need!” said the Dark Queen as she held her. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you too...”

“Erm, excuse me, Miss Dark Queen. I hate to interrupt you, but I came here to ask whether we could live in this castle.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The castle, please.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“I raised the subject earlier, and that was when Miss Clowria collapsed.”

“Ha, haugh...” she said. It was her verbal tic. “Of course that’s what would happen... H-H-How thoughtless can you be... Th-This is our Dark Queen’s Castle you’re talking about... And to put it in starker terms, you’d *steal* it from us?”

“No, no, I’m not stealing it. I’d just like to borrow it. I very much need a house for a human to live in, you see.”

“Hrm?” The Dark Queen seemed perplexed. “A human dwelling? But why in heaven’s...?”

“Daddy...” said Olivia, tugging nervously at my robe’s hem. “Are those two ladies all right?”

Aww, she’s worried about them, as any kind girl would be. What a tender soul.

“Uhh... I forgot to ask, but...that girl is *human*, correct?”

“Yep. She’s human.” I nodded. “She’s actually my daughter.”

“Haugh whaaaa?”

The Dark Queen looked at me and Olivia in turn with a look of astonishment.

Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve ever introduced Olivia to somebody as my daughter. I felt a tad abashed, and my bosom crawled a little

with happy embarrassment.

I gazed at the Dark Queen, who was looking our way with a puzzled expression, and Miss Clowria, who was holding her now-bent sword at the ready. *Ahh, right. I'd forgotten to explain why we needed a house!* I could've kicked myself. When asking somebody for something, it's only proper to explain why it's a reasonable request. And as her father, I have to show Olivia how a grown adult ought to behave.

"I saw a wee child when I awoke one day in my shrine; it was Olivia. She's from a village named Pias..."

And so I decided to regale the two as to how I ended up as Olivia's "Daddy."

* * *

"Ha, haughh!" one wailed. "Waaaah!"

"Hic," the other sobbed. "H-How could such a thing...?"

So wept the diminutive Dark Queen and the tall and slender Miss Clowria, their hands joined together as they cried. I wondered whether I'd done something wrong.

"What's wrong?" asked Olivia, clearly worried. "Do you have boo-boos?"

The two just cried all the louder.

"Haugh! She's such a good girl!" shouted the Dark Queen.

"She really is, Your Darkness... Olivia, you've had such a harsh upbringing... Just how honest and pure can a girl be?!"

The Dark Queen sobbed. "Hic, oh Elder Dragon... That your heart would be so pure as to resolve to be her father... We, we had no idea!!!"

Boy, those waterworks were something else. I was pleased Olivia's tale had moved them, but... *I really can't ruin the mood by demanding they lend me the castle right this instant...*

No sooner than that thought ran through my mind...

"Clowria!"

"Yes, Your Darkness! Your word is my command!"

“I’ve made up my mind. We shall lend the castle to the Dragon of Old!”

“Really?!” I blurted. “Are you sure, Miss Dark Queen?” It appeared as though she took so much pity on Olivia that she would lend us the castle.

If her expression and her quivering voice were any indication, Clowria was just as shocked. “I-I’m surprised! Are you sure, Your Darkness? You’ve been shut inside the Western Tower for so many years since you started lagging behind that cur Hero... Haven’t you been staying inside the castle to recharge your energy in order to exact revenge on the Hero’s party...?”

“W-Well, if it’ll help this girl grow healthy and strong, then that’s a small price to pay! And besides, as long as I have my comfortable quarters at the top of the Western Tower, I don’t give a toss about the rest of the castle! So why don’t I show the girl and the kindhearted Elder Dragon my sheer mercy and compassion? Am I wrong, oh right hand of mine?”

“It’s just as Your Darkness says, my beauteous Queen Maredia!”

“Besides,” murmured the Dark Queen with a devilish grin, “if the guy whose praises were once sung in epic poetry as *the* ‘dread dragon of old’ starts living here, then...that’ll make for a, like, super hyper-competent security service... Ha ha...it’s almost scary how limitless my genius is...”

A “security service”? What’s that?

That aside, it seemed we’d somehow come into a place to live. I put a hand on Olivia’s head. “Olivia.”

“What is it, Daddy?”

“Starting today, this castle is our house!”

“Really truly?!” Olivia skipped with joy. “Yay! We did it! This is amazing! I’m like a princess now! Living in a castle, you and me... So are the two ladies the queens? Or are they princesses too?”

“Who, me?” asked Miss Clowria. “I can’t speak for Her Darkness, but I’m definitely not the princess type... Granted, I was once nicknamed the ‘Dark Queen’s Princess Knight,’ but that was a thousand years ago!”

“M-Me, a princess? Oh no, I-I’m blushing...”

The two squirmed with embarrassment at Olivia's incredibly cute query, and I got all bashful too. *Olivia, you're too adorable for words.*

And that was how we came to make the castle our home. Now I'd be able to give Olivia a more ideal life for a human. I was in high spirits.

* * *

According to the Dark Queen, as long as she and Miss Clowria were able to use the Western Tower, we were free to use the rest of the castle as we pleased. In fact, it appeared that for the most part, the Dark Queen had no intention of even leaving her room.

Is she just being considerate? She was the one who'd commanded a number of dark-kin. Perhaps she was good at being mindful and caring. If at all possible, I wanted her to make friends with Olivia too. Dark-kin are closer to humans than dragons are, after all.

Now then, it was time for the move. *Daddy's gonna give it his all!*

We traveled the skies on the way home too, and the mood was quite festive.

"You're amazing, Daddy!" came her lilting voice from astride me. "You're flying while holding a castle!"

I held one end of the ropes holding the castle aloft in my mouth. The ropes were made using the roots of the World Tree, which has been growing on the mountain for as long as I can remember. Whenever I draw close to it, energy and vitality well up inside me. As such, I knew the ropes would give me enough power to reach the mountain without stopping, despite how heavy the castle was. As one might expect, it was my first time flying with a castle hanging from my jaws, but it came out all right in the end, surprisingly enough.

"Hauugh! Wh-What in blazes is this?"

"Y-Your castle, Queen Maredia... It's *f-flying*..."

"C-Clowriaaa! Wake up! Don't faint on me!"

Their voices carried up from the Western Tower, which was right under my chin. I was delighted that the two of them were so thrilled.

* * *

“Look, Daddy! Over there!”

“Wow, Olivia, that sure is a big staircase!” I replied.

Starting that day, she and I were hard at work cleaning our new home. We’d transplanted the castle right to the base of the mountain where we lived—the Sacred Peak of Olympias. Flying with the castle in my mouth was a bit exhausting, but it went well. Incidentally, the two who moved here alongside the castle—the Dark Queen Maredia and the Dark-Kin Knight Miss Clowria—were holed up in the Western Tower and had yet to come out.

“Haugh! I’m staying inside,” the Dark Queen had told me. “Do not open this room under any circumstances, do you hear me?”

It was then that I was sure this was the Dark Queen paying me and Olivia some mind. I suppose that’s the Dark Queen for you! The one who led great numbers of dark-kin could only be an amiable person.

Chapter 5: Mr. Dragon Opens the Library Door

“Erm, well, my childcare books do say that having one’s child help out in the home can spur their growth, but...even bearing that in mind, Olivia’s working her heart out.”

I felt fuzzy inside, watching Olivia work so tirelessly. *She’s a treasure.*

She and I were plugging away at cleaning and doing the laundry, all to make our new home a comfortable place to live.

As I wasn’t used to human housework, I opened up a tome from among the ones I’d bought—*And Now It’s Perfect: A Textbook on Housework*—and held it in one hand as I cleaned the castle. Just because I’d assumed human form didn’t mean I was a deft hand at human skills, so I learned to clean by imitating the book’s contents.

On the other hand, Olivia was making a phenomenal showing despite her tiny frame. She handled various tools such as a “broom” and “rag” (among others) dexterously, making short work of the scrubbing, dusting, and sweeping the castle needed. I was thoroughly impressed. *My daughter’s a million times better at cleaning than a millennia-old dragon! Even though it’s only been a handful of years since she was born! Wait, wait, don’t tell me... Could it be? Is my Olivia a prodigy?*

“Daddy’s so happy. You’re such a huge help, Olivia.” Taking a break, I smiled her way. I always aim to outright tell her whenever I’m happy.

She gave me a truly sunny smile of her own.

“Tee hee! Cleaning with you is so much fun!”

Even though her smile made me melt with happiness, her next words hit me like a bolt of lightning.

“Where I used to live, I cleaned all day all by myself, using only my hands!”

“Your hands?”

“The broom and the rag, they all broke. And I couldn’t get them to buy me new ones. They said they broke because I’m a ‘dumbo.’ So I cleaned using my hands from then on.”

“Oh... Oliviaaaaa!”

Heavens me! I hugged her close. Just thinking about what kind of ordeals Olivia suffered while she was living with those he-humans made me nigh on weep for her. *Don’t worry, Olivia! I’ll make you happy at any cost!*

We spent a good long week cleaning the castle. Or rather, just the part of it we were living in. And just as she promised, the Dark Queen never left the Western Tower.

I chose rooms for myself and Olivia from among the ones we’d cleaned. Olivia’s room was a small one in the Eastern Tower. Well, I say small, but the room was bigger than the dilapidated Pias hovel she’d once inhabited. Olivia’s room is the first to be greeted by the morning sun, and the refreshing winds that blow around the mountain come in whenever she opens the window. I thought it would be the best room for a happy and healthy Olivia, and when I told her that, she seemed to take a shine to it.

One of the walls in her room was taken up by a large bookshelf. It was empty for now, but we planned to stuff it with great big loads of Olivia’s favorite books. She loves books, after all.

I was still regularly reading aloud to her, so she was growing cleverer and cleverer before my eyes. It seems to be true that draconic voices boost knowledge, because she was already able to read and take in high-level books. And yet her interest in kiddy picture books hadn’t abated either. Just looking at her read always put a spring in my step.

I hope this place will be the kind of safe haven she can always return to if she ever becomes wounded or gets in a bind, once she’s flown the dragon coop and started living a human’s life.

I really, truly hope so.

* * *

There Olivia and I were, standing at the base of the Western Tower’s

staircase. Our cleaning was going well, and this area was all we had left to tidy up.

“But Miss Dark Queen told us not to approach her room in the Western Tower...” I mulled it over a little. We had to respect the wishes of our castle’s owner. “Olivia, Miss Dark Queen is using the room at the top, so steer clear of it.”

“Okay, Daddy!”

That’s it, Olivia. Excellent reply. I decided to hold off on cleaning the Western Tower for the time being. And just like that, we were finished...or so I thought, until something caught my eye: “Where’s this door lead?”

It was a small door that sat opposite the staircase. If I hunched over a little, I’d be able to enter. The door seemed undersized because that sort of lavish ornamentation that covered it usually went on bigger doors. The gems and jewels decorating it were so big they made the door look smaller by comparison. A great number of jewels boasting an especially pretty green hue studded the door. I had some of them among the colored gems on the floor of my shrine as well. I believe humans call them “emeralds.”

“It’s good and shut, though.” *Well that’s a bit odd.*

Before holing herself up in her quarters, the Dark Queen had said, “I’ll leave all of the doors in the castle open for you. You can use any room you like, save for my room, which is my comfortable abode. SNAP, it’s done!”

She’d snapped her fingers, and with that, all of the doors should have opened for us. This door being closed meant the Dark Queen actively didn’t open it.

“Maybe she *couldn’t* open it?” I supposed it could also be the case that we *oughtn’t* open the door.

Olivia lightly tugged on my clothes. “What a pretty door!”

“It is pretty, Olivia. It’s extremely pretty.”

“Those’re emeralds, right?”

“Ah, these, you mean? Good eye, Olivia. Wanna see them up close? Want me to lift you up?”

“Lift me, Daddy!”

She raised her arms up with sheer mirth, as she always did when she wanted me to carry her in my arms. I held her up, and she was as light as a feather. She was still so small that she fit snugly in my human form’s arms.

“Wow...”

Olivia stared at the shining emeralds from up close. Judging by her expression, she was spellbound. “Daddy, does this door open?”

“Hmm? I’m not sure... I wonder whether it’s all right to try?”

Olivia’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. Nervously, I reached a hand toward the door that for whatever reason differed from the others in the castle.

“Hrm, it’s fairly heavy.”

I may have been in human form, but even so, I had about the same amount of strength as in my dragon form. And yet the door was still really heavy. It was a strange sensation.

“Hm... I feel like there’s a strange kind of mana at play here. Maybe that’s why it won’t open... Hrah!”

I put a little *power* into pushing the door to try and clear away the mana tangled up in it. With a short *crick*, the door opened.

“Wow, Daddy! It opened!”

I could tell then that I’d been right—there had in fact been mana blocking my prior attempt. Now that I’d blown it away, it was no longer any different from a normal door. I’d seen this method of mana-lacing somewhere before.

“Ah, I think I remember now. I believe it’s called a ‘seal,’ if I recall.”

In fact, it wasn’t too long ago. I did a favor for a human who came to my home holding a sword that had gotten “sealed” or what have you. One little breath from me and the mana tangling the blade up flew right away. If I’m not misremembering, the human then said something to the effect of “I, I did it! The seal on the Blestbrand is gone!”

Wonder what a “Blestbrand” is?

“You’re not going inside, Daddy? What is this room?”

“Well, honey, I’m not sure we’re allowed to enter...”

After a moment’s hesitation:

“Haugh?! W-Wait, what the whaaaaat?!?!”

We heard the pitter-patter of footsteps as a figure emerged from up the Western Tower’s staircase.

“Ah, hello, Miss Dark Queen.”

It was the Dark Queen Maredia, master of this castle...but she was wearing awfully casual clothes: shorts, a round-necked shirt, and something sheep-like and fluffy on top. Her pajamas looked extremely comfy. If it weren’t for her long black hair that touched the floor and the big curly horns poking out of said hair, one might mistake her for a petite human girl. Olivia might grow taller than her in only a handful of years.

Olivia jumped up and down and waved her hands at her. “Ah, you’re the sheep lady!”

“Sheep? Haugh, I’m the Dark Queen Maredia!”

“What’s the matter, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Haugh, Elder Dragon! Wh-Wh-What do you mean, what’s the matter?! I-I sensed the d-door opening!”

“Ah, sorry about that. Guess I shouldn’t have opened it without asking.”

“N-No, that’s not the point! How in the world did you do it? I was so surprised I rushed right out of my comfortable abode!” Her big golden eyes were teary, and she looked at the open door and me in turn. She *must* have been in a hurry—her round eyeglasses were slightly askew. “Augh, the Library of Grimoires...my treasure trove!!! It got sealed away by that odious Hero’s party... Oh Elder Dragon, how in the world did you break the seal?”

I was still carrying Olivia when the Dark Queen grabbed at my clothes and pulled hard on them. *I guess I really shouldn’t have opened it... I fudged things*

up.

“Uh, well, you see, I just saw there was some mana blocking it, so I gave the door a little push.”

“A *little* push?”

“A little push.”

“You just pushed it?!”

“I...I just pushed it, yes,” I said. And that was the honest truth.

The Dark Queen crumpled crestfallen to the floor. “Ha, haugh... I...I tried so hard for so long to break that seal...” she muttered. “A century, no, maybe a millennium? It was for *ages*, in any case... And, and yet you broke it that easily? Is this the true might of an elder dragon?!”

Ah, so she wanted that seal broken. Phew!

“Ha, hauugh! C-Clowriaaaa!!! The Library!!!” She ran up the Western Tower’s staircase, screaming Miss Clowria’s name.

Those two really are bosom buddies. I hope Olivia makes friends that are that close to her someday. Relieved, I placed Olivia back down on the ground. She’d been kicking her legs; clearly, she wanted to cross the threshold this instant.

“Hey, Daddy! Miss Maredia said it’s a library!”

“She did, didn’t she?”

“And a library’s a place with lots of books, right? I’ve always wanted to visit one!”

And with that, she dashed off, with me following after her.

The library had a high ceiling with a chandelier dangling from it. Moreover, the space along the walls was completely crammed with books, books, and more books! A rainbow of books! The sight took Olivia’s breath away, and she looked up at me with a grin from ear to ear.

“This is amazing, Daddy! Amazing! There are so, so many books!”

“Wow...this really is something else.” It even took my breath away. The shrine grotto I’d made my den had a fair few bits of gold and silver and jewels, but this

room was just about as big and was all chock-full of books. It was the first time I'd seen this many at once. It was like a gold mine of knowledge.

"Daddy!" Olivia smiled at me and extended a hand my way. "Daddy, read to me tonight too!"

I squeezed my rosy-cheeked daughter's hand in mine. "I'd love to."

With this many books around, no matter how many of them I read to her, we would never run out of options. I was sure we'd find a whole lot of books Olivia would take a liking to. *The Dark Queen's Castle is incredible. To think there's a library this big here!*

"Let's read lots and lots more books from here on out, honey."

"Yeah!" She nodded in agreement. The expression on her face screamed, *I can't wait for tonight.*

I was pleased as punch. *I'll read until you're sound asleep, however long that takes!*

Chapter 6: Mr. Dragon Learns the Library's Secret

Why oh why was a library this superb sealed away?

According to the Dark Queen (who brought Miss Clowria down from the Western Tower), this is how it went down:

“Haugh... My Library of Grimoires was a proud storehouse of the history and knowledge of us dark-kin. But on the day the Hero's party invaded this castle, they attempted to burn our beloved library, of all places, to the ground! They claimed dark-kin knowledge *corrupts* humans. I knew I'd likely be defeated, but I struggled tooth and nail to stop them. I was loath to let our wisdom and history turn to ash. And I had a hidden stack of fan comics in there too, so I fought like my life depen—err, AHEM!” The Dark Queen suddenly cleared her throat.

What're fan comics?

“Well, anyway! I managed to keep the Hero party's hellfire at bay—”

“But the party managed in turn to place a firm seal on Her Darkness's great library,” said Miss Clowria, finishing the Dark Queen's sentence. “Since then, she has tried time and time again to break the seal, but even my Queen, in all her magnificence and resplendence and greatness and invincibility, couldn't break the seal for many an age... The same seal that you, Sir Dragon...”

“Haugh! And he broke it so easily! He ‘just pushed it a little’... Such is the might of an elder dragon!” said the Dark Queen, biting her lip.

This was making me a bit uncomfortable. “Oh no, please. My might? You flatter me.” I'm just a smidge long-lived and a mite on the strong side, that's all. So when people praise me as “amazing” because of those things, it weirds me out somewhat...

“Tee hee, Daddy's so amazing! My Daddy's amazing, isn't he? You two think so too, right? Right?!”

Sorry, I take that back. Hearing you say that takes your Daddy over the moon!

From then on, whenever Olivia was free, she'd stay in the library. It seems she truly does adore books.

The title "the Library of Grimoires" notwithstanding, its collection also contained picture books, cookbooks, and the like. Do those books reflect the Dark Queen's tastes?

I soon found myself practicing cooking in the castle's kitchen, cookbook in hand. Learning recipes from various nations is fun for me. Keeping in mind Olivia's favorite flavors, I tried my hand at making all sorts of dishes. Whenever I was in the kitchen, Olivia was in the library.

At first, Olivia often entered the kitchen and shouted that she'd help me, but I couldn't possibly let her! Cooking requires an open flame, and using a kitchen is totally different than cooking with my own fire. I can't adjust or control this flame as I could the fire I breathed when making her soup back in the shrine-den. Plus, stir-fries and sautés need particularly hot temperatures.

"So I can't help you?"

Olivia asked me whether she could help me at every opportunity. Perhaps she's the type that always wants to be doing something.

Hmm... What can she help me with? I racked my brain. *Ah, I know!* "Err, the library's really big, and it seems it was sealed for a long time, so...how about you try airing it out?"

"Airing it out?" She tilted her head, puzzled. Her soft, light brown hair swayed gently as she gazed at me with those sky-blue eyes.

It was around that time that I realized she'd grown a wee bit since the day we met. *You're cuter than ever, but in a more mature, refined way. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call you a "lady" now... Well, that's a pickle. The plethora of parenting books I read tell me that a splendid lady like her goes out into the world as a mating pair alongside an attractive partner. Yet I wanted to be with her for a little while longer.*

I told Olivia what I'd learned about airing things out from a book called *Household Labors*. "Airing things out means to dry books and clothes in the

shade and put them where there's good ventilation—that is, where there's a good flow of air—to prevent mold and bugs from springing up. It's an important chore.”

“Oh! You know everything, Daddy! I didn't know about that!”

“If you air out the books in the library for me, it'll make Daddy very happy.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. And I'm sure Miss Dark Queen will be thrilled too.”

“Her too?” She hopped up and down with an enormous smile. “I'm gonna do my best!”

Before a smile that sunny, I bet all the bugs will scarper off anyway.

And with that, the deal was sealed—when I was in the kitchen, Olivia would stay in the library.

According to Olivia (who, come dinnertime, told me everything that happened that day), the Dark Queen occasionally dropped by the library as well.

Really now? I hope they become fast friends.

As I watched Olivia munch away at the food she so clearly found tasty, I pictured what things would look like for us in the near future. Once Olivia got a little bigger, I figured the day may come when we work side by side in the kitchen. And by then, I might be able to cook up a storm without needing a cookbook.

I wondered what Olivia would grow up to be like. When she becomes a bona fide young lady, will she start being cheeky with me? I look forward to it. After all, I don't think you can say bratty stuff to anyone besides someone you trust.

* * *

That day, Olivia had been airing books out in the library while I was making our meal. Even after some time passed after I'd finished preparing our supper, Olivia had yet to arrive at the dining hall (which was so spacious that eating there just the two of us did feel a bit desolate).

“Olivia?” I called, dropping by the library.

The Library of Grimoires was divided into two sections. There was the reading room, which was around the size of my shrine-den, and over in the back were shelves packed to the gills with books. These shelves reached all the way up to the ceiling and had a ladder that moved both vertically and horizontally. All of these elements together made the room so stylish and charming. The large windows in the reading room had been left open, and a whole bevy of books lay strewn where the sun’s rays couldn’t get at them. They were being aired out. But where was Olivia? I peered behind a bookshelf, only to discover something startling.

“Lessee... ‘Come forth, o abyssal envoy, come ye here. The depths be crimson, the nadir palid. Pull the threads of the guileful Ariadne, wicked of heart, and reel, reel her in’?”

“Ahh! O-Olivia?!”

She was lying down on her belly, her chin on her hands, her legs kicking gently. She was cheerfully absorbing one of the books she was airing out.

It came to me in a flash: *Whatever she’s reading, or rather reciting, can’t be good! In fact, it sounds pretty similar to the incantations dark-kin speak when they use magic!*

As if to prove my suspicions, the mana in her vicinity was beginning to wind and coil. What’s more, it was assuming the shape of something that wasn’t here before... *Ah! This is that summoning spell that’s used by humans and dark-kin and so on!!!*

I’d heard about summoning spells back when I’d taken a peek into the Dark Realm while on one of my strolls. The Dark Realm is a separate plane of existence where dangerous creatures and dark-kin live. Apparently, summoning spells are typically used by humans to summon one or more to a position near the caster. I think it was the Dark Realm’s watchdog, one Mr. Cerberus, that I heard grumbling: “Boy, let me tell ya, it’s the pits, ’cause for the most part they get summoned when they’re takin’ a bath or some such.”

But never mind that! I chastised myself for getting distracted.

“Ah. Daddy?”

Olivia waved at me. *Behind you, Olivia! Look behind you!*

Thanks to my reading to her, I could sense that Olivia’s intelligence was steadily increasing, but I never would’ve guessed she’d be able to read magic grimoires or use summoning spells just like a dark-kin! *I knew it, my little Olivia’s a total genius...but that’s not what’s important right now!*

“Olivia, don’t move a muscle!”

Countless large spiders came creeping and crawling from within the darkness. Their enraged growling told me they weren’t too thrilled about being summoned from the Dark Realm.

In the past, whenever I encountered a large spider from the Dark Realm, I just thought *ah, a spider* and naught else. But things were different. I’m a father now! And I had to defend Olivia!

I wasted no time reverting back to dragon form and grew to a size the library could only barely contain. The once-spacious reading room now felt like a tight fit.

“Please, spider-folks! Return to the Dark Realm!”

I sucked in a deep breath and spat fire at them without hesitation. *Sorry, my friends! Please leave Olivia’s general area! I’m making my flames as cold as possible!*

I broke a sweat breathing fire to keep them away from Olivia. I suddenly heard voices from behind me.

“Haugh whaaa?! Tell me it isn’t so, Elder Dragon! B-B-Breathing fire in the library?! Everybody knows a dragon does *not* breathe fire in a library!!!”

“Be calm, my Queen!!!”

“My, my collection of gems!!!”

The Dark Queen and Miss Clowria must have rushed down here upon hearing all this racket. *Ah, they’re worried the books will burn. The Dark Queen did say they were important to her.*

But it was all right. Olivia was here—my adorable, precious daughter whom I needed to protect. “Spider-folks, please go home!”

“Daddy?”

When the flames disappeared, I could see no more of the spider-folks. Olivia looked up at me blankly as I sat down with relief. It had been a while since I assumed dragon form; Olivia was truly a tiny little thing. She may have grown a bit, but she still needed my protection.

“Those spiders are under Ariadne...” said Miss Clowria. “It looks as though they were sent back to the Dark Realm. Phew! What a relief!”

Apparently, that was why they’d vanished. *In any case, I’m happy Olivia’s all right.* “Olivia!”

She came running and clung to one of my claws. “Daddy, you’re amazing! You’re so cool! You can breathe sooo much fire!”

Most living things cower and run when I breathe fire, but not her. Despite my appearance, her faith in me has been unshakeable. *I love her so much.*

“Haugh, E-Elder Dragon? Are, are the books okay?!” shouted the Dark Queen, tears in her eyes.

Oh, right. I’m too big and blocking her view of what happened. “Ah, no need to worry, Miss Dark Queen.”

There’s no way I’d ever hurt Olivia. I’m a dragon, and I’ve been around for a very long time. I decide whether my flames burn something or not. I’d singed the spiders a little bit, that’s all.

“Olivia.” I returned to human form and hugged her close. “I’m sorry, honey. This is all because I had you airing the books out all alone.”

I was so spooked that the ordeal nearly shaved some years off my life. But she must not have really understood what I’d done, because she was beaming in my arms.

The two ladies whispered to each other:

“Erm... I don’t suppose it was that human girl who used that summoning spell

just now?”

“It would appear that is the case, my beauteous Queen.”

“Haugh... But how is that possible? A little human girl, with low levels of magic power? A little human girl who can’t even handle mana? And all of the grimoires in this library are too much for even dark-kin like us to handle.” The Dark Queen was greatly perplexed.

I see... I don't quite get it, but I guess leaving this job to Olivia to do alone is too risky. How careless of me... I was in the middle of preparing dinner. I need to get back to the dining hall. Let's tuck in before the milk soup turns cold. It's her favorite, after all.

“Ah!”

“What is it, Daddy?”

“Er, well, may I have a word with you two?” A splendid idea had just occurred to me. *This is such an uncommon occasion.* We may have lived in the same castle, but it was rare indeed for us to be in the same space as the two ladies. If they didn’t mind, then... “Might you be interested in having dinner with us? I made way too much milk soup, you see.”

“Hrm?” said the Dark Queen. “It’s just, I...”

“Oh my, I didn’t think we would receive an invitation to dinner. We oughtn’t waste this chance, so let’s go together.”

“Say what, Clowria?”

“We still haven’t properly thanked them for breaking the seal. I shall make the post-meal tea.”

“Urk... Then I suppose I shall take you up on that offer!”

“Excellent! I read in my parenting books that it’s good to eat meals all together. Please, come to the dining hall!”

“Yay!” shouted Olivia. It seemed she’d wanted to chat with the two ladies for quite some time now.

The milk soup, my signature dish, proved popular with them as well, and we

had a fun time enjoying dinner together. The post-meal tea that Miss Clowria made for us was tasty too.

I see. So this is a human-style meal! I thought, suitably moved.

From that day forward, the two ladies left the rooms in the Western Tower far more frequently.

Chapter 7: Mr. Dragon Acquires Tutors

“Huh?” I exclaimed, though the surprise was a pleasant one. “You’re gonna teach her?”

“Uh-huh!”

I never expected the Dark Queen to make such an offer. To repay us for airing out the library, she’d become one of Olivia’s teachers. Apparently, she’d given it some thought after the kerfuffle in the library the other day.

“I can’t stand the thought of any more weird shenanigans happening in the library...so I, the Dark Queen Maredia, shall use my collection of grimoires to lecture her before that can ever occur again! I hope you’re grateful!”

“Indeed. Her Darkness and I were raised by the same foster mother, making us sisters of sorts. Those with strength and potential should be given a proper education, and that is a principle that goes for both dark-kin and humans.”

“Yep, it’s just as Clowria says!”

The Dark Queen and her knight were on the same wavelength.

“I’m grateful. I’m a dragon, so I’m not too familiar with what’s common practice among humans.” I figured dark-kin like them might know more about humans than me. It seems they used to get into scuffles with humans and would go on trips to where humans lived with large armies. In particular, I heard that the Dark Queen used to personally go at it with the Hero’s party. It’s a shame they fought and split up.

I looked at Olivia with some doubt in my mind. I was happy the Dark Queen offered her help, but it all depended on whether it’d make Olivia happy. As one of my parenting books says, “When it comes to culture lessons, you must respect your child’s wishes.” That came with the caveat that noble families didn’t have that luxury, but then again, I’m not a noble. I just want Olivia to be a normal, down-to-earth, happy girl.

Olivia’s sky-blue eyes started sparkling upon overhearing our back-and-forth.

“You two’re gonna play with me?”

“Haugh whaaaa?! It’s not *playing*, it’s *learning*. And it’ll be tough stuff! We’ll be deciphering difficult-to-understand grimoires, the collected knowledge of us dark-kin!”

“YAYYY!!! I wanna play with you! Is that okay, Daddy?”

“D-Did you even hear a word I said?!”

Olivia glomped on the Dark Queen out of sheer joy.

“Haugh! D-Don’t cling to me like that! Save me, C-Clowria!”

“Hee hee, it looks like you’ve found yourself a little sister, my Queen. Even after all the time you spent holed up in the castle... I’m so happy for you.”

Excellent. Looks like both the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria are pleased and delighted. Which means there’s only one way I can respond:

“All right, Olivia, promise me you’ll listen to what they say.”

“Okay!” She spiritedly raised her hands up high.

Seeing Olivia so delighted put a big dumb smile on my face. It was that moment when I realized that whenever I’m happy while in human form, a smile just naturally bubbles up.

Olivia, I hope your smile never goes away.

Chapter 8: Mr. Dragon Reads Her Books in the Ancient Tongue

Olivia was growing quickly.

Slowly but surely, I was improving my cooking, laundry, and cleaning skills and I was now enjoying castle life. I spent more and more time in my human form and reverted to dragon form only a handful of times per year. Olivia ate whatever I made her, and never failed to couple it with a smile and a “Daddy, this is great!” And she never neglected to help out either.

Such was our everyday life, and the years passed.

More recently, it had become routine for Olivia’s two educators to join us at the dining table morning, noon, and night. They called all of my food delicious too, and at times they even requested dishes from me. The Dark Queen’s favorite was rice topped with a fluffy omelet. Miss Clowria, meanwhile, seemed to like breakfast and would pile lots of strawberry jam and butter on top of her crispy scones. And Olivia’s favorite was, as ever, milk soup. Perhaps I was more talented at cooking than I realized. *I’ve lived alone for so many millennia that I had no idea.*

“Daddy!”

Olivia had grown big enough to be able to eat honey without cause for alarm, and yet she still came to my bedchamber every night with a different book in hand.

“Olivia, you know you have a bed of your own.”

I was using an athletic chamber that was once the indoor training grounds for the Dark-Kin Army as my personal room. Otherwise, if by some chance I ever reverted back to dragon form while still half asleep, it’d spell trouble. Thankfully, that hadn’t happened in several years, but still. A few centuries ago, I once dug a pretty big hole in the ground while in a drowsy stupor. To this day,

that hole remains as a lake and is called Tritonis, the Sacred Draco-Spring. Miss Clowria tells me it's a sacred place for humans. Talk about embarrassing. I try not to get near the place if I can help it.

Olivia came right by my bed. "But I wanna sleep in bed with you, Daddy."

"All right, but just for tonight."

It had been "just for tonight" for several years now. I know that human girls need to start sleeping by themselves at some point. My parenting books say it's not healthy for a child to sleep with their parents for too long. However, whenever I see her sleepy face, I end up thinking to myself, *just a little while longer, until she's grown enough*. Maybe I'm one of those parents they talk about. The kind that spoils their kids rotten.

"Daddy, I want you to read this one today."

"A new book, I take it?"

The book she handed me was imposing. The cover and binding were pretty, and it was fairly heavy. It was big enough to serve as a human baby's bed. I opened the tome on my lap. I hear humans use bookrests to read big heavy books, but I didn't need anything like that. I was strong enough to comfortably hold it in one hand.

...Come to think of it, Olivia lifted this book fairly easily. She's gotten quite a lot stronger herself.

Lately, she'd been training in things like swordsmanship and martial arts with Miss Clowria, who was once the captain of the Dark-Kin Army Corps's knightly order, which might explain her newfound strength. Exercise sure is good for you.

"Wait, didn't you read this book with Miss Dark Queen? You're always bringing Daddy picture books."

"Miss Maredia said she can't read it."

"Oh?"

The Dark Queen held the library so dear to her heart, that I'm sure her learning is extensive...and yet she can't read this one? What gives?

I scanned the book. “Ah, I see.”

The text was in ancient Ariel, a tongue that had died several millennia back. The nostalgia hit me hard. While I’ve basically lived my whole life here on the Sacred Peak, for many years I often came across the glyphs and letters used by humans through the “oblations” they brought to me. I liked reading what they gave me. Reading is fun! All this to explain why I can more or less read the forms of writing humans once used. It’s only now that I know what “oblation” means. As I’d been spending my days alongside Olivia, I’d come to learn a little bit more about all things human. “I guess those two must not have been born yet.”

“Are they old letters?”

“Yep. From back when I was young.”

“You’re still young, Daddy!” she shouted frantically.

I laughed despite myself. “Am I? I suppose you may be right. Thank you, Olivia.”

“Tee hee! Read it for me, would you Daddy?”

“Sure. In fact, I figure I might as well teach you ancient Ariel while we’re at it.”

“Really?”

“Just a little, until bedtime.”

“Yay! I get to study with Daddy!”

Olivia was a lot bigger now than the day we’d met, but she slipped between me and the book all the same. Back then, her light brown hair had been short, loose, and disheveled, but now her hair was long and girlish. I groomed her long, pretty hair for her every evening. Whenever Olivia moved, the strands swayed with her.

She’s the very image of an adorable, sweet human girl. Taking renewed comfort in that being the case, my eyes fell on the volume before me. “Err, well, first off, each individual character in ancient Ariel has a meaning assigned to it. Take this symbol, for example. This one means...”

“Wow, Daddy! You’re like an encyclopedia!”

Olivia had been absorbing the text with great interest, but before long, she was beginning to nod off. When her eyelids started drooping, I decided that was a good time to gently close the book.

Goodnight, Olivia, and sweet dreams.

I gazed at Olivia’s dozing face for a spell before settling into sleep myself. It was a blessed little moment.

The Dark Queen read grimoires to Olivia while she was busy airing out the library. Olivia also began bringing me whatever books the Dark Queen can’t read. For the time being, I’m glad I can read her basically any book here. Being able to show my daughter one of my cool sides makes my heart dance. I’ve sure been around for a good long while.

Those halcyon days went on for several more years.

Olivia learned the sword and martial arts from Miss Clowria, and from the Dark Queen, she learned how to decipher grimoires and some practical magic that humans can cast. With me, she studied various different ancient alphabets and scripts while we chatted around bedtime. Olivia was steadily growing clever, strong, and oh so cute and pretty. *Granted, she was already super duper cute to begin with!*

Chapter 9: Mr. Dragon Hears Her Marriage Proposal

The day. It's here. It's finally come.

I'm the most shook I've been in millennia.

* * *

One fateful day...

As I was nodding off in a corner of the kitchen after having prepared the ingredients for dinner, Olivia stole up next to me. She must've had spare time now that she'd finished airing out a whole collection of library books.

She was a wee bit bigger now, my Olivia. And nowadays, she could work through the books far faster than before.

Slowly, quietly, she drew nearer and nearer. I could sense her approach, and I knew from experience that it was best to pretend to be asleep—she was trying to give me a jolt.

"Boo!" she shouted.

"Ahh!!! You got me!" I said, feigning an over-the-top reaction of shocked surprise. She exclaimed shrilly in delight. *My oh my*, I thought, *my little girl's just so cute and innocent*.

I somehow managed to restrain myself from breaking into a smile at the thought, only to be hit with a whopper.

"Daddy!"

"Huh?"

On my cheek, I felt something soft. My peepers opened wide, and there before my eyes was Olivia's face.

Did she... No, it couldn't be... Did she just kiss me? The thing human family members, lovers, and married couples do to show their love and affection?!

"Olivia?"

“Ah, you’re awake, Daddy.”

Olivia’s expression seemed grown-up for her age. She was wearing her hair up and had it decorated with a large, white lace handkerchief.

“Look, Daddy! I’m a bride!”

“A b-bride?”

“Yep! When I’m all grown up, I’m gonna marry you, Daddy! I’m gonna be your bride!”

“Whaaaaat?!?!”

The day had come. It was finally here. The day was finally here! I was the most shook I’d ever been in all my millennia!

“I realized from all the storybooks I read in the library that a princess who marries a prince will live ‘happily ever after’! That’s why I’m gonna marry you!!!” she said, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

I see. She’s emulating a “wedding ceremony” that humans have started having when they pair off as mates.

I’d read all about these frilly white clothes in the book *Family Occasions*. I’d also read how daughters proposing to their fathers is relatively commonplace in another book called *Getting on Great with Your Little Girl*. But reading about it was a far cry from experiencing it in real life! This had me all but bowled over.

“Olivia, honey.”

“Yeah?”

Fighting through my slight—ahem, my immense—discomposure, I pulled myself together, as I knew that for moments like these, starting off on the right foot was of the essence. The sentiment made me happy, but that was neither here nor there. I had to teach her what was common practice in human society.

“I’m overjoyed, Olivia, really. But Daddy can’t be your husband.”

“Huh?”

“It’s because I’m your father, sweetheart.”

“Is that why?”

“It is. Humans can’t marry their own fathers,” I continued, slowly and gently. “But while I can’t be your husband, I’ll always be your... herkk...”

“Daddy?”

I was surprised at myself. My head was swimming with how Olivia would one day marry someone, and how she’d just declared she’d be my bride.

I... I...!

“Ah, ha ha. What the?” Something warm streaked down my soft human face. “Why am I crying?”

The tears just kept coming. I wasn’t sad or regretful, so why?

I couldn’t stop thinking about Olivia’s happiness, and about the brevity and preciousness of my time with her. And whenever I thought about Olivia’s future, an emotion I’d never before felt in my millennia-long life swelled in my heart. It was a sweet, warm, happy feeling, but it was also bittersweet, wistful, and cutting. If there’s a word for it, then I don’t know it.

“What’s wrong, Daddy? Do you have a boo-boo?”

“No, sunshine. I’m all right.”

“But Daddy, you’re crying.”

“Lis—herkk... Listen, Olivia... I can’t be your husband, but know that I’m on your side, always and forever, no matter what.”

“Huh? Okay, got it, Daddy.”

“And that’s because I’m your Daddy.”

That’s right, I thought. I’m your Daddy.

This sweet, warm, happy, bittersweet, wistful, cutting feeling. I don’t know its name, but...this feeling I get when I hope and pray for Olivia’s happiness in the future may just be love.

All that being said, she proposed to me! I could’ve giggled. I wanna brag about this to somebody. Wonder how the two ladies’ll react!

Chapter 10: Mr. Dragon Celebrates Her Birthday

The seasons passed, and one nippy morning, Miss Clowria came around while I was prepping lunch. Apparently, she wanted to tell me something on the down low.

“Mr. Dragon of Old.”

“Morning, Miss Clowria. If you want Miss Dark Queen’s ginger cookies, they’re on that shelf over there.”

“I’m not here about that... I wanted to talk to you about Olivia’s birthday...”

“Birthday?”

“Yes, I would like to put on a birthday celebration for her.”

According to her, celebrating “birthdays” is a human custom. The idea of remembering one’s birthday is quite something. I don’t even remember how long ago I was born. I mean, I’ve been around since the world was a place of utter chaos, before it was anything like it is now. The calendar the little ones use wasn’t around then.

“Could it be you’ve never celebrated her birthday before?”

“I haven’t, no. I don’t really have a good idea what exactly a birthday is... Guess it’s a major event for humans, huh?”

“Well, uhhh... I hate to say it, but I think it’s a fairly huge event.”

“A, a huge event...”

“Yes. In fact, birthdays are celebrated with great fanfare.”

“They are?!”

“I’d thought that surely you two had been celebrating her birthdays in private...”

Miss Clowria brought me several picture books from the Library of Grimoires, which the Dark Queen had apparently collected for fun. The stories showed

cute characters attending birthday meet-ups, and some were stirring tales set entirely at birthday parties. In one of the illustrations, a cheery and excited girl was smiling as she said, “Tomorrow is my birthday. I’m so thrilled, I just can’t wait!”

I’d never seen any of these books before. And here I’d thought I’d read a ton of picture books alongside Olivia. It was then it dawned on me that birthdays were far more special and important to human children than I’d ever imagined!

“I... I’ve really mucked things up!”

I’d read so many parenting books with the goal of raising her clever and healthy, but I couldn’t recall reading one broaching the importance of birthdays.

Holy moly! It must be that humans take the importance of birthdays for granted; so much so that they never bother writing about it!

A fair few seasons had passed since that chilly day I first encountered her, back when she was truly little. Around three season-cycles, I’d say. She’d said she was only just three years old, but the topic of her birth date never came up. I think that she’s probably around six now. I can’t believe I’d never celebrated her birthday in all this time!

“My goodness, what do we do?! I definitely want to throw her a party!”

“Too right. As a matter of fact, allow me to tell you what Olivia whispered in Queen Maredia’s ear: ‘My birthday’s around the corner.’”

“Whaaaat?!”

So Olivia knows her birthday? I was shocked. *Why on earth did she never tell me? I wonder if something compelled her not to? What could her reasons be?* “So when’s Olivia’s birthday?”

“Well, according to her...it seems it’s on the day of the Spring’s-Near Festival.”

The Spring’s-Near Festival. A human holiday. A grand-scale get-together held in the coldest period of the year in anticipation of the advent of spring. It involves decorating momi firs (evergreens that look like pointy hats) and enjoying foods like sweet cakes and whole roasted chicken as a family. A

celebratory occasion where everybody has fun exchanging gifts.

And that day's Olivia's birthday...I guess.

"Wait, but that festival's..."

"Yes indeed."

I'm not too acquainted with the human calendar, but I figured it must not be too far off given how cold it'd gotten. Then I remembered that I could check the Dark Queen's calendar that she had hung up, featuring cute girls striking cute poses...

"As you can see, it's three days from now!"

"Three days?! A blink and it'll be here already!"

"Quite so! And our lovely and resplendent Queen has also expressed interest in this endeavor. We three ought to unite our forces so as to make Olivia's surprise birthday party a success!!!" Miss Clowria excitedly balled her hands into fists.

"Sounds good. Let's make it a bash to remember!" Just from picturing Olivia's face light up, I was getting super duper excited.

And so we formed the Olivia's Birthday Alliance.

* * *

"...and that's why I'd like to throw Olivia a birthday party, Miss Dark Queen!"

"Hee hee! So you've finally come, Elder Dragon. Allow me to demonstrate to a benighted dragon of old the stuff my vaunted birthday parties are made of!"

She came to me with a book in hand. It was a book with lots of pictures in it that she regarded with fondness...though it wasn't a picture book per se. It was a type of tome that dark-kin read called manga. In this manga, a scatterbrained but lovable heroine throws her childhood friend turned chic-yet-boyish girlfriend a surprise party. The Dark Queen was flipping through the pages, squirming and squealing all the while. "Haugh, I could read this a billion times... It's just such a masterpiece..."

"Ahh, so this is what a birthday party is." I gave it a read myself. There was a

cake, decorations, a delicious-looking spread of food, and a gift inside of a box. *So this is a birthday party!* It gave me a greater insight into what we needed to prepare than the picture book from before. *It's pretty similar to the Spring's-Near Festival*, I thought. *That being the case, I might be able to get everything ready in a jiffy.*

I'd been reading a book called *Seasonal Holidays and Parenting*, so I was familiar with how to celebrate the Spring's-Near Festival. And I could prepare a cake and a feast on top of that. "Seems like a whole load of fun!"

"Yeah!" replied the Dark Queen, eyes gleaming. "I'm sure Olivia will be thrilled!"

"Mm-hmm," said Miss Clowria with a nod, and she served her fellow Alliance members some tea. "Why don't Her Darkness and I take care of preparing the decorations for the room?"

"Wow, you'd do that?"

"Of course... After all, if we left it up to you, I've a feeling you'd use ridiculously precious gems and stones and the like..."

"Huh? Is decorating with gems a bad thing?" That was news to me, considering how many were lying around my shrine-den.

"...No, forget I said anything." She turned to the Dark Queen. "Now, let's make many an origami paper ring!"

"Sure, and I'll tell you what, I'm no slouch at it." Confidence written all over her face, the Dark Queen cut multicolored paper squares long and thin and connected them into a ring. "Behold, Elder Dragon! Look upon my works! It's an origami ring!"

An origami ring? But like...what is it?

* * *

After listening intently to the two ladies' birthday party lecture, I decided to go look for a gift for Olivia. The shrine-den we used to live in contains a fair number of sparkly and pretty gems, jewels, and precious stones that I collected as a hobby. The grotto floor is blanketed in a carpet of gold coins and jewels,

which I also used to sleep upon.

“I wonder what kinda present Olivia’d like...” I scanned the vicinity. Before me were gems of all types, from diamonds and onyxes to sapphires and peridots. There were sparkly gems the color of a red sunset, some the color of daybreak, and others the color of verdant greenery. They’re all favorites of mine, but now that it had come time to think about which to gift to Olivia, I had no idea which to pick. I just wanted to give her every single one I thought was pretty. *I couldn’t do that, though... Giving her all of these would throw her for a loop... And, more to the point, she’s so small she might get buried in the mountain of jewels.*

I could picture the scene in my head:

“Happy birthday, Olivia. Daddy got you a gift!”

With a clinking and a chinking, a flood of gems and gold and silver coins rain down from above, piling higher and higher and higher.

“Ahhh! Daddy, help! I’m—”

“Oh no! OLIVIAAAA!”

That would be terrible, just terrible. “Hmmm, if I have to choose just one, then...”

I picked out a handful of gems that I liked the most out of my favorites pile and mulled it over. “Err, uhh... Which one do I go for...?”

I picked up a great big ruby in my fingers. It was a deep, deep red, so red you could swear it sucks you in. And when you hold it against the light, it shines like the sun itself.

“Aha!” How could I forget this ruby?

I took the ruby out of the shrine-den and transformed back into my dragon form. Flapping my wings with all my might, I took to the skies, flying at full power.

* * *

“Hauughh, Clowria, go more to the right!”

“Like this, my Queen?”

“Ohhhh, *nice!* Right there, Clowria! That feels *gooooooooood...*”

“M-My Queen, if you could please refrain from putting on such a peculiar voice when you’re on my shoulders...”

Such was the scene I stumbled upon in the dining hall when I returned. The Dark Queen sat astride Miss Clowria’s shoulders with her arms outstretched as she decked the window frames with origami rings in a rainbow of colors. I’d done what I had to do as hastily as I could, but it still ended up taking me forever.

“Wow! It’s so pretty!” I found myself clapping, and the Dark Queen puffed out her chest with pride from atop Miss Clowria’s shoulders. It seemed she’d put in a ton of effort. “Heh, this is child’s play for one such as me...”

“If I may, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Haugh?”

“It’s just, the party’s tomorrow, so...if you put up the decorations now, then Olivia might spot them during dinner today.”

“Ha, haughh!!! Oh, oh no, what do we do, Clowria?!”

“It’s okay, Your Darkness. What we’re doing right now is a rehearsal!”

“Huh! Right, t-totally! That’s it, we’ve been rehearsing! Actually, didn’t *you* say you want to decorate too?”

“M-My apologies. I got swept up by the festive mood, and...!”

The two ladies began tidying up in a panic and I burst out laughing. Olivia was busy with her chores, like tending to the vegetable patch she’d started in the garden and airing out the library books, but she was due to return any minute now.

“Let me give you a hand.” I neatly stuffed the colorful array of decorations on the desk into a bag, and I was looking forward to putting the decorations up the next day.

Oh yeah, and another thing. “Uh, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Haugh? What is it, Elder Dragon?”

She was the one to ask, as she seemingly has a vast index of the library’s publications and grimoires in her head. “Could you point me to a book that shows how to make a cake?”

When it came to the gift and the decorations, the preparations for the next day’s party were complete. Plus, I’d prepared the ingredients for a dinner chock-full of Olivia’s favorite foods. However, one thing was missing...

“Oho! A homemade cake, eh! I’m looking forward to that myse— Ahem, well, if you really want my help, then I guess I’ll just have to give you a hand!”

“Excellent, thank you, Miss Dark Queen.”

The party was taking shape, and there was only one thing left to prepare. It was time to make Olivia a cake!

In my kitchen in the dead of night, I could hear the pitter-patter of footsteps approaching. Olivia had to be fast asleep around now, so the source of those footsteps was another very small lady, the Dark Queen. Lately, I’d seen human children in town fairly frequently, so I could tell she’s physically around thirty or forty by human years. In any case, she’d come bearing a stack of large books piled high enough to obscure her face, and she was trembling and staggering due to their combined weight.

“Oh my, are you all right, Miss Dark Queen?!”

“Haugh, I-I-I’m all right... Yikes!” she exclaimed, struggling to keep them from clattering. Then, with a thud, the tower of books was placed on the kitchen table.

The surprise party was the very next day. The two ladies would handle decorating the hall and I was to prepare the food. The preliminary arrangements for the cooking were all done, so all that remained was making the main attraction—the cake.

Just judging off titles like *Tasty Cakes for Baking Beginners*, *Kid-Craftable Confections*, and *Fairy-Tale Cute: A Book on Sweets*, I was in for a storm of sugary-sweet info. *Guess sweet stuff makes humans pretty happy, huh.*

“Wow, Miss Dark Queen! Thank you! This is my first time making a cake, so I hope it goes okay...”

“You’ll do fine! See, I only brought books that say they’re for beginners!”

“I never imagined the Library of Grimoires would have recipe books on sweets too...”

“I mean, yeah. If it were nothing but strict and formal grimoires, it’d get boring real quick.”

The Dark Queen cheerily flipped through the pages, closely examining the cake recipes on offer. There were cream cakes and chestnut cakes, glossy chocolate cakes and big fluffy chiffon cakes...and they all looked so good it was hard to choose!

“Did you finish preparing what I asked, Elder Dragon?!”

“Ah, err... You wanted cookies, right?”

“Yep. Ginger cookies!”

“Yeah, I put in a lot of ginger and sugar... I made little square cookies, and round ones too... Plus, I made as many of each as you listed.”

“Oh! Excellent work! The ginger cookies of an elder dragon are an exquisite thing!”

“Thanks. But what’re you gonna use them for?”

I beavered away baking those cookies just as she’d asked...*but aren’t we making a cake?*

“Heh heh, just leave that to me! Ah, so, I want you to make this cake and this cake. Then I want you to whip some cream too... Just leave tomorrow’s party to me and it’ll be fun for sure!” she said, chortling with an impish twinkle in her eyes.

I peered at the pages of the cookbook by her. *So uh, those are the ingredients, and that’s the procedure... Got it.* I had a feeling it’d be easier than I’d thought.

* * *

Dawn was here, and a sweet fragrance wafted from the kitchen. Neither

dragons nor dark-kin have to sleep each night, and being able to stay awake for as long as you like comes in handy for times like these.

“Haugh, that smells so good I’m honestly a little worried! This thing might take over the whole wide world!” said the Dark Queen, fidgeting restlessly in front of the oven.

We’ll be carrying out the surprise party tomorrow... Ah, wait, it’s already “tomorrow.” The party’s today.

Olivia was still sound asleep, so the aroma of baking wouldn’t spoil the surprise. It was certainly concerning just how good it smelled though.

Showtime would start at noon. The plan was to have her think it was just any old lunchtime before formally inviting her to a wonderful birthday party in her honor!

I still had no idea why Olivia had suddenly decided today was her birthday, but I hoped it would be a stellar day for her nonetheless! *I’m gonna do my best!*

“Oho, that’s a cake all right!”

I whisked the sponge cake out of the oven. It was chock-full of dried fruit, didn’t seem burnt, and looked nice and fluffy.

“Am I dreaming, or do I have a gift for making sweets?” I’ve lived for millennia, and I never noticed! Maybe once Olivia’s all grown up, I ought to open a confectionery store.

“Niiice! Good going, Elder Dragon!” exclaimed the Dark Queen, who jumped for joy upon seeing my sponge cake. “All righty then, Elder Dragon... You best leave the rest to me!”

“Huh? But Miss Dark Queen, aren’t you supposed to be decorating?”

“Never mind that! You need to get cooking, don’t you? I’ll take the cake to the dining hall to cool.” Then she took the still-steaming sponge cake off my hands and departed for the hall.

“Uh, wait, what just happened?” The Dark Queen was being uncharacteristically forceful. Though she seemed pretty enthused... Wonder why?

“Ah, oops, almost forgot! I need to go get that thing at daybreak!”

Hurriedly, I took off my apron and exited the castle before assuming dragon form and taking to the air. Flying through the sky’s sunrise colors felt great. And when I pictured Olivia’s delighted face, my heart thumped and my wings flapped more than necessary.

* * *

By the time I hurried back home, the sun was up. Putting all the finishing touches on the party was hectic, to say the least. To help prevent the two ladies decorating the dining hall from being spotted by Olivia, I had successfully sent her on a walk.

“See you later, Daddy!”

“See you later, Olivia.”

Breakfast scones in hand, Olivia entered the forests of the Sacred Peak of Olympias. Recently, Olivia had taken a liking to eating breakfast while looking up at the boundless winter sky from below the branches of the bare trees. Her fluffy coat looked adorable on her. Olivia would also pick up acorns and pluck winterbloom snow flowers from time to time. Afterwards, she would go to the medicinal herb section of the garden to tend to the herbs that were surviving the winter before returning to the kitchen or the dining hall. All of this was her routine as of late.

This gave me a brief window to get more party preparations done! I watched as Olivia headed cheerily off into the forest and then I quickly launched into finishing the food in the kitchen.

It was time to prepare the chicken. I stuffed the cavity of the plump chicken with herbs, nuts, berries, and the like. All this would make the chicken more flavorful, as I’d read in *Meals for Red-Letter Days*.

I cut the baguettes into small pieces and prepared some sauces for dipping. I also made forest butter paste (made from nuts with high oil content) and squeezed lots of lemon juice. This was going to be delicious. The soup was milk soup, just like always. I put in lots of the winter mushrooms Olivia loves. Milk

soup is always on the table for me and her, and an important part of our menu. "All right, now it's all done... I think."

Beautiful dishes of food lined the whole kitchen. *If this doesn't make her happy, then I'm a monkey's uncle.* I triple-and quadruple-checked to see if there were any dishes I forgot. The present I'd give Olivia was also accounted for. I couldn't wait to see her face light up!

* * *

It wasn't long at all before I heard her breathy and excited voice calling out to me. "I'm back!"

My heart raced as I headed for the dining hall. "Uhh... 'Happy birthday, Olivia.' I think that's how it goes."

The second Olivia entered the decorated dining hall, I was supposed to shout "happy birthday" in tandem with the two ladies. I walked briskly for the hall as I went over the exact phrase in my head.

All right, gotta take my position before Olivia enters...

I opened the dining hall doors. "Huh? Why's it so dark?" Were the curtains drawn?

At that moment:

"Daddy, congratulations!!!"

Fireworks in a rainbow of colors pop-pop-popped all around me. Olivia was holding her right hand aloft... Were these pretty fireworks the work of her magic?

"Huh? What're you doing here, Olivia?"

Hadn't she just come back from the forest? I was frozen in surprise. The Dark Queen snapped her fingers, and the curtains flew open, letting in the light of the sun.

"Happy birthday, Mr. Dragon of Old!"

"Wa ha ha! Surprise accomplished!"

The two ladies grinned as they gave me a round of applause. But what was all

this about congratulations?

“Tee hee! Did we surprise you, Daddy?”

“Olivia, what’s going on?”

She squeezed me tight, her face the picture of contentment. I looked up and saw a banner hanging from the ceiling that read: “Happy Birthday, Daddy!”

MY birthday?

“Daddy, I asked them to help me celebrate it. Your birthday!” she said.

“But I don’t know when my birthday is...”

I’m a dragon, and I’ll live through countless ages. I was alive long before the world played host to humans. I’d spent all this time by my lonesome, living a quiet life. I don’t know how many thousands or tens of thousands of years have passed. It’s no longer measurable by man’s units of time.

“But Daddy, today’s the Spring’s-Near Festival.”

The Spring’s-Near Festival is the glitziest time in the year for humans. I hear it’s a day when everybody in town can spend a joyful time with their family.

“My memories are hazy since I was so little, but...it’s the day you made me your family, Daddy.”

“Huh?”

I recalled that cold, cold day. I’d been sleeping in my shrine-den when Olivia appeared before my eyes. Then, I put her on my back and plodded over to the village of Pias. It’s true that the village had been in a rather festive mood. If I’m not wrong, the people were in high spirits and there were shining decorations throughout the town. Looking back, they must have been preparing for the festival. And on the table by which Olivia’s blood father and his mates had been guffawing over bottles of booze...I remembered. It had grown cold, but it was a whole roast of chicken.

Ahh, it’s all coming back... I think there were tiny little Spring’s-Near decorations on the counter and at the entrance of the rental library where I bought those parenting books, as well as gift boxes by the pointy-hat tree.

“I’ve never celebrated Spring’s-Near before, Daddy. But all the villagers looked so happy that it stuck with me. I saw so many sparkling decorations from on top of your back.”

I hadn’t remembered the scenery around us. *I suppose it was Spring’s-Near on that day.* I was close to tears. *That means everyone abandoned her on that jolliest of days. And then, lonely and all by herself, she came to a creature feared by most humans, a dragon.* My heart ached for her. And yet there she was, smiling merrily.

“So that’s why, Daddy... That’s why today’s my birthday. Spring’s-Near Festival is the day I became your daughter...so it’s my real birthday!”

“Olivia...”

Uh-oh. I might just start crying. I was all choked up, and Olivia continued.

“So I gave it a lot of thought, and I realized, today must be *your* birthday too! It’s the day a cool and classy dragon became my Daddy!”

“Your Daddy...”

“Umm, the ladies told me we don’t know when your birthday is. But I do remember when you became my Daddy, Daddy!” she said, grinning broadly.

Ahhh! I can’t, it’s too much! “Olivia!”

I hugged her tight, awash in tears.



Midwinter though it was, her light brown hair smelled like a warm, sunny spring day.

“Daddy!”

She hugged me tightly.

I’m gonna make you happy if it’s the last thing I do. I vowed once more to work hard to ensure the life Olivia would lead as a human would be a blissful one.

“Aughh, what a touching scene!!!”

“Yes, my Queen, indeed it is...!”

“Olivia,” said the Dark Queen as she sobbed. “Hic... C’mon, Olivia... Now’s the time to do it... So do it now...!”

Huh? What do you mean, “do it”? Do what?

“Oh yeah!” said Olivia, pointing at something or other on the dining table that was covered by a white cloth. “Daddy, Miss Maredia and I made that!”

The cloth was removed, and ta-da!

“Wow, it’s our home!”

It was the castle. Our castle. Only it had been recreated in cake and cookie form! It was a miniature sugar-art house!

“Ah, so that’s why you told me to make those cookies, Miss Dark Queen!”

“Heh heh, correct! Not too shabby, am I right?” But the Dark Queen wasn’t done yet and preened as she took out something else. “And *this*...is a sugar figure, special-made by your very own Dark Queen!”

“A sugar figure?”

I had no idea how she created it, but the “figure” she plopped on top of the cake was the spitting image of Olivia, and it was apparently made of sugar. *Look at that fun-filled smile!*

“Heh heh heh... It’s edible and everything! And here’s another one for you!”

“Wow, it’s Daddy!”

Down came a big sugar figure of a dragon, on the back of which was a man smiling happily.

It's me! Both the dragon and the man were me! "It's amazing! Thank you, Miss Maredia!"

"Haugh?! N-Not so hard, Olivia..." The Dark Queen smiled helplessly as Olivia squeezed her.

I'm sure the Dark Queen worked really, really hard on them.

A smiling Miss Clowria looked on as the two messed around playfully. "Hee hee... All right then, this will be my contribution to this celebration. There!"

With a snap of her fingers, the decorative origami rings all around the room began shining brilliantly, like the night sky.

"Wow..." Olivia gazed at them, spellbound.

I was more than content. *Who knew it was possible to be this happy? Surprises are a thing of beauty.*

"All right, now, I've made nothing but your favorite food, so what say we get this birthday bash started?"

"Uh-huh!" Olivia jumped for joy.

Our meal of fun and fancy now done, I retrieved a small box. "Olivia, Daddy has a present for you too."

"Huh?"

"Here... You liked this ruby."

From inside the box, I took out a brooch made using a ruby that had been in my shrine-den. I scoured the jewelry stores in all of the villages and towns in the vicinity, searching for a place that would make me something in a day's time. As I'd gotten it produced in a hurry, I wasn't really feeling the box's decoration, but the big ruby was there in all its shininess.

"I don't know if you remember, but when you were small, you told me you liked this ruby because it looks like your Daddy's eyes."

Owing to my powerful draconic mana, my eyes are a deep red, and that doesn't change even while in human form. These red eyes of mine are the biggest difference in appearance between me and an ordinary human. Yet Olivia had held this ruby up to the sun and exclaimed with delight about how it "looks like Daddy's eyes!" That smile on her face is still one of my treasured memories, and it'll always have a special place in my heart.

"That's why I'm giving this to you as your gift."

For her first-ever birthday celebration, I wanted to give her a memento of us, and I was sure that this ruby was a worthy present.

"Oh my gosh... I'm so happy! Thank you, Daddy!"

She glomped me. I attached the brooch to Olivia's clothes.

"Tee hee! Hope it looks good on me!"

"Oh, it looks wonderful on you."

And so our fun "first birthday party" wound down.

I can't wait for next year's party... This birthday thing is such a fantastic idea!

On winter's heels came the spring, and the blooming spreed flowers heralded the start of a new year.

Chapter 11: Mr. Dragon Receives Notification She Passed the Test

All right, I've made up my mind.

The seasons cycled three times, and Olivia turned nine years old. Apparently, when the humans of this nation get to that age, their guardians prepare to send them to a place called a “school,” and at this school, they pass the time alongside a whole load of teachers and friends.

For the sake of her future, she needed to do it. Make friends with humans her own age. Due in part, I'm sure, to her not-so-joyful early years, she often seemed a little more childish than what the parenting books say she should be now, but at other times she acted *too* maturely. How do I put this? Mainly, it's that she expresses her affection for her Daddy so...straightforwardly. Undisguisedly. In fact, she's *extremely* pliant!

She did have her terrible twos to a slight extent, but it was way more minor than in my parenting books. Don't get me wrong; I'm happy she loves me, but I know that at this age, she should probably be hanging out with lots of friends in the same generation as her. The reason she's pouring all of her brimming stores of affection onto me is because she doesn't have another outlet. And that can't be the healthiest state of affairs for her if she's to grow into a happy human.

So here I was, discussing the matter with the two ladies. “...And that's why I'd like to show Olivia the world outside the castle.”

This stunned the Dark Queen. “Haugh? For real though? Are you gonna be okay with that, Elder Dragon?!”

“I'll miss her.”

“Haugh! Hark, Elder Dragon! There's naught but horrors outside! And, like, if it suits you, I'll teach her more magic! Without Olivia around, it'll...it'll be so lonely...”

“Queen Maredia... If you're feeling lonely, well, um, I'll still be here, unworthy

though I am.”

“Haugh... Olivia...”

“She didn’t even hear me...” Clowria sighed.

The Dark Queen’s golden eyes were getting misty.

“Miss Dark Queen, you’ve done great by us,” I explained. “You’ve been teaching Olivia magic and the basics of how to read grimoires and stuff every day, for one.”

“Uh-huh! Olivia has a talent for it. As it stands, she’s way more skilled than that detestable Hero’s stupid weak-ass mage!”

“Plus, you’ve been instructing her in martial arts and swordsmanship and stuff, Miss Clowria.”

“And she’s a deft hand at those too. I daresay she’s stronger than the top brass of the Dark Army were.”

“Right. And I can sense how much Olivia’s growing day by day. And yet...”

“And yet?”

I squared my shoulders. “And yet, well...in the eyes of humans, we’re all ancient geezers!”

“Ancient g-g-geezers? How rude!”

“You do realize the vast majority of humans don’t even make it to a hundred years old, right? Miss Dark Queen, how long have you been kicking?”

“Uhh, I, uhh...”

“You’ve been around for a thousand or so years, no?”

She nodded deeply. “Erm... I’m, uhh, around a thousand five hundred.”

And I bet that put Miss Clowria at more or less the same age. “I don’t know exactly how old I am,” I continued, “but it’s in the tens of thousands of years. By human standards, we’re all old fogeys!”

“Haugh whaaa?!” At the word “fogeys,” the Dark Queen clutched her head in her hands and whined. Miss Clowria, for her part, rubbed her temples with a

groan of her own. Regardless, it seemed they couldn't refute it. It's a fact humans don't live for thousands or tens of thousands of years.

"As such, I want Olivia to make friends her age." I plopped some parenting books on the desk: *Your Child's Development by Age*, *On Letting Go: For Both Parent and Child*, and *A Comprehensive Guide to Entrance Exams Across the Lands*. They were all books I'd read time and time again after taking Olivia in. I opened one to a specific page. "Look at this. I want to send her to a *school*."

"A, a school?!" cried a wide-eyed Dark Queen, who got to her feet. "Haugh, not a *school*! Olivia, at a *school*... Augh...! You, you can't... She'll get wrapped up in a school rom-com!!!"

"Huh? A school what?" I had no idea what she was saying.

In any case, Olivia was school-age now, and I had to make the necessary preparations. From that point on, the days flew by as I bustled about choosing one and setting her up for her entrance exam and what have you. Ultimately, I chose a school for girls in their teens that requires a specialized entrance exam—the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

* * *

A letter of acceptance.

I kept reading it over and over. It was proof that Olivia had passed the entrance exam of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, which she'd taken just the other day. The pamphlet described it as a boarding school and said that all students were required to pass an exam to attend. I chose that school because Olivia had barely spent any time in human society and I wanted a place with rock-solid security. The higher the barrier of entry, the less likely that dangerous sorts make it in. Like, say, gigantic dragons.

"So she's in, huh."

Olivia was happily snacking on some pudding, handmade by me, as she gazed my way. It was drenched in raspberry sauce, which Olivia loves. The sweet-and-sour fruit juice seeped right into the bread of the pudding. It's another signature dish of mine as of late.

"Tee hee! Guess I did my best, huh, Daddy?" she said, looking at me. Her eyes

peeked out from beneath her lashes, fishing for praise.

“Mm-hmm. You sure did, sweetheart!”

Very gently, I stroked her head. Recently, she’d taken to braiding her long hair. At first, I’d braided it for her (as Miss Clowria taught me), but Olivia learned to do it herself in no time flat. My daughter’s so gifted.

“Tee hee, Daddy! You’re gonna ruffle up my hair!” she laughed, grinning.

I checked the acceptance letter for the umpteenth time before stopping to appreciate Olivia’s smile.

She’d passed.

“Hee hee!”

Olivia’s smile.

She’d *passed*.

“Hee hee!”

Olivia’s smile!

I was so happy that I didn’t know what to do with myself. This letter of acceptance was the fruit of her labor, the first notch under her belt in the human world. As her father, how could I *not* be happy? I was deeply, deeply moved. “You’ve grown big enough to be able to pass those ‘entrance exam’ things.”

“And you know what, Daddy, it was super easy too!”

“Was it now? These ‘Subjet Exam’ things are how humans study, right?”

“You mean Subject Exams, Daddy. And it was way easier than study time with Miss Maredia!”

“Is that right? We’ll need to thank her again. By the way, what’s this ‘Combat Exam’?”

“Err, well, they had me play around with this moving doll thing. Compared to my training with Miss Clowria, it was easy-peasy.”

“I see. We’ll have to express our gratitude to Miss Clowria as well... Now,

what's this 'Mana Reading' section about?"

Incidentally, the Subject Exams, Combat Exam, and Mana Reading sections of the letter all read "SS Rank." I wondered what "SS" meant, though given she'd passed, I knew it couldn't be a low rank.

"Well, they measured my height and weight and stuff, and then they put this big crystal ball thing like one of the ones in your cave in my hands, and it was so pretty how it shined in all the colors of the rainbow! I think it's gotta be that device I read about in one of the library books. A mana gauge!"

"Huh. How interesting. But what's the point of measuring your mana?"

"Everybody who saw my crystal ball was saying, 'That's dracoshaman level!'"

"'Dracoshaman'... 'Draco' as in dragon?"

"Uh-huh. The Elder Dragon of the Sacred Peak is you, right, Daddy?"

"That's what humans call me, anyway."

"Gotcha." At my words, Olivia smiled. "They said it was just like how the ball'd react to the mana of an elder dragon. We really are family!"

"Wow, that's what they said, huh!"

I did hear that if a child grows up from an early age near a being with lots of mana, that mana can transfer to the child. I remember reading it in *Parenting for Witches and Wizards*. I was a bit skeptical, but I realized then that perhaps Olivia harbored the same sort of mana I did. And the fact that her mana resembles mine serves as proof we've lived together as father and daughter for some time. In other words, I am unequivocally her Daddy, and now that that was verified in an objective way, I felt a gush of pride. Thanks, entrance exam!

She'd apparently be in the "pre-academy preparation" phase of the school until age twelve. Also, there was to be a "ball" for new students, but since a lot of adults would come to that, I declined the invitation. If I remember correctly, a "ball" can mean a big dust-up where fighters beat each other up, and my entering the arena wouldn't exactly be fair. Not to mention dangerous for the humans. That said, the invitation also said students should wear a dress. Do people fight in dresses?

Enrollment day came in the blink of an eye.

* * *

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls: the boarding school for girls ages twelve and up where Olivia would soon be attending. According to the enrollment handbook, it wasn't just the school uniform and textbooks that she needed—I also needed to buy her everyday household goods, casual clothes she'd wear in the dorms, fancy dresses for dinner parties, and various other tools and devices.

Olivia mostly lacked a thirst for physical possessions, and her wardrobe was minimal. The year-long preparatory phase went by before I knew it, and the school entrance ceremony lay right around the corner. We had to go do some shopping, and thankfully, the handbook listed what stores to go to and what to buy.

“So we’re gonna go shopping today.”

“Yay! Shopping with Daddy!”

There was a shopping city named Miranda not far from the forests of Olympias where we lived. A great deal of shops were crammed up against each other, and people walking down the streets were glamming it up.

This being her first time visiting a city, Olivia’s eyes were sparkling. Her insatiable curiosity was one of her strong points.

“Haugh... Why must I go outside too?”

“Thank you, Miss Dark Queen. I figured that it’d be better for you to pick out clothes for Olivia than me. You look more her age.”

“You say that, but I am more than a millennium older! Come to think of it, you called me an ‘old fogey’ not too long ago, didn’t you, Elder Dragon?!”

“Th-That was a figure of speech... Okay, you’re right, I’m sorry.”

“Good grief. It’s been *centuries* since I last left the castle!”

She was even more heavily clothed than usual, and she had on a pair of tinted eyeglasses. She’d pulled a hood down over her eyes so as to hide her sheep

horns.

She feels more at ease that way, I hear. Though, I guess she was pretty famous for a time. There are those among the little folks with longer lifespans than humans, like elves, so there might be people who remember her. I can understand her wanting to be in disguise.

“Lo!” Miss Clowria waved a hand as she walked over to us, the crepe the Dark Queen had asked her to buy in hand. She was wearing a sleeveless vest and very short pants; it looked really comfortable to move in. I’m told this style is in vogue.

“Hmph, when Clowria’s dressed like that, you can tell what a nice figure she has... I’m so jeal—err, I mean, oh, such scandalous attire!” The Dark Queen just kept staring at Miss Clowria.

Passersby were also stealing glances at the shapely Miss Clowria. She never misses a day training, and a well-toned body is always attractive.

“My liege, I bought you your crepe!”

“Clowria, tell me you got me a chocolate banana one.”

“Of course. And I asked for extra cream too.”

“Whoa... Damn, that looks good!”

Her golden eyes sparkled as she took the crepe. Olivia hopped lightly up and down. “Aww, I want some too!”

“Hrm? You, you get one bite, all right? This is *my* crepe. Now open up.”

“Tee hee, thanks! Nom.”

“Haugh?! That was a BIG bite, Oliviaaaa!”

What a heartwarming scene! “It brings me joy to see Miss Dark Queen getting on so famously with Olivia,” I remarked to Miss Clowria as we watched the two mess around like siblings.

“And I’m relieved Her Darkness is having so much fun day in and day out.”

We might as well have been their parents, talking about them like that. I hoped Olivia would make lots of friends as close as the Dark Queen.

“All right,” said the Dark Queen, “let’s start with her uniform!”

“My Queen, please wipe the chocolate off your mouth first.”

And so we walked down the streets of Miranda, with Miss Clowria leading the pack. She’d come here to shop a number of times before. The city was jam-packed with more shops than I’d ever seen crammed tightly together. Humans, elves, and dwarves populated the crowded streets, and there were even some people who looked a lot like dark-kin.

“Olivia, we wouldn’t want you to get lost, so let’s hold hands.”

Strolling down the street with her hand in mine made me feel a strange pride inside. *Look, folks! Look at how cute my daughter is!*

The time we spent together was a veritable whirlwind.

Clowria talked through what we still needed to do that day. “We had her measurements taken for the uniform, so let’s go see about her dorm clothes next. And it looks like the school has designated pajamas, so we have to order those eventually as well. Let’s see, what else... We need a dress for the ball too.”

“Wow, there’s so much to buy,” I replied.

“It also said to write her name on all her belongings, so let’s visit a store that does embroidery so we can ask them to embroider her name. Shall we?”

“There’s that too, huh! Thank you, Miss Clowria. You’re a huge help!”

“Oh, ’tis nothing. I’ve not seen Her Darkness have this much fun in a long while, so this much is no problem at all.”

Miss Clowria’s eyes looked so affectionate as she watched the Dark Queen fight with Olivia over some cotton candy, though I realize I was probably making the same expression as I watched my little one.

“Wow, you’re wearing a dress, Olivia!”

“Tee hee! Do I look like a princess, Daddy?”

“You’re the spitting image of one!”

The dress for the ball marked the last thing we bought that day. Apparently, a “ball” is just a dance party. I was thinking of “brawl.” I was glad there’d be no fighting involved.

We deliberated quite a bit over the color of the dress, and in the end, I decided to just buy whatever the Dark Queen suggested. Evidently, the small handful of gold coins I took with me from my shrine-den could buy a hundred dresses and then some. I had no idea since I have great big piles of coins there.

We sure bought a lot of stuff that day. Thinking back to the store where we bought her uniform...

“Olivia, that uniform looks great on you.”

“Really? Do you wanna wear one, Daddy?”

“Huh?! Oh, no, that’s all right.”

“Tee hee, just kidding!”

That was fun.

On our way home, I felt warm and fuzzy reminiscing over the day’s events. What a fulfilling day it had been! We got her textbooks, her pens, and even her household goods. The city sold practically any ware you could think of.

When we left the city, Olivia was holding almost more than she could carry in her arms, her cheeks as red as the evening glow of the skies above. Now she was on my back.

“...Look how sound asleep she is,” said the Dark Queen.

“She really is.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s probably because this was her first time in a city like that. Aren’t all those bags heavy, you two?”

“I’ve some muscle. Are you okay, my Queen?”

“This much is no sweat! Good grief, to think Olivia could make me, the Dark Queen Maredia, hold her bags for her! She might just be a hero of legend one

day.”

“I don’t mind if that’s where life takes her. But I also don’t mind if she lives an uneventful life as an ordinary human, so long as she’s happy.”

I knew that once she was in school, I wouldn’t be able to see her for some time. But I also knew this was a necessary step for her.

I could feel her body heat and her little heartbeat on my back.

I harkened back to that cold winter’s day. I could recall the whistle of the winds as I placed the human baby on my back and plodded over to Pias. The day I met my Olivia.

She slept on my back like nothing could hurt her.

Several years had passed since the fateful day I became a father, and in that time, Olivia had become my treasure. I looked up at the scarlet sunset. “School, huh. I just hope she enjoys it.”

The first star to appear that evening twinkled in the distance.

Chapter 12: Mr. Dragon Gets a Name

Olivia's first day at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls was close at hand. I was sitting in a chair with my head in my hands. "Oh boy... A name, huh..."

"What's wrong, Daddy? I can write names real well," boasted Olivia, quill in hand.

I was looking over the letter sent by the Florence Academy while drinking my post-meal tea at the wide, empty table in the dining hall.

"You can, honey. And your handwriting's really pretty too."

"Teh heh heh!"

I shifted my eyes back down to the document. It seemed Olivia's entrance exam answer sheet was published in the *Florence Academy for Girls Guardian Bulletin* as the model answers. Olivia's handwriting is beautiful, and the contents of her writing were splendid enough to have warranted a letter from the Headmistress.

However, there was a note at the bottom of the document:

ATTENTION: Olivia's family name was omitted from both the enrollment application and the examination answer sheet. Under normal circumstances, such a gross error would have caused her to fail. However, taking into account the extremely outstanding results of her test, she will enter the academy at the top of her class. Please be sure to write her family name as well as her first name in the letter of consent.

This was the source of my consternation. *A family name? A family name...* "Family names are as human-culture as it gets, aren't they...?"

I'm a dragon. I had no name, and never did. I didn't have a surname to give her. "What should I do, Miss Clowria?"

"Hmm... I think you ought to cook up any old name. As long as you avoid the surname of a noble line that's famous in human society, it shan't raise any

eyebrows.”

“That’s all there is to it?” Miss Clowria’s bold suggestion gave me pause. What if they got mad at me and that caused Olivia to be unable to attend school? Whenever Olivia’s future entered the picture, I turned into a big wuss.

“I’d like to hear what Miss Dark Queen has to say... Speaking of which, where is she?”

“Ahh... You see, now that Olivia’s first day of school is approaching, she’s caught a case of the blues. In fact, she’s taken to shutting herself in the Western Tower, just like before.”

“I’ll be!”

“She’s the great and mighty Dark Queen Maredia, so I’m sure she shall have something to say on the matter...is what I’ll tell her.”

“Y-You will?”

Lately, I’d been thinking I ought to lend Miss Clowria a book called *If Your Child Becomes a Shut-In*. But on the other hand, the Dark Queen did say she was over a thousand, so she’s well and truly an adult by now.

Then Olivia, who’d been listening to us talk, shouted, “Can I give us a name?!”

“What? Ah, sure, go ahead. I have a feeling it’s best to just use any old name, just like Miss Clowria said.”

“In that case, I’ve got a name in mind!”

“Huh? You do, Olivia?”

“Uh-huh! I’ve been thinking of a family name for a real long time!”

I was surprised, as I never would’ve guessed she’d been giving a thing like that any thought. I didn’t know what Olivia’s former family name was, nor did I feel like saddling her with the name of a man who treated her like dirt before abandoning her out in the freezing winter. *I can’t stand the thought of Olivia going by the surname of such a scumbag of a father. Besides, I’m her Daddy now.*

“Daddy, you look angry.”

Ah, drat. It looks as though whenever I think about that man, my expression turns grim. *Up until now, a single human man could never mean a thing to me who's lived since time immemorial.*

"Ah, I'm sorry, Olivia. So tell me, what family name do you wanna give us?"

"Just wait there a sec!" And with that, she ran off, returning before long with a book in hand. She must have brought it from the Library of Grimoires. "I think this is the name for us!"

"This name?"

It was a book called *Names of the Holy Households of Human History*. It looked like heavy reading, but the cover was a handsome one studded with jewels. Some distinguished, eminent human must have compiled this biographical dictionary. Flipping through its pages, I saw it was full of names, including those of famous figures throughout history and their accomplishments. I'd even met a handful of these humans before, although they were really just brief back-and-forths rather than encounters worth writing home about.

"Lessee..." Olivia flipped through the pages with practiced hands until she hit the page she was looking for. She stared intently at the text, and then her wee little finger landed on a word. "I like this name for us, Daddy. I thought about it for a long time. Eldraco!"

"...Eldraco..." I ran my eyes over the explanation written by the name. "Hmm..."

The name means "wicked dragon," or alternatively, "devil." The book also said it was a "posthumous name."

I heard that some among the dragons who're younger than me persecuted the little folks (like humans, elves, dwarves, etc.), so I guess that's how this name was derived. In any case, it wasn't a name that carried a positive connotation. Not knowing what to tell Olivia, I searched for the right words. I didn't think it was really the best name for us.

"Ah, uh, Olivia. About this name..."

"I really like Eldraco. It means 'like a dragon,' see? There's even a drawing

here.”

It was an illustration of a dragon breathing fire on a human town. *Yikes. I don't do that kinda thing, but I suppose some dragons do. Talk about bad vibes...*

“Right, but look, my darling. The meaning of the name isn't all that pleasant...”

“Why?”

“It's written right here.”

Olivia looked at me with astonishment. “That's not true! It says family names are the names of households. And my Daddy's kind, and big, and cool!”

“Olivia.”

“I remember, Daddy. I remember the day I met you, when I was small. I was so cold and lonely back in those days. But then you, my dragon Daddy, put me on your back, and it felt so nice and warm!”

Olivia's words took me aback. She didn't want that name because of what the book had to say about it. She wanted it because it reminded her of *me*.

“I was...warm?”

“Uh-huh! Your mane smelled nice, and it was soft and warm! And I'm the daughter of a kind and loving dragon Daddy... So I want a name that means someone like you...” she said, fidgeting with the hem of her clothes. “So...that's why I wanna be an Eldraco.”

“Olivia, I had no idea that was going through your head all this time.”

“Tee hee. Is it a bad idea? It's just, I'll be going to a far-off school. But with a name like Eldraco, it's like you'll be right next to me...” she said, smiling bashfully.

Those words shot me right in the heart. And she was right. Who cares about how some stranger casts a name? This was the name she wanted to go by as my child! If Olivia's able to lead a life of bliss alongside a name that tells the world she's my daughter, then nothing could make me happier.

“Olivia Eldraco,” said Miss Clowria, who had a cup of black tea in one hand. “That sounds like a wonderful name to me.”

I held my pen and quickly and easily jotted her brand new name on the enrollment papers. *Olivia Eldraco*. I looked at those letters. *Not bad*.

“...Olivia.”

“Daddy!”

“From this day forward, you’re Olivia Eldraco. The daughter and greatest treasure of the dragon that lives on the Sacred Peak of Olympias.”

“Tee hee! Nice to meet you! My name’s Olivia Eldraco!”

She glomped me, and I hugged her tight. I felt the beating of her small heart and her warmth. She’s my darling little daughter.

Through our new family name, I got the feeling that the bond between us became even stronger. It was as though it had been made visible to the world. From this point on, we were family, no matter where we might go. *Wonder whether the humans of the distant past created surnames with that same sentiment.*

“Ah, but don’t tell anyone at school that your Daddy’s a dragon, okay?”

“You got it!” she replied, hands in the air.

Having a dragon for a Daddy is a bit on the weird side, after all.

From then on, we wrote her name on all of the things she’d bring with her to school. She did some, and I did some others. We wrote her name neatly and with great care. Olivia Eldraco on her pens, Olivia Eldraco on her hats. Olivia Eldraco on her shoes, Olivia Eldraco on her textbooks. And as we broke in her new name, writing it over and over and over, I prayed she’d enjoy her school life.

...I’ve gotta say, though. There’s a LOT of stuff to write her name on!

Chapter 13: Mr. Dragon Attends the School Enrollment Ceremony

It was really sunny on the day of the school enrollment ceremony.

Granted, that's only because I blew away the rain clouds that formed on our way there. It'd been a while since I had assumed my dragon form and taken wing with Olivia at my back.

Good thing the rain clouds were small enough to dispel with just a little puff. A long, long time ago, there'd been a prolonged spell of rain that lasted years and years. Humans had called it the "Tears of Ruin," the sadness-induced downpour of the god of calamity. Blowing those clouds away had been a rather tall order, but I'd been so sick of the humidity that I'd kept at it.

I landed near the school and transformed back into my human form. Hand in hand, Olivia and I walked to the gates. Towering over the grassy fields was the prestigious boarding school she'd start attending that day—the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

Olivia had on her brand new uniform and a mature, grown-up look on her face. So cute. The brooch on her chest, the red ruby I gave her for her first birthday celebration, was shining. She'd said she wanted to stick it on because it made her feel like her Daddy's always there with her.

The girls present at the ceremony were Olivia's age, and their parents were also dressed to the nines. I couldn't pinpoint why exactly, but their outfits seemed so classy. Looking at them, I suddenly felt uneasy. Maybe my own clothes were strange for a human parent to be wearing. I did as the Dark Queen told me to do and bought the whole ensemble off of a mannequin labeled as the "Outfit of the Season," but...I'm a dragon that's lived a life of leisure on a mountain. I couldn't be sure I was comporting myself correctly as the dad of a (super cute) little human girl.

"Uh, erm, Olivia?" I whispered into her ear. She was walking alongside me.

“Hmm? What is it, Daddy?”

“Do I look, uh, *off* at all?”

“Heh, heh heh heh!”

No way, I thought. Is something off after all?

“Oh no, I do look strange, don’t I?! Am I doing this right?”

“Hee hee, I’m sorry for laughing, Daddy. It’s just, you looked so flustered. Besides, this is the first time I’m seeing so many girls and moms and dads. How am I supposed to know?”

“Oh, oh yeah, you’ve got a point.”

“But you know,” she said, staring straight at me and standing on her tippy toes to whisper in my ear, “you’ve got the most style out of all the dads here.”

What a bomb! “Gwuh?! Aww, Olivia, thank you!!!”

My daughter is just the nicest!



The entrance ceremony was held in the Grand Auditorium before a huge crowd of students and their guardians. When the proceedings came to a close and Olivia was shown to her classroom, I took a seat at the auditorium and waited for Olivia and the rest of the new students. To my amazement, she had been chosen to give an address and represent the class of newly enrolled girls. And while it was apparently just reading a passage prewritten by the academy, I couldn't wait to see her in her hour of triumph.

"Ah, there you are! Over here!"

Upon entering the Grand Auditorium, a tall woman with pink hair waved at me. It was Miss Clowria. She'd traveled all the way to the Florence Academy to witness Olivia's moment of pride.

If I were in dragon form, I could see the stage and all the first-years on it no matter where I was. In human form, however, there was a chance I wouldn't be able to catch sight of Olivia unless I found a good vantage point. It was the Dark Queen who told me the phrase for a good vantage point is "the best seat in the house."

"Wow, these really *are* the best seats in the house!"

"Indeed," said Miss Clowria. "Our reward for getting in line early."

"Where's Miss Dark Queen?"

"She is here... My liege?"

"She is?"

I looked all around, but I didn't see her seated anywhere. Then, a familiar voice emerged from Miss Clowria's chest. "Haugh... That I should be so imprisoned in such cramped quarters..."

Squirming out from Miss Clowria's top was a black cat with a red ribbon tied around its neck. It was so tiny! I got the feeling I'd *seen* it before. It was those eyes—they were a really pretty gold, almost like little moons...

"Miss Dark Queen?"

"Heh heh. *You* can take the form of a handsome man, so there's no way I wouldn't be able to shapeshift too. Well? Go on, tell me I'm cute!"

“You’re extremely cute, my liege!”

“Ha, haugh...” Miss Clowria’s praise seemed to have made her all sheepish. The kitty queen started nervously grooming her face.

She’s just like a bona fide cat, I mused. All things considered, she must truly hate leaving the castle if she’s willing to go as far as to shapeshift and be carried around by Miss Clowria.

“Thank you, Miss Dark Queen. Olivia’ll be thrilled. She told me she wanted you at the ceremony too.”

“W-Well, I’m just here ‘cause I figured it wouldn’t hurt to observe how humans live their lives!”

“Apologies, Sir Elder Dragon. Her Darkness is feeling shy.”

“Haugh, Clowria?!”

Just then, a woman in majorly showy attire took a seat next to us. She was accompanied by a number of retainers and seemed like a big shot. She looked offended, somehow. Was she some sort of monarch, or what?

“...How do you do?”

“Ah, hello.”

The lady glared sharply at us, as though sizing us up, before heaving a sigh. “Good grief. I can scarcely believe a member of the Palestria family is being made to sit in the same auditorium as plebeians like them. The fact that they switched to a meritocratic system *sounds* all well and good, but this academy, too, is not what it once was!”

“Pales...?” I’d never heard that name before. I’m aware that I was living in a bubble, though, since the only people in centuries who’d come to see me on the mountain were those filling roles like “hero” or “king.” That said, I knew it wouldn’t do to come off too rude. I supposed I ought to introduce myself. She might be the mother of a future friend of Olivia’s, after all.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Palestria. Err, my name’s...” Then I smiled and stifled a chortle. I do have a name now. “My name’s Eldraco!!!”

“Well aren’t we self-confident... Draco, you say? Hmph. Is that not a

posthumous name? I swear, rabble like you, here at the esteemed Florence Academy. What cram school does your family even use?"

"Cram school?" *What's that?*

"Ugh. I'm asking you what cram school you used for the entrance exam. Not that it has anything to do with the House of Palestria, given we have employed private tutors for generations," she replied huffily.

"Erm, well, I guess you could say we use private tutors too."

I mean, the Dark Queen taught her magic and how to read grimoires, Miss Clowria taught her martial arts and the sword, and I taught her the ancient tongue...so yeah. We're private tutors.

"Pshaw. Well, you may have clawed your way to enrollment, but I think you'll find studying at this academy might just be too high-level for no-name commoners! I'll have you know my daughter boasts the second-highest grades of the entrance exam, and that her future is quite bright indeed."

Boy, Mrs. Palestria sure goes on and on. Can't say I don't relate to her pride in her daughter, though.

"Haugghh... I don't like her," muttered the Dark Queen, her fur standing on end as she listened to our exchange. Evidently, she wasn't much for people with inflated egos.

"Allow me to inform you that the House of Palestria traces its honored lineage to the mage that played a role in yon Hero's subdual of the Dark Queen—"

"Haugh... I *thought* I heard that name before. That liar! The dunderhead that went by 'Palestria' or whatever scurried home right before stepping foot in the castle! Quit bending the truth!"

"Huh? What was that voice just now?"

"HISS!"

"Eek! A, a black cat?! How foreboding!"

Cats are tough customers, aren't they?

It was then, with a flourish of trumpets, that the new first-years streamed into

the auditorium. The parents and guardians who had been chatting among themselves now hushed up.

“Oh my, where is our Olivia, I wonder?” asked Miss Clowria, looking around restlessly.

“Over there.”

I spotted her the instant she entered. Her braided pigtails swung in the air. In her brand new uniform, our Olivia was the cutest of them all!

“Hauugh, Clowria. I wanna see too!”

“Oh, sorry, of course. My Queen, can you see her from here? Weeee, you’re flying high!”

“Haugh! Hey, I’m not a baby, okay?! ...Ah, I see her!”

Olivia spotted us too, and she flashed us a smile. Her grin was a tad more awkward than usual; it looked as though she was a bit nervous. It was the first time I’d ever seen that look on her face. She was stuck home all this time, so she had never experienced a place like this. *You can do it, Olivia. Your Daddy’s got your back!*

“Ah, Daisy, over here!!!”

Mrs. Palestria had been so standoffish before, but apparently she’d spotted her daughter because now she was effervescent.

Shortly thereafter, the ceremony commenced. It wasn’t long now before that moment would be upon us. A stern-looking woman—the Headmistress—read out the new students’ names.

“Olivia Eldraco, head of the class.”

“Yes, ma’am!” shouted Olivia in reply, after which she stepped up to the stage.

“Eep!” came a voice from next to us. “...‘Eldraco’? The, the head of the class?!” A visibly astonished Mrs. Palestria kept shooting glances my way.

I couldn’t help but feel delighted. *That’s right. That adorable little girl’s my daughter!!!*

“I never... I haven’t heard that name come up in any cram school or mock exam...and yet she’s head of the class?” she mumbled.

The whole auditorium was abuzz. The black cat that was the Dark Queen wagged her tail with satisfaction at Mrs. Palestria’s dumbfounded expression. “Heh heh. Serves ya right!”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Olivia on the stage. She took a deep breath and unfolded a paper.

“Today, we take our first step into the next chapter of our journeys as members of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls,” she said, her words booming throughout the auditorium. Her voice was stiff and keyed up, but she put her utmost effort into reading her address and in a stately fashion. She did a splendid job. Who knew she was talented at public speaking too! *Get a good look, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter really is that cute!!!*

“Hey, excuse me, are you Mr. Eldraco?”

Once the entrance ceremony was over and the new students went to their classrooms, their guardians could only head back out, but a woman stopped me by calling out to me.

“Ah, uhh...”

“I’m the Headmistress, Courié. Are you Mr. Eldraco?”

“Is something the matter with Olivia?”

“No, I just wanted the chance to meet you. Olivia Eldraco’s mana measurements, as taken when she entered the academy, were so powerful as to be beyond outlier levels. And that’s not to mention her almost full marks on the subject exams... I just wished to ask you: what sort of education did she receive to grow up so brilliant?”

“Ahh... I raised her with love and affection.”

“R-Right. And? Anything else besides that?”

“Uhhh...sorry. Nothing springs to mind.”

At that, the Headmistress’s eyes became round as saucers.

The Dark Queen mewled. “Haugh, I wanna go home...”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I leave Olivia in your capable hands. See you!” And I ran after Miss Clowria.

As you can see, Olivia’s school life got off to a smooth start, and I returned home alongside the two ladies. The next time we’d meet would be during summer vacation, three months from now. Until this point, I’d thought a hundred years could pass in the blink of an eye, but I figured the three months I’d spend waiting for Olivia’s homecoming would probably feel like ages. Nonetheless, it wouldn’t take long for me to realize that my worries were groundless.

Chapter 14: Mr. Dragon Receives Letters

A week had passed since Olivia's first day of school. A great big owl delivered a bundle of letters to our home. It was a familiar, an animal that lives alongside humans.

"Thank you, Mr. Owl. Bye-bye."

I waved my hand, and the owl bowed politely. Smart as a whip, it was. And its feathers were so glossy. Someone must be keeping good care of it.

The delivery contained regularly scheduled communications from the school as well as...

"This one's from Olivia!"

Olivia's neat handwriting graced the envelope.

"Awww... It says 'TO FATHER'!"

I could sense how much she'd matured. She always used to call me "Daddy." Sure, it was a letter, but her calling me "Father" felt a smidge awkward. "I've gotta say, though, that's a fair bunch of letters. Let's see here..."

I unfolded it and took my sweet time savoring it.



Father,

I hope you're doing well. I'm doing well at school. I'm in the all-star class now. I was surprised because there's only six people in it. But I already made some friends. Daisy Palestria is my closest friend out of all of them. May I bring her home with me when we're on break? Daisy's mother is really scary, so Daisy says she doesn't want to be there if she doesn't have to be. My other friends in class are always talking about how their dads or moms are scary too. But since you're so nice, it doesn't click for me. The only thing that goes through my head is "huh?" But that just means I'm a really lucky girl! So let me thank you again.

To my dearest Daddy,

Signed, Olivia Eldraco



I read that last bit around a hundred times. Just by calling me her “dearest Daddy,” a smile appears on my lips. *“My dearest Daddy”... Olivia, sweetheart, you’re my dearest too.*

“Let’s see here... This one’s from the school, huh.” I reached for the next envelope. It was labeled as from the Secretariat of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. The letter rustled as I unfolded it and I gave it a quick scan.



Dear Mr. Eldraco,

Thank you very much for your continued support of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls’s foundational principles and guiding dictates. This is a periodically conducted evaluation of the scholastic performance of your child, Olivia Eldraco. One of the academy’s features involves frequent and detailed feedback regarding the students’ progress as learners.

MIDTERM SCHOLASTIC EVALUATION

MAGIC THEORY: S+

SPELLCASTING: S+

SWORD BASICS: S+

HORSEBACK RIDING: S+

GRIMOIRE COMPREHENSION: S+

BASICS OF ANCIENT LINGUISTICS: S+

COMMENTS

She is enrolled in the all-star class, the proud pinnacle of this academy. The all-star class was patterned after the Six Sages by Phyllis Florence, herself one of the Six Sages of Riaris, and Founder of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Each grade has an all-star class composed of six students, yet Olivia’s grades are outstanding even among her peers. We would kindly suggest that you consider having Olivia skip grades or even advance directly to higher education.

Please direct any questions you may have to the Secretariat of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

Signed,

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls



I was overjoyed. “Wow, Olivia’s really breaking a leg out there!”

Miss Clowria told me that an “S” on a report card stood for a truly outstanding grade. That many in a row signified how much effort she was putting into her schoolwork. Plus, she said she’d made friends. Summer break couldn’t come soon enough for me.

Wonder what this Daisy girl’s like. She’s a Palestria, huh... Guess that makes her the daughter of the woman who sat next to us at the entrance ceremony. She did have a forbidding air to her.

“Right then, I’m gonna put in some elbow grease airing out the grimoires while she’s not here!” I figured I might as well focus on the grimoires that are too dangerous for Olivia to handle. It was up to me to do it as the Dark Queen was in truly low spirits now that Olivia was away and hardly ever exited the Western Tower.

From then on, the owl flew by the castle on a regular basis. One day, it came carrying yet another letter from Olivia and yet another report card of straight S+’s.

“Ah!” I blurted, upon reading the letter.



Father,

I’m coming home next week!

To my dearest Daddy,

Signed, Olivia Eldraco



That was all she’d written. Her excited handwriting spoke volumes of how

impatient she was to return home.

“Fantastic! Olivia’s coming back!” I skipped little skips of joy. Miss Clowria recently taught me the amusing style of walking called “skipping” that humans do on occasion, and I couldn’t help myself. “Miss Dark Queeeeen! Miss Clowria! Olivia’s gonna come home!!!”

I skipped right out the castle doors, reverted to dragon form, and took flight.

“Haughh, Elder Dragon! This is an invasion of privacy!!!” shouted the Dark Queen, still in her pajamas.

But as soon as she learned of Olivia’s imminent return, she cried out, “Clowriaaaa!”

Oh how I looked forward to it! I wondered whether she’d tell us all about school. I’d make her favorite dishes for dinner, that was for sure.

The spring semester passed by in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.

* * *

The day was finally here. It was the first morning of the Florence Academy’s summer break. I’d brought a chair out in front of our home and sat waiting for Olivia’s return. Being the Dark Queen’s Castle, our home is pretty spacious. So spacious, in fact, that it takes a while to reach the entrance from the kitchen, where I spend much of my time. I wanted to see her as soon as possible.

“Hey, Elder Dragon! Is Olivia here yet?”

“Nope, not yet.”

The Dark Queen came down again and again from the Western Tower just to ask me. To think she’d been holed up in the Western Tower with Miss Clowria this whole time. She had ants in her pants and then some.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you something, Miss Dark Queen.”

“What?”

“It looks like Olivia’s bringing a friend home. Is that all right?”

“Haugh whaaa?!” She froze solid.

I see. She’s super not into the idea of meeting people, huh... I suppose it made

sense. Long, long ago, dark-kin lived lives of relative peace, but ever since humans multiplied, things have been a mite rough for them. Humans were after her head for so long and the Hero wreaked havoc on the castle and on her dark-kin comrades. The dark-kin population has definitely dwindled.

“B-But...I wanna see Olivia...” The Dark Queen started squirming and fidgeting with the hem of her pajamas. I could imagine her calling Miss Clowria over, clinging to her tall form, and bawling her eyes out, just like always.

“It’ll be all right. Olivia picked this girl to be her friend. There’s no way she’s not a good girl.”

“Haugh. Th-That’s true. Hmmm...” It appeared the Dark Queen found that to be a compelling argument.

With that, it was back to waiting. She’d be here any time now.

That evening, just when the sky was changing color, Olivia arrived at last. The figures of two wee children emerged from the edge of the dense forests of the Sacred Peak of Olympias. One of them waved her tiny hands. “Daddy, I’m home!”

“Welcome back, Olivia!”

I rocketed up out of the chair I’d been sitting in since morning. Olivia ran up to me, still carrying the large travel bag designated by the academy. She then tossed the bag on the floor and hugged me. “Daddy!”

“You’ve gotten bigger, Olivia.”

“Tee hee! Have I really? Only three months’ve passed.”

“Yeah, three whole months.”

Olivia had grown a size bigger since we parted ways on school entrance day. The robes that once covered her ankles had gotten a wee bit shorter on her. Her stride was now full of confidence. She looked so dependable.

Human children grow so quickly, I thought as I hugged her.

Just then, I heard a tranquil and courteous voice. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” said the petite girl with wavy indigo hair that reached her waist.

She lowered her head in a well-mannered bow.

“Ah, welcome, welcome.”

“Ah, Daddy! This is my friend, Daisy!”

“My name is Daisy Palestria. Please accept my apologies for barging in during your father-daughter reunion. I’ve long looked forward to staying the night here.”

“Oh, err, Daisy, you don’t need to be so formal... Just, uh, relax, okay? Err...” I was surprised by the formality of her greeting, but that aside, I had some words lined up for when we met. It was a turn of phrase I picked up in a book called *Socializing With Your Kids’ Friends*. “I’m pleased Olivia has you as her new friend!”

I’d been waiting for ages to belt that one out, ever since I heard from Olivia she’d be bringing a friend home.

“Heh heh!” Olivia giggled bashfully. Her habit of gripping the hem of my clothes tightly hadn’t changed since she was little. When I was in dragon form, she’d pull hard on my mane.

“Oh no, the pleasure is all mine, sir.”

“Come on in, Daisy!” Olivia invited her friend inside.

“Thank you very much.”

Though Daisy was Olivia’s age, she seemed remarkably mature and her posture was impeccable. Olivia led her inside by the hand.

“I dunno... It’s fine if she loosens up a little.” Daisy’s expression was a little stiff, which had me a tad worried. I recalled what Olivia had said in one of her letters.

Daisy’s mother is really scary, so Daisy says she doesn’t want to be there if she doesn’t have to be.

I hoped Daisy would relax a bit. I thought about how I wanted her to have some fun here as I followed after the girls.

“I baked the nut cookies you love so much, Olivia, so why don’t we have some

tea?”

“Yaayy! Daisy, Daddy’s cookies are super good, so you’re in for an amazing treat!”

“Oh my. Your father does the cooking?”

“Yep! He made a big feast for my birthday, and his milk soup’s the best in the whole wide world!”

“I...I see.”

I caught Daisy lowering her gaze a little. *How odd*, I thought.

When guests are over, everyone knows you bring out some black tea. Or so I’ve read, anyway.

I poured a cup for Olivia, one for her friend, and then one for myself. As for the Dark Queen...

“Hauughh...”

I spotted the black cat watching us from behind cover.

Guess she doesn’t want any tea for now. They do say cats aren’t great with stuff that’s hot.

It made a pleasant sloshing sound as I poured it and the sweet aroma of the tea leaves began wafting gently through the dining hall.

“...These are good.”

“Heh heh, right?! I love Daddy’s nut cookies too!”

“...These are really quite good.” Daisy nibbled away at the cookies in her well-behaved and polite way, but with great enthusiasm. It seemed she genuinely did like them. Olivia kicked her legs mirthfully as she watched Daisy go to town.

I handed the two their freshly poured tea. I had used cups that I save for special occasions. “Your tea is served.”

“Yaayy!”

“Thank you very much.”

“I’m just happy you’re enjoying the meal.”

“Ah, my apologies. Have I made a vulgar display?”

“No, no, of course not!”

Daisy hung her head in shame, so I looked her in the eyes and smiled what I hoped was a reassuring smile. I was a bit nervous, seeing as this was my first time interacting with a child other than Olivia. “Make yourself at home. Olivia’s been stuck here alone for so long that I was worried she’d have trouble making friends. That’s why I’m thrilled Olivia’s brought a friend home to hang out with so soon. So let me thank you once again, Daisy.”

“Y-You’re welcome.”

“You’ve got some time till dinner, so why don’t you have Olivia show you around the place? Ah, just don’t go up the Western Tower staircase. The Dark—err, uhh, that is, this castle’s...this castle’s *landlady* lives there!”

“So you’re renting the place?!” Daisy chuckled, shaking with laughter.

The Dark Queen was staring at us, curled up in a corner of the dining hall as her tail wagged. That’s right—our home is the Dark Queen’s Castle.

Olivia beamed at Daisy. “My Daddy’s so nice, isn’t he?!”

“He really is... The father pouring tea or cooking food is unthinkable in my house... It’s never happened even once. Plus, err, your father, he’s...”

“Uh-huh?”

“He looks so young and dashing.”

I ended up hearing what Daisy whispered to Olivia. Young and dashing! I was surprised. To think this human form would be spoken of in such terms. So that’s how Daisy saw me. Huh!

“Heh heh, totally. I’m proud to call him my Daddy!”

Awww! Olivia’s words put a spring in my step. I felt like putting fifty percent more nectar in the tea, and I did just that.

Olivia and Daisy got along famously. They ran around the castle enjoying the view of the forests of Olympias from the top of the Eastern Tower and laughed

while basking in the sunlight colored by the rose windows of the entrance hall. Listening to their cheery voices, I reflected on our good fortune as I prepared dinner. The girl who was once so tiny and flabby and clung to me like a security blanket was now making merry with a friend she'd made on her own. I may have felt the tiniest bit lonesome, but that was drowned out by a tidal wave of joy.

"Ha ha, and she said she's proud to call me her Daddy too... Hee hee!" I found myself grinning at the thought. *I'm so happy she's proud of me. I mean, I'm so proud of her, so of course I want her to be proud of me too.* "Wonder if they'll be coming out of their bath soon..."

Olivia had insisted on taking a bath with Daisy. The tub was large enough to fit dozens of people comfortably, so two was no problem. She plucked some nice-smelling flowers from the garden, saying she'd make them float on the bathwater. She really must have been waiting for today's sleepover with bated breath.

"All right, time to chop up the ingredients..." I was making Olivia's beloved milk soup and some bread. I used lots of butter in the bread dough to make it big and fluffy. Lately, the Dark Queen had been ordering a variety of stuff from within her room so we kept getting tasty food delivered to us. "I can buy stuff with the click of a button! Mwah ha ha!" I planned on asking her how to do that one of these days.

Just then...

"Sorry to bother you, but is there some way I can help?"

"Ah, Miss Clowria."

She was standing at the entrance into the kitchen, and she was cradling a black ball of fluff at her chest. The fluff ball had wee sheep horns by its ears: it was the Dark Queen.

"And if it isn't Miss Dark Queen too. Still in your cat form?"

"Haughh. A stranger is in my castle! It's only natural!"

"Pardon us," said Miss Clowria. "Queen Maredia has been in a foul mood."

“C-C’mon, what else is there for me?! I wanna play with Olivia too!”

“Come now, please don’t flail like that.”

“Haugh, you’re so mean, Clowria! You *know* how eager I was for Olivia’s return! And I promised I’d take her to the library to teach her the basics of the secret magic passed down to dark-kind!”

“Her little lady friend will be going home on the morrow. Surely you can endure it for just one day?”

“Hauughh...”

Her ears drooped downheartedly. Meanwhile, I was just pleased she and Olivia were on such great terms. Speaking of the library...

“Come to think of it, the two of them seemed stoked about dropping by the Library of Grimoires once they finished their bath.”

“Y-You mean including that *other* one?!”

“Yeah, Daisy looked excited about it too.”

“Haughh... My vaunted library... Hold on, wait a sec, where have I heard the name *Daisy*?” The Dark Queen cocked her head in contemplation. Incidentally, it’s incredibly cute when a cat tilts its head like that.

“You remember that woman who sat next to us at the entrance ceremony?”

“The woman who sat next to us... Ahh, so that’s a descendant of that House of Palestria?!”

“Right, yeah. Mrs. Palestria.”

I was surprised she remembered, considering how little interest she had in humans. The Palestria that was Daisy’s ancestor may have turned tail and fled, but she was still a member of the Hero’s party, so she must have made quite the impact on the Dark Queen.

“Haugh...”

“What’s the matter, my liege?”

“Oh, I just feel like I’m forgetting something...” The Dark Queen tilted her head as she racked her mind.

Miss Clowria tilted her head as well. “Something you’re forgetting?”

“Uh-huh. It’s something to do with the Hero’s gang... Hmm... I feel like something’s gnawing at the back of my mind... What could it be... Ah.”

“Ah?”

“...Haugghhh!!!”

“Wh-What is it, my Queen? What troubles you?”

“Oh no! I completely forgot! I laid traps in order to make mincemeat of the next descendant who dared to enter my library!”

“Huh?! No, wait, I, my liege?! This is the first I’ve heard of this!”

“I, I never told anyone! I thought I’d give them a fright... And I even went as far as to lay a trap for that Palestria, the mage who ran away before the castle entrance, just in case...”

“What?!”

Th-This is bad! We need to stop them before they head for the library!

“O-Olivia!”

I dashed out with the mewling black cat in my arms.

The door to the Library of Grimoires was ajar. Normally, it was kept shut.

“Dear heavens, are we too late?!”

There was a chance they’d made a beeline for the library after their bath. They’d been looking forward to it a great deal, after all. I dashed into the library in a panic. If push came to shove, I was prepared to assume dragon form to protect them, just as I’d protected Olivia that one time. It’d mean revealing my true self to Daisy, but there was no substitute for the girls’ lives. Besides, Daisy might understand our situation if we talked it out.

“OLIVIA!!!”

The two were standing stock still in the reading room, dressed in matching nightgowns.

Daisy was scared witless, clinging to Olivia as a great big pack of monsters and

ghosts had the two surrounded. I'd never seen these creatures around the castle before, so they had to be the Dark Queen's trap. *I, I need to save them!*

"Don't move, you two!"

But the instant I said that, Olivia gently lifted her right arm.

"Olivia?"

"Hi-ya!"

Bam! A searing beam of white light zoomed out from in front of her. I was momentarily dazzled.

"Huh?" I opened my eyes to find the plethora of ghosts had vanished, leaving only the monsters in their wake.

"One more time! Hi-ya!"

A rain of ice spears launched from Olivia's direction, piercing the monsters' hides and sending them back to the Dark Realm.

For a second, I just stood there, mouth agape. Finally, I came to my senses and rushed over to them—and I ended up tossing the Dark Queen in the process. As she was a cat at the moment, she was able to land on her feet so I wasn't terribly worried.

"Olivia!"

"Daddy!"

Olivia smiled innocently as if that mishap hadn't just happened. She wasn't out of breath or anything, and she didn't look taken aback or scared.

"Heh heh! How's that? Pretty strong now, right?"

"That was something else, Olivia! I never would've thought you could defeat that many monsters and ghosts in one go like that..."

"Heh heh! They're spells I learned from Miss Maredia and at school. Ah, but I held back, just like you did that day!"

"You held back?!"

"I felt bad for the monsters, so..."

"I see. You really have gotten strong. You're so strong that your Daddy's frankly astonished. Boy howdy, though, my heart near enough stopped there...!"

"Oh no, that's not good!" said Olivia, eyes wide open. Then she expressed concern for Daisy, who was still quivering as she clung to Olivia's arm. "You okay, Daisy?"

"I-I-I'm okay... I think."

Daisy's eyes were more than misty, and she looked pale, but who could blame her, with the trouble she'd just been in?

I addressed her as softly as possible so as not to scare her: "Ehm... What say we go to the dining hall? There's some warm soup waiting for you."

Daisy still looked frightened, but she nodded deeply. I stood up in a protective stance. Upon exiting the library...

"I am truly sorry."

"Miss Clowria!" said Olivia.

She was waiting by the entrance to the library and bowing quite deeply. The Dark Queen flailed in her hands.

"I represent the landlady of this place," she continued, her head still down. "Allow me to apologize for exposing you to such peril. We should have been quicker to see that that danger was coming."

I was startled to see her that way. "Uh, you don't... Please, raise your head."

"Y-Yes, please do," said Daisy. "I'm okay... It just gave me a bit of a fright, that's all. Ah, and it was mostly Olivia's magic that threw me off... As you can see, I came out unscathed."

At those words, Miss Clowria raised her head at last. "I will come back with the landlady so that she too may apologize."

"Haugh?!" But the Dark Queen's shrill cry sounded a lot like how a cat would cry anyway.

Whew, that did give me a jump. Accidents like that are bad for my heart. It

was then I realized how, to me, something happening to Olivia was hundreds of times more terrifying than something happening to me. That said, Olivia's magic blew me away. She had turned into a little powerhouse before we even knew it. *Those spells were the beginner-level spells Olivia practiced with me a bit when she was little, weren't they? Man, those were the days.*

I was still thinking about how strong Olivia had gotten when I returned to the kitchen to warm up the milk soup. The ample amounts of soft chicken and mushrooms lent it a mild flavor that Olivia adored. I hoped Daisy would love it too. And I hoped they'd enjoy themselves enough to forget what just happened.

Dinner was very amicable. Daisy kept calling it all delicious, and Olivia was having oodles of fun eating with her. Seeing Olivia smile so much made it fun for me as well.

I guess Daisy's nerves melted away as the meal wore on and she began mentioning school stuff.

"Olivia's always talking about you, you know."

"What? She is?"

"She is. And she's talked my ear off about the milk soup in particular."

"Oh c'mon, I didn't talk about it THAT much!"

"Uhh, yes you did!"

The way the two of them giggled was absolutely adorable. You could totally sense what good friends they were.

"What're you talking about?"

"Whenever she feels lonely in the dorm, she gets a hankering for your milk soup."

"Does she now! The soup is so simple though."

"It's a flavor that brings memories with it for her, probably."

I thought back to the days I had only just met Olivia. We hadn't made our home here yet, and we were living in my shrine-den. If I recall correctly, we

used to have milk soup all the time when it was the sole recipe I'd gleaned from my parenting books.

"I, I see. It brings memories, huh?"

"They must be warm memories too. I get that impression every time she talks about it."

"Daaaiisyy! You're embarrassing me! Heh heh!" Even Olivia's ears were beet red.

I nearly teared up. *Oh, I guess that makes sense. We had milk soup every day at the shrine-den, so to her, it's nostalgia-central. I'm just relieved she remembers those days fondly.*

After dinner, we enjoyed a nice chat in the dining hall. Their eyelids grew progressively heavier, so I gave them some sweet warm milk to drink.

Olivia's yawn caused Daisy to yawn too. It was bedtime for the girls.

"Goodnight, Daddy."

"Goodnight, sir."

"Yep, goodnight, girls. Sweet dreams, that unfortunate incident notwithstanding."

I escorted them to the bottom of the Eastern Tower staircase. There was a guest room, but the two slept in Olivia's room. Hand in hand and clad in school-designated nightgowns, they ascended the stairs as I watched, before heaving a large yawn myself.

Ahh, it's been a while since I well and truly cooked. While Olivia was away, I mostly dozed off aimlessly in dragon form and took walks. I slipped into my own bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 15: Mr. Dragon Debuts as Her Daddy

There was a really pleasant breeze the next morning. For breakfast, I made walnut bread toast with plenty of butter and honey. Plus, I tossed a wild greens salad with lots of nut oil and sprinkled some salt on top. Oh, I also made a clear soup on the side, and the onions and sausage stock I used imparted their flavor in spades.

“Tee hee! This is so your go-to breakfast, Daddy!”

“You’re right, honey; it’s pretty much our standard.”

Walnut bread, wild greens salad, and soup. Our prototypical breakfast. Basically every parenting book urges its readers not to skip breakfast, so I promptly implemented it when we started living together. Since it’s an every-morning thing, I figured simple was best, so I devised this menu. Besides, I like wild greens.

“You have this every day?”

“Do you have a usual meal at your house, Daisy?”

“Well, in my house, the bill of fare changes when the head chef does. For the most part, I only get to eat with my father or mother at dinner banquets or social functions. Eating breakfast with family like this never even crossed my mind.”

“I see.”

Little by little, Daisy shared her thoughts with us. Most of the students at the academy were the children of venerable mages or nobility or the like, and the vast majority of them had no custom of crowding in large numbers around a single table. She related how bewildered she was when she ate with others for the first time upon entering the dorms, how surprised she was when Olivia spoke happily of the meals her Daddy made her—and how envious of her she grew.

“I asked a huge favor, coming here to sleep over. I’ve never slept over at a

friend's house before... So, that's why..."

"Hee hee! Daisy, this is the first time I've ever had a friend come home to see me too! So..."

Olivia and Daisy exchanged glances. Then, their matching smiles were as dazzling as the morning sun.

"This was so much fun!"

"I had a truly fun time!"

"Is that so? Well, this old man had a great time too." I felt so warm and fuzzy inside.

Later, Miss Clowria brought out the Dark Queen...or rather, our home's "landlady." She apologized for the incident in the library. She looked so dejected. *Maybe I'll make her some super sweet tea later. But seeing Daisy off comes first.*

* * *

We decided that Olivia would accompany her to the other side of the woods. The forests of the Sacred Peak are thick, but Olivia was used to walking through them so the two girls would be safe. Not once has Olivia ever gotten lost amidst the trees.

"You're welcome to stay for more days, you know," I told Daisy, who was holding her travel bag with both hands.

She shook her head. "Thank you, but I was only able to delay my return home by telling the people back home that I wished to hit the books at an academy study room for a day... To tell the truth, my parents don't know about my sleeping over at Olivia's."

"Really?"

"A-As such, well..."

"It's okay; we won't tell. Right, Olivia?"

"Uh-huh. Of course we won't, Daisy!"

"Thank you very much," she said, heaving a sigh of relief.

Her mother must truly be scary. Honestly though, from our perspective, we'd love for her to come whenever she likes, as long as she's fine hanging out at our humble abode.

"Daisy," I said, "drop by our place whenever you want. I promise you're always welcome here."

"Ah, thank you, sir!"

"No fair, Daddy! Daisy, I'll be waiting for you too, okay?"

"Heh heh, but Olivia, I can hang out with you at school!"

"Oh, right! Hee hee!"

Before departing, Daisy bowed deeply once again. *She really is one courteous little girl.*

"See you, Daisy," I said with a smile.

"Uh, sorry, before I leave, I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure. Shoot."

She stared at me and, without pause, said, "Well, when I heard you live on the Sacred Peak, I thought, no, it couldn't be...but you really do live in such an illustrious estate, and you have a library with so many grimoires. So, err... Are you, in reality, a super distinguished mage who's living in seclusion from the world?"

"Huh?" I was in a bit of a fix. I couldn't exactly say something like *I'm a dragon that's been living here since ancient times*. "Well, for now, that'll be my little secret."

All right, look at me go! I can give a proper evasive answer like a human now! It made me want to boast about my new skill.

For some reason, Daisy looked at me with stars in her eyes. "So it's just as I suspected!!!"

Uh-oh. I gave her the wrong idea, I guess. Is it fine like this, or...?

"Goodbye, sir!"

"See you later, Daddy!"

And so the two bosom buddies disappeared through the woods, taking no note of my unease. In any case, I suppose I can chalk up Olivia's first-ever sleepover as a success.

There's nothing to worry about...right?



“Take care now! Bye!” I said as they walked away hand in hand, waving at their backs.

“Your secret’s safe with me, sir!” said Daisy.

She’s definitely misunderstanding something...

* * *

A few days following Olivia’s return, I was murmuring in my sleep.

Our days together were fun and peaceful, just like before. And there I was, dozing snugly in the bed in my quarters, the former training grounds of the Dark-Kin Army.

My eyes opened a teensy bit. The light pouring in from the windows felt harsher than usual. *So bright...*

“Guhh... Wait, don’t tell me it’s noon already?”

The sun was high in the sky. Though it wasn’t past noon yet, it was quite late all the same. *How weird.*

Normally, Olivia would wake me up, shouting, “Daddy! I’m hungry!”

Then, I heard some cheery-sounding clamor in the distance—clinking, tapping, banging. And, before long, a really nice aroma made its way to me...

“Eeyaaaah?!” came a scream.

I jolted awake. *Was that Olivia?* “A-A-Are you okay, Oliviaaaa?!” I jumped out of bed and dashed toward the source of the commotion, rushing into the kitchen to find Olivia there.

“D-Daddy!”

“Olivia, are you okay? What happened?”

“Err, well... It’s just, I thought I’d make you some milk soup...”

“Huh?”

She was wearing an apron and holding a ladle. In the pot, there was a slight amount of milk soup left but some milk had spilled onto the floor.

“You were just sleeping so deeply that I thought I’d make breakfast myself. I

read the recipe, and I learned how to make soup at school...but when I tried, the milk boiled right over!" she said pensively, her shoulders drooping.

"...Olivia!" I hugged her tight.

"Daddy, you're crushing me!"

I hurriedly relaxed my grip, but who can blame me? Olivia was just so kind. To think she'd tried to make her Daddy some breakfast!

"So you tried making Daddy some milk soup? Thank you, Olivia!"

"But look, it's a mess now!"

"It's okay. The floor just needs some mopping and it'll be right as rain."

"Ah, I'll help you, Daddy!"

Working together, cleaning up took no time at all. I put the mop away, after which the moment I was waiting for finally arrived. I warmed up what little was left of the soup she made and ladled it into a bowl.

"You don't mind if I have this, do you?"

"Wait, you're having that, Daddy?"

"Of course. Most of it might have ended up on the floor, but there's still some left. All right, time to dig in."

"But Daddy..."

"Boy, this looks good."

I flashed a smile her way, and while she looked perplexed, I could tell she was also a little relieved.

It's okay, Olivia. No soup you make me can be anything short of delicious.

I put our two soup bowls on the table. It was very little for two people, so I savored my portion a little at a time. "Mmm. That's good!"

"Really?"

"Really. Thank you, Olivia. It's the tastiest soup in the whole wide world."

At that, Olivia smiled a daisy of a smile.

Chapter 16: Mr. Dragon Cooks With His Daughter

I entered the kitchen to prepare us some dinner, same as always. But to my surprise, there stood Olivia, waiting for me with her apron on.

“Oh hey. What’s the matter? Not airing out the books like usual?”

“Tee hee. Miss Maredia said she’d do it for me!” she said, smiling wide. Then she snapped into a standing-at-attention pose in front of me. “Mr. Daddy, sir, please teach me how to make milk soup!” She bowed.

Oh no, Olivia, don’t do that to me. That’s the cutest pose ever!

Fretfully, I wondered what to do for a moment before putting on my apron. Olivia stared intensely at my hands with a serious look on her face. *I get it. She’s got her milk soup mishap on her mind. Not that she needs to worry about that at all.*

In response to Olivia’s earnestness, I resolved to explain how to make the soup in a simple but thorough way.

“Let’s see... First, you need to sauté several of the soup’s ingredients. Let’s fry the sliced sausage on low heat. The oil will come out from the sausage slowly but steadily, and then you add the onions and cook them till they’re see-through.”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Why don’t we throw some mushrooms into today’s soup? Chop the tips off of the stems, then break them into pieces and cook them. We have to make sure the mushrooms are cooked all the way through. When that’s done, pour in the water and bring it all to a boil.”

“Right, right. I did it all perfectly up till then...”

“I’m guessing it boiled over when you added the milk?”

“Uh-huh. It just came gushing outta nowhere!”

“I see... Well, when you add the milk, you have to lower the heat a bunch.”

“Huh?”

“You can’t boil milk or else the pot will overflow super quickly. The trick to this milk soup is to add the milk only after you’ve thoroughly boiled the other ingredients. Once you add the milk, you’ve got to keep it from boiling more... See those little bubbles on the edges of the pot? That tells you when to shut off the flame.”

I turned off the stove, and the soup started to steam.

“Now for the secret ingredient.”

“There’s a secret ingredient? What is it?”

“A dribble of honey.” I stirred the honey in with a spoon. Since small children can’t eat honey, I remembered getting a little emotional when I added in the secret ingredient for the first time. My little girl was growing up!

I added salt and pepper to taste, and with that, the milk soup was complete. I’d made milk soup day after day since Olivia was little. How much of the stuff had I made since then? How much had I made since I started being able to throw in the honey? I’ve made so many batches that I can make some lickety-split without eyeing the cookbook.

“Now then, how’s it taste, I wonder? Wanna taste test?”

“Yeah!”

“Here you are.”

She blew on the soup spoon I gave her and sipped. I was reminded of when she was a wee one, back when I fed her a spoonful at a time.

“Hee hee, you know what, Daddy?”

“What?”

Olivia stood on her tippy toes and whispered softly in my ear, her voice lilting like she was imparting some secret: “Your soup’s the best soup in the whole wide world, Daddy.”

I couldn’t even deal with it. Am I wrong, or is my daughter the cutest in the whole wide world?

Chapter 17: Mr. Dragon Goes on a Picnic

Apparently, Olivia has got this thing called “homework.” She was assigned loads of it over the long break, and it had to be submitted on her next day of school. *Boy, this going-to-school thing sounds hard. At least let the kids take a break during break, right?*

I gazed at the books and papers Olivia had piled up on the desk.

“Huh. So many different subjects... What’s this *Beginner Level Grimoire Deciphering Workbook?*”

“Oh, I already finished that. It was so boringly easy that I asked my teacher to give me the mid-and high-level ones! Though I finished those too.”

“Gotcha. What about one, then? *Drawing Magic Circles: Drills and Practice?*”

“Finished that one too.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. And this one? The *Ancient Language Vocabulary Notebook?*”

“They’re all words I already know.”

“...Ah, you’re right.” I was the one who taught her the ancient tongue, so I guess it’s my pet subject. I flipped through the notebook—the words were simple stuff like “apple” and “pen.” It was true; they were probably too elementary for Olivia, I surmised. I couldn’t blame her for feeling bored.

“What about this one? *A Deeper Look at the Ancient Language: Selected Brainbenders?* Was that a bit more of a challenge?”

“I got that one from my teacher, but I know all the words in it too.” She pouted, her cheeks puffing out childishly.

Aww, that expression’s really, really adorable! As I grinned at her cuteness, it dawned on me. “Olivia, have you finished *all* of your homework, by any chance?”

“Yep!”

“Really?!” It was only the fifth day of summer break! *Holy moly, she really is a genius, isn't she?* I'd entertained the idea of giving *For When Your Child Fails to Finish Their Summer Homework in Time* a read just in case, but it seemed there was absolutely no need. *Attagirl, Olivia.* “That's incredible, Olivia! Your Daddy's floored!”

“Tee hee!”

I picked her up and gently raised her above my head before spinning in place.

“Ahhh!” she shouted mirthfully.

It was times like those I felt glad to be a dragon. Even when in human form, my physical strength is, for some reason, more or less the same as when I'm in dragon form. That means that I can lift her up in the air like this whenever she wants—no matter how big she gets.

“Ah, actually, Daddy...”

“Hm?”

Olivia whispered impishly: “There *is* one assignment I haven't done yet.”

“What kind of assignment?”

“Hee hee. Well, I need to go on a picnic with you!”

“Wha? A picnic?” *That's homework?* I all but scratched my head.

* * *

Early the next morning...

Olivia came running along, dragging the Dark Queen behind her. Olivia was holding a basket of lunch boxes too. Miss Clowria, meanwhile, followed behind them.

“Haugh, why must I leave my abode?!”

“Hee hee! It's my homework! Help me out! Pretty please?”

“Auh... W-Well, if you're going to beg, then...”

The Dark Queen really is a simple creature.

Olivia's actual assignment was to survey the vegetation of nearby hills and

fields. Apparently, the autumn semester would introduce lessons in a scientific field called herbology, and the students were tasked with observing the wild plants growing near their homes and writing reports on them over summer break.

“I must say,” said Miss Clowria, “to interpret a vegetation survey as a picnic—Olivia thinks of the darndest things.”

“Miss Clowria, Miss Dark Queen, are you sure we’re not imposing? Are we bothering you by dragging you outside?”

“Her Darkness may complain, but in truth, she is having the time of her life. In fact, the reason it took so long to prepare is because she was having trouble picking out what to wear. She kept saying things like ‘When it comes to picnics, it’s a white dress or bust! That’s a hard-and-fast rule for lookers like me!’”

“A dress, huh.” *She’s wearing a white dress, sure enough.* With her slender frame and long black hair, she looked just like one of the pretty little things that appear in the young ladies’ novels she’d bought for Olivia—apart from the big sheep horns, that is. “It looks good on her.”

“Verily, it does at that!” said Miss Clowria, with a pride I didn’t quite understand.

Those two sure are close.

As for Olivia, she was wearing adorable checkered overalls with short pant legs so it was easy for her to move around. The legs of her shorts and the blouse’s sleeves puffed out in a way that reminded me of a pumpkin. And with her braided light brown hair, she looked heart-meltingly precious.

The Dark Queen seemed to judge Olivia’s outfit. “Hrm? Haugh, Olivia. Clearly, you don’t *get* picnics.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Heh heh! For *beauties* like us, you take one of *these* to a picnic!”

“Whoa, a straw hat!”

“Haugh! And furthermore! You ought to get on your hands and feet and grovel for such an honor as to wear matching hats with me! Also, you can never

be too careful with the heat!”

Olivia asked the Dark Queen for the straw hat and put it on, spinning in place to show me her new look. “Look, Daddy!”

“You look fantastic in it, Olivia! It’s too cute on you!”

“Tee hee, yaayy!”

A straw hat... To think it was capable of drawing out Olivia’s cuteness to this extent... Human creations are something else!

The Dark Queen squirmed as she gazed our way. “Ah, uh... Clowria? Umm...”

“Yes, my Queen. It looks swimming on you too. Very swimming indeed.”

A slight pause. “Haugh. Heh, heh heh. O-Of course it does!!!” Her face was beet red. “Let’s go, Olivia. Follow me!”

“Kay!”

I walked in the same direction the two ran. *I’m glad the Dark Queen’s having fun.*

There are truly a ton of living things inhabiting the Sacred Peak. Before I became Olivia’s Daddy, I lived a very tranquil life. I’d spend every day taking plodding strolls through the woods, warming myself in the sun’s rays, and apologizing to the soft moss as I trod over it. That was all there was to daily life for me. Which is to say, I know about most of the flora that grows on Olympias.

“Wow! Daddy, you know about all kinds of wild plants!” shouted Olivia, who was holding a field guide on medicinal herbs.

It was gratifying to hear. “Your Daddy knows everything there is to know about this mountain. What do you want to see next?”

“Lessee... I wanna see this! The kurimomo tree!”

“Hmm... Ah, that one...”

I walked slowly, keeping pace with her. Over the centuries, my walking course had become easy terrain thanks to my strolling across it for so long. As such, even someone as tiny as Olivia can walk here without issue. Nice going, past me!

At any rate, the scenery of the stretch of land that I could traverse in a single step when in dragon form looked totally different walking it alongside Olivia.

“Uh, Daddy?” She was squatting, staring right at something or other.

“What is it, dear?”

“This plant’s not in my field guide.”

“Hm? But I see it all the time around the mountain.” It was a small plant with heart-shaped leaves and a nice scent. Plus, by night, the plant sparkles. I want to show that to Olivia one of these days, but the forest by night’s still too dangerous for her.

“Daddy, can I take it home?”

“Huh? Hmm, well, I suppose it’s all right since there’s a whole bunch of it around... But I do feel a bit guilty.”

“Ah, I have an idea!” Olivia’s hands started digging around the plant. Then she unearthed it with lots of soil sticking to its still-attached roots. “Yay, I did it, Daddy!”

“I see! Now we can take it with us!”

“Hee hee! We should grow it at home, right Daddy?”

“We do have a spare large bowl at home. We could plant it inside.”

“Uh-huh!”

Some soil was stuck to Olivia’s cheek. As I gently wiped it off, I looked up at the blue sky. We’d left early in the morning; the sun was already at its apex.

“Now, Olivia, why don’t we go back and have lunch? The two ladies are waiting.”

At my suggestion, Olivia’s face lit up. In the forest lay an open field where both the two ladies and the basket of lunch boxes awaited us. The Dark Queen had told me: “Walking through the woods is tiring, okay?!” Incidentally, she’d brought a book with her to our picnic. She was a bibliophile through and through. Plus, it seemed she’d helped out a little with Olivia’s homework as well.

Olivia skipped for joy, practically singing as she said, “Yay! I can’t wait for Daddy’s lunch!”

The moment we started walking, our tummies grumbled. Olivia and I looked at each other and chuckled. *Ahhh... It’s little nothing moments like these that make me so happy.*

“I’m proud of the lunches I made. You’re gonna love it.”

“Tee hee! You made them, Daddy; *of course* they’ll be delicious!”

We hastened our pace as we headed for the open field. *Boy, picnics sure are fun.* I washed my hands and laid out the picnic blanket. The sunlight pouring down on us was nice and warm, and when I opened the basket, Olivia cheered. “Wow! Wow! It’s amazing, Daddy! It’s all stuff I like!”

“Heh heh. It’s not often we do picnics, after all!”

“Hee hee. I love you, Daddy!”

“Careful, sweetie, it’s dangerous to glomp me without warning like that.”

Olivia’s sheer glee made me feel warm and fuzzy. Meanwhile, the Dark Queen took a peek into the basket. “Haugh? Elder Dragon?”

“Yes, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Wh-Where’s all the food to eat?” she asked with a puzzled look on her face.

The first basket was filled with a variety of bread. There was a nut bread that smelled of walnuts, moist pain de mie, doughy bagels, and crispy croissants full of that nice buttery flavor. The other basket contained ham and sausage, several types of cheese, spiced egg filling, plus condiments like salt and pepper and butter and honey, not to mention a zesty oil for flavoring. I also brought a whole load of herbs, as well as several kinds of jam.

“M-My lunch... It has nothing but *ingredients...*” The Dark Queen was trembling.

Ah, my mistake. I neglected to explain it to her. How careless of me. “Err, Miss Dark Queen. It’s for sandwiches!”

“Haugh?! But I don’t see any ready-made ones!”

“Look, first you do this... And then, you do this...” I sliced Olivia’s beloved nut bread in half and spread a thin coat of butter. “Ahem. Olivia, milady, what would you like to order?”

“Hee hee. Uhh, err... Give me some cream cheese, and, uhh...apricot jam!”

“Right away, ma’am.” With an affected bow, I spread a heaping helping of apricot jam on the half-slice of nut bread, with a thick layer of room temperature cream cheese to go with it. Then I put the two halves together, and... “Lunch is served, milady.”

“Yaaaay!” She took the freshly made sandwich with both hands and sunk her teeth into it. “Mmm, so good!” She started gobbling it down, merrily as can be.

The Dark Queen stared and gulped at the sight of Olivia relishing her food.

“Haugh, I—I want one too! Clowria, gimme some!!!”

“Pardon? Queen Maredia, surely you can make yourself one.”

“I want one that you made me!”

“All right, all right. Heh heh... I say, ever since Olivia’s returned, you seem to be enjoying yourself quite a lot.”

“Hrm? Did you say something?”

“No, my liege. Now then, what would you like?”

“Haugh, err, gimme butter and herbs... Ah, throw some sausage on there too. And eggs! And, uh, slap some cheese on there! You know what, gimme the works—as befits your Dark Queen!”

She really did seem to be enjoying herself. As I wiped away the jam stuck on Olivia’s cheek, I made my own sandwich. I filled it with herbs, and I added salt, pepper, and oil to it too. “Mm, this is good, right, Olivia?”

“Uh-huh! Eating outside is fun!”

Miss Clowria had finished making the Dark Queen’s sandwich and had started making her own. “I see,” she said, as her hands made quick work of the sandwich-crafting. “Sandwiches get soggy over time, but with this arrangement, we can eat freshly-made sandwiches outside. I expected no less of you, Sir Elder

Dragon.”

The final product in her hands was a startler. Olivia saw it too, her eyes sparkling. “Wow, it’s got stripes!”

Miss Clowria’s bread had butter and jam spread on it in a striped pattern. The striking orange of the marmalade combined with the light color of the butter made it a sight to behold.

“Whoaaa!”

“Oh, this? I was just reminiscing about how I used to make this for Her Darkness when she was little. Although normally the bread is toasted.”

“Mm. This takes me back,” said the Dark Queen as she stuffed her cheeks with the sizable sandwich. I supposed that as milk soup is soul food to us, that sandwich is to the two ladies.

“Aww, I want one later too!” said Olivia.

“Of course.”

“Haugh, no fair! Make me one first!”

“My my, Your Darkness, you wish to partake of another one? I seem to recall you said you were on a diet.”

“Urgh... I-It’s just, eating outside like this, it’s so tasty I forgot myself...”

“Hee hee! Picnics sure are fun, aren’t they, Miss Maredia?” said Olivia, flashing her a big ol’ smile.

“Haugh, haugh,” whined the Dark Queen, her cheeks red. But she didn’t disagree.

Boy, what a fantastic day. “...It’s kinda incredible,” I found myself muttering.

At those words, Olivia tilted her head. “Incredible?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. It’s just, none of us are connected by blood, but I feel like we’ve *always* been living like this, and I feel like we’ll continue to do so forever. Spending every day as a human comes with its hardships, and I need to do so much I’ve never done before—and yet, I’m having the time of my life.”

“Connected by blood, you say?” said Miss Clowria.

“Blood doesn’t matter, Elder Dragon,” said the Dark Queen. “There are plenty of happy families that aren’t blood related. What matters the most is enjoying ourselves here and now, Elder Dragon.”

“Right, I totally agree.”

There were times I grew a tad uneasy. What would I do if, sometime in the future—like, for example, once Olivia hits puberty—the fact that we’re not blood related, or even the same species at that, starts bothering her? I want to be her Daddy, but...I can’t deny that on the day we met, we were strangers. As happy as I was currently, that just watered that seed of doubt all the more.

“...You okay, Daddy?”

“Yeah, honey, I’m sorry. It’s not like we have picnics all the time, after all. Care for another sandwich?”

“...Daddy, I’m having tons of fun right now.” Olivia smiled as warmly as the sun up above.

That was when I remembered that no matter my insecurities, all it took was her smile to bring me true happiness. “...Once we’re done eating, what say we go exploring around here a little more?”

“Kay!”

We do need to enjoy this moment to the fullest.

Chapter 18: Mr. Dragon Receives a Summons

Starting the following day, Olivia began waking up a little earlier. She'd decided to grow the plants from the forest that weren't listed in the field guide in a medicinal herb plot in a corner of the garden. Furthermore, she had created a field of medicinal herbs by planting them nearby.

"Tee hee. Hope they grow okay!"

"With you at the helm, I'm sure they'll do fine."

Olivia looked really happy, smiling as she watered the plants every day. Apparently, she'd be submitting her observation diary of the plants as an "independent research project."

I dunno, I thought. Those plants are just so ordinary. They're all over the mountain.

* * *

"See you later, Daddy!"

Three days had passed since I saw her off. Our fun summer break zipped by, and Olivia headed back to Florence Academy. Unsurprisingly, the Dark Queen holed herself back up in her quarters in the Western Tower, and as Miss Clowria was keeping her lonely queen company, I didn't see much of her either.

But just as I thought another stretch of days of idle tranquility was at hand, a letter arrived early one morning.

"Huh? They want me at the academy at once?"

The owl with the silver leg band bearing the Florence Academy crest brought a letter that read:

■ ■ ■

Dear Mr. Eldraco,

Thank you very much for your continued support of the Florence Royal

Academy for Girls's foundational principles and guiding dictates.

We would urgently like to have a discussion with you regarding the academic work and scholastic progression of your daughter, Olivia Eldraco, currently in the all-star first-year class. As such, we ask that you come visit our academy as quickly as possible. While we apologize for the suddenness of this summons, we would be grateful if you could cooperate for the benefit of your daughter's healthy growth.

Signed,

The Secretariat of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls

And the Office of Special Scholarship Student Selection



My legs gave out; I was so petrified. A summons from the academy! I had heard about these from my parenting books. It could only mean one thing... Olivia was rolled up in some kind of trouble!

"Oh, oh no! Wait for me, honey!"

I bolted outside and reverted to dragon form, whooshing straight for the skies. *Hurry! Hurry!*

As I didn't have Olivia on my back, I could fly at maximum speed. I reached the academy just before noon. Still in a mad rush, I turned back into human form and rushed into the secretariat.

"Um, excuse me. I'm Olivia Eldraco's father."

When the woman in the office saw me, her eyes went wide. She gaped at me, then at the papers I held close at hand. "Huh? Wait, are you really Mr. Eldraco? I sent the letter only yesterday. How could you possibly arrive so soon...?"

"Oh, uh, err, I just happened to be close by."

"Is...Is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Stupid me. The academy is more than a half day away from our home via a coach pulled by the fastest horses. And it takes the owl about as long to arrive here. So when humans say to come as soon as possible, they still

expect me to arrive at noon the next day. I got awfully hasty there.

“In any case, I’m grateful. This is a matter we must discuss forthwith. I’ll speak with the Headmistress and the Director posthaste, so please wait in the reception office.”

She guided me there, all the while muttering to herself. “How odd... I’m sure I sent the owl to your address...” I just came as quickly as possible because they told me to; matching the pace of humans can be real difficult.

“Here is the reception office, sir.”

“Ah, thank you.”

The reception office had a large window facing the academy’s beautiful inner courtyard. The school building was three stories tall and made of sleek wood. Gazing at the scenery, I sat down on the room’s soft sofa, and my keister sank right down into the cushions. Partaking of the cold tea with plenty of ice that the woman gave me, I looked out the window once more. “It’s gorgeous here.”

The courtyard was full of flowers and was further decorated with a fountain and sculptures. It was really pretty. There were doors leading from the surrounding school building into the courtyard. *Those must be the classrooms.* “Which classroom’s Olivia in, I wonder?”

I got to my feet, opened the window, and leaned forward. While it was no match for the paradise at the summit of Olympias, the courtyard’s beauty was nothing to sneeze at. The season’s flowers were in bloom and their scent carried on the wind. I mused how glad I was Olivia was spending her time here. Naturally, I wanted my cute little girl to be surrounded by pretty sights.

Some time later, I heard a chiming. “That must be the bell.”

A girl was pacing around, ringing the largish bell in her hand. She had on the same uniform as Olivia, so I figured she was a student in a higher grade who’d been given bell duty. As soon as the bell’s toll resounded across the academy, the students started rushing out the doors. The girls wore blazers with different colored ribbons based on their grade. I knew Olivia’s grade wore red ribbons. “Wow, there are so many... Wonder where Olivia is?”

Leaning on the window, I watched the students as they went on their ways.

Suddenly, I realized some were glancing in my direction.

“Have a gander at the reception office... Oh my, that gentleman is quite fetching.”

“I concur! What a handsome fellow. I wonder if he’s a thespian?”

“I’d believe it; there are more than a few daughters of famous actors attending the academy.”

That’s the sort of thing they were whispering among themselves. They were bigger than Olivia, so I guessed they must be her upperclassmen. They were on the other side of the courtyard, but dragon ears have keen hearing.

“I’m not an actor though...” I figured I’d try waving at them.

The girls shrieked and covered their faces. *Huh. I guess Daisy did tell me as much when she came home during summer break, but...is my human form really that handsome?*

“It’s not a good idea to stand out so much, so next time, I’ll wear those... What’re they called? Ah, right, eyeglasses. Those things the Dark Queen puts on when she gets up.”

The girls were still clearly murmuring about me when I heard a certain adorable voice call my name. “Ah, Daddy?!”

A cute girl leaned over the second floor hallway railing that faced the inner courtyard and waved to me. It was Olivia.

“Jeepers! Olivia!” I waved back happily.

Not a moment later, the students who had been discussing me on the sly all but yelped in surprise.

“What? ‘Olivia’... Could it be Olivia Eldraco, the girl genius?!”

“So does that mean that gentleman is Olivia’s father?”

“I heard she wrote up an herbology paper during break.”

“Golly... For her to be so outstanding herself and to have such a handsome father at the same time!”

“I’m so jealous!”

I heard each of the upperclassmen make similar remarks to one another loud and clear. *Wow, they're all speaking so highly of her!* Even happier now, I waved harder at Olivia. *I thought she'd gotten wrapped up in some kind of trouble but she looks perfectly fine and happy.* My heart was racing. *What a relief!*

"What brings you here, Daddy? Oh wait, sorry! I just realized I have to go to Spellcasting! See you later!"

"Sure thing, honey. Do your best!"

She waved at me as she hopped in place before leaving in a boisterous fashion. She was surrounded by friends and had a big smile on her face.

Ahh, Olivia, you're really enjoying school... She'd told me all about it during summer break, but to see it with my own eyes put me on cloud nine.

After a short while, the bell jingled again and the students hurried back to their classrooms. The teachers entered the classrooms a little later. Class was now in session, and the silence that fell over the courtyard made the rumble of voices just a moment earlier seem like it never happened. As I looked out over the courtyard, the door into the reception office opened up behind me and in came two women. One was skinny with a stern expression, and she stood impressively ramrod straight for an older human lady.

"Mr. Eldraco..." the old woman intoned, "Welcome, and thank you for coming."

"Oh, no, thank you. I'm Olivia's father."

"This is our first time meeting since the entrance ceremony. I'm Courié, the Headmistress." She bowed deeply.

"And I," the other woman said, "am this academy's Director...and its Founder."

Its Founder? But wait, I thought this academy's history was a storied one spanning almost three hundred years?

With her long blonde hair in an intricate style, the woman in question introduced herself. "My name is Phyllis Florence."

Oh, her ears are pointy. I get it now, she's a...what was it? An elf. If I

remember correctly, they live way longer than other little folks, much like dark-kin.

Miss Courié and Miss Phyllis took their seats on the sofa across from me.

“Under normal circumstances, Miss Phyllis of the Six Sages of Riaris wouldn’t meet with parents or guardians, but...she is making an exception in this case.” Miss Courié’s brow furrowed.

I straightened up in my seat.

“Now then, Mr. Eldraco. What reason can there be for why we called you here today apart from your daughter?”

“Y-Yes, of course, ma’am! Has there been some kind of trouble...?”

“Far from it,” she replied. “We would like your consent to declare Olivia Eldraco a genius officially recognized by the kingdom: the King’s Pupil.”

“King’s Pupil?” *What’s that?*

Miss Phyllis sat listening as Miss Courié explained it to me in a leisurely but solemn tone. “The special scholarship student of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls can receive the special status of being the King’s Pupil from His Majesty. In addition to waiving all tuition fees, Olivia will be allowed to participate in official business specified by, say, the Royal Order of Knights or the Royal Sorcerous Society, and will be paid for her services in the form of a salary. What’s more, Olivia will be able to supplement her education at the academy...through specialized instruction with Phyllis Florence herself!”

“Ahh.”

“This would afford her a chance to receive my wisdom directly...” added Miss Phyllis. “That is the upshot here.”

I don’t really get it, but it seems like something incredible’s happening here. Olivia’s amazing. They’re calling her special!

“Referral to the special scholarship during one’s first year is an extraordinary achievement,” said Miss Courié.

To sum up what the two grave-looking women told me:

“Olivia Eldraco possesses talent enough to shake the world. This I declare to you as the Headmistress of Florence Academy. We’d like you to allow us to support her financially as a special scholarship student and to implement extracurricular instruction under Phyllis Florence, one of the Riaris Six, Founder of this academy, and elven sage most high.”

“Erm...” I was pleased Olivia was being praised to high heaven, but... “I don’t know, ma’am. Could you let me think about it?”

“Whaaat?!” shouted Miss Courié.

“Whoa, Miss Headmistress, that gave me a start!”

“It’s only natural I’d shout! Listen, this is the special scholarship student of the prestigious Florence Academy we’re talking about! The King’s Pupil! Normally, it would be an unqualified ‘yes’...”

“Well, have you asked Olivia?”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Did you ask Olivia if she wants to be the King’s Pupil?”

“No. We ask the parents or guardians first.”

“Then how can you know she would be up for it?” I’d just seen her look delighted to be here. She’d been smiling, surrounded by her friends. Of course, Olivia looked happy when she was with me too, but the smile she wore here was different. As such, she was the one who had to make the decision that might change her everyday life, not me. “If Olivia becomes the King’s Pupil, won’t the time she spends at the academy decrease?”

“She’ll be able to take the classes that are important. We must also, of course, consider skipping grades...”

“Skipping grades means Olivia moving to a higher class early, correct? Wouldn’t that break her up with the friends she has now?”

“Yes, naturally.”

“Plus, instruction under Miss Phyllis would leave Olivia all alone without classmates, right?”

“About that—She would move out of the dormitories and into Miss Phyllis’s residence to receive her training.”

“So she’d be unable to see her dorm friends too.”

“But given Olivia’s talent, this is more important!”

“Leave that for Olivia to decide.”

“Surely you jest!” Miss Courié was speechless. Judging by her expression, she could scarcely believe I wouldn’t be thrilled to hear such fantastic news.

But I wasn’t about to cave. As her Daddy, I want Olivia to choose a fulfilling life for herself. I recalled Olivia’s smile during summer break as she recounted tales of her school life, and Olivia’s sparkling eyes as she spent the day with Daisy. I could never just change her school life of my own accord. How whacked out would it be if I just decided things concerning Olivia’s life without her input? When I decided she’d enroll in this school, it was because she’d told me, upon arriving for the exam, “Wow, Daddy! What an amazing school!”

“...Heh, ah ha ha ha!” No longer silent, Miss Phyllis was shaking with laughter.

“Miss Phyllis?”

“Mr. Eldraco, was it? You’re good! You’re very good!”

“Huh?”

“To tell you the truth, I’ve been wringing my hands over how much my academy has changed. All of the students’ parents enroll their children here for prestige and status and the like... I was beginning to realize how far we’ve strayed from our erstwhile ambition to provide an education aimed at allowing girls with bright futures to obtain happiness... Hee hee... Who would’ve guessed there were still guardians such as yourself at my academy.”

“But Miss Phyllis!”

“Courié. Surely you understand? It’s just as Mr. Eldraco said. It is Olivia, the student in question, who should choose what sort of education she will be receiving.”

“That may be, but...” The Headmistress’s brow furrowed yet more, but Miss Phyllis continued undaunted.

“Let’s conduct a parent-child meeting once class is out for the day. Olivia will decide whether or not to become a special scholarship student at that juncture... In fact, if you prefer, I can even conduct the final test then and there. I shall ascertain Olivia’s talent with my own eyes.” And with that, Miss Phyllis took her leave.

The Headmistress politely bowed her head. “Understood, ma’am.”

“There she goes.”

The Headmistress sighed. “If Miss Phyllis insists, then there’s nothing for it. Mr. Eldraco, I will prepare you a guest room, so please stay the night. Let’s discuss the matter here in the reception office after the students have dinner. I’ll inform Olivia through her homeroom teacher.”

“Right, yes, thank you.”

“Also, there’s something I’d like to ask you later regarding the herbological paper Olivia submitted...”

“Ah, the independent research project. She was growing a plant that’s commonplace near where we live. She said it’s because it’s not listed in the field guide...”

“What?! This is a breakthrough discovery! It’s very likely that that is the panacea herb thought lost to time!”

“It is?”

A pause. “Well, let’s discuss it later.” And with that, the Headmistress took her leave as well.

Chapter 19: Mr. Dragon Views a Lesson

Boy, this has turned into a bit of a headache.

I slipped out of the reception office after the meeting. “You know what, I’ve got time, so I wonder if I can peek in on one of Olivia’s lessons!” The idea gave me butterflies in my stomach. I mean, who wouldn’t want to see Olivia in class, being an eager beaver? I asked the secretariat worker from before for her gracious assistance, and together we headed for the so-called Spell Training Area where Olivia was currently in class. The area she led me to was quite spacious and its stained glass windows and chandeliers were sparkling. Evidently, they held dance balls here too.

“They practice casting spells here? Is it not dangerous?”

“It’s okay. Miss Phyllis’s protective barriers have been applied to the entirety of the Florence Academy building!”

“I see... Ah, there’s Olivia!”

I was happy to spot those light brown braids of hers. I was told it was okay to watch the lesson unfold from the entrance, so I didn’t hesitate to peer inside. Including Olivia, there were six girls of the same height. It seemed as though the spellcasting lesson was already underway.

Olivia was nodding and listening earnestly as the instructor spoke. *Wow, she’s engaging with the lesson so diligently! So cute!*

“This is the all-star class...colloquially known as Class Zero. Olivia is renowned all throughout the academy as particularly outstanding.”

“Is that so? What a delight to hear!”

“She’s very frank and upfront, so much so that I find myself rooting for her to succeed too. Plus, for a student at this academy, she’s not at all self-important... Oh, pardon me. Forget I said that.” The secretariat worker let out a sigh. I didn’t know the first thing about it, but I could tell academy life was giving her something of a hard time. “Do you see the embroidery on her uniform’s scarf?”

she asked.

“Hm? Oh, would you look at that. The red first-year scarf has black embroidery.”

The scarf adorning the neck of her blazer was red and black. I hadn’t spotted any embroidery on the students I’d seen in the courtyard.

“The black embroidery is proof of being in Class Zero. It’s the object of many a student’s admiration.”

“Is it now?”

“Students bearing the black embroidery have priority access to the library’s reading room and the dining hall, among other places.”

“Is that how it works here?”

“Some of the Class Zero girls let the black embroidery get to their heads and choose not to associate with other students...but Olivia is always chatting with the normal students too.”

“I see... So Olivia’s made loads of friends!” That fact really gave me a lift, and I was grinning as I observed the Spell Training Area.

The students stood up.

“Ah, looks like it’s starting,” she said.

“Oh my gosh, good luck Oliviaaaa!” I found myself shouting.

Olivia turned around. “Ah, Daddy!” She waved. *She’s heart-melting!*

“Olivia Eldraco, we’re in the middle of class,” chided the instructor.

Oops. Sorry, Olivia.

The instructor saw my now-I’ve-done-it expression and called out to me. “Sir, if you’d like, why don’t you observe the lesson from over here?”

“What? I can watch?”

“Yes, you may. This will be the first spellcasting exercise of the academy’s all-star class.”

“The first?”

From what she told me, the spring semester saw the students practice incantations and drawing magic circles in the classroom, but today was the first day they would try casting spells for real.

Magic circles, huh? If I recall, they allow humans for whom magic isn't their strong point to make a note of the composition of magic. And I'm pretty sure incantations are similar. They're both activation styles that are written of in the Dark Queen's grimoires. An incantation's what Olivia was reciting when she accidentally summoned those spider-folks from the Dark Realm.

"By all means, witness the fruits of our academy's education!" said the instructor confidently.

I took a seat in a corner of the area. *Magic "lessons"... I just can't picture it. A few millennia ago, people used magic without any issues. Also, since Olivia's been practicing with the Dark Queen since she was little, I don't mind if the lesson ends up being easy for her, even if only a little.*

"Now then, let's start in order from the student with the lowest grades in Magic Theory last semester... That being said, everyone more or less got an A or higher."

The student who was up first stepped forward. *So whoever's next got higher grades than the girl before her, huh? That means everybody will know how they stack up academically... This is kind of tense.*

The instructor must have picked up on what I was thinking. "By adopting and enforcing a system of strict meritocracy, the academy mitigates the risks that come with having the daughters from families of high esteem in the same place... Some of the students' families are politically opposed, so it's best for the grading standard to be extremely simple and direct."

"Uh-huh..."

As far as I could tell, the children were enjoying the school, but the adults seemed to be fussed over all sorts of things.

"I'll use a magic circle!" said the student.

"Very well. Your task is to activate the beginner fire spell, *Incendium*. You may begin."

The first student used chalk to smoothly draw a magic circle on the ground. She then tapped the edge of the circle with a finger and channeled her mana...
“*Incendium!*”

A small flame spouted up from the circle.

“Spell activation confirmed. Very good.”

The other five students clapped and I found myself clapping as well. Watching tiny kids do their best makes me want to cheer them on. “Wow. So that’s how humans use magic these days?”

“Humans? These days?”

“N-Nothing!”

The instructor shot me a suspicious look. *Gotta be more careful!*

“Next, please step forward.”

“I’ll use a magic circle too... I’ll draw that there, and that there... And it’s done!”

“Spell activation confirmed. You drew the circle quite fast too. Next.”

“I’ll use an incantation! ...‘*Magic embers, draw breath.*’”

“Excellent, spell activation confirmed.”

The students cast the spell one after the other. I was on the edge of my seat, wondering when Olivia’s turn would come, until eventually, there were only two girls left.

“Next is Daisy Palestria.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Ah, it’s Daisy. I gave her a little wave of encouragement. She looked at me and gave me a nod.

“Miss Palestria, you got an S last semester... Take note, children. This is the spellcasting prowess of an S-rank student.”

The solemn-faced students concentrated on Daisy’s movements. Olivia held her head high and cheered her on. “You can do it, Daisy!”

She firmly gripped her hands and saw Daisy off to the proverbial arena. Daisy's indigo blue hair swayed as she stepped forward.

"I'll use a combination of hand seals and an incantation."

"Oho, hand seals!" murmured the instructor, impressed. "Now there's a rare form of sorcery. It imparts meaning to the symbols one's hands make."

Look at Daisy go. She's a virtuoso!

"Here I go. *Magic embers!*" She drew a symbol with her tiny hands, and a small flame flared up.

Olivia's eyes were sparkling. "Nice!" Clearly, she was happy Daisy was getting to shine.

The instructor put a hand over the board she was holding. She followed the strings of characters floating above the board with their eyes and then nodded. "Uh-huh. All right, good. I've confirmed you activated the spell, and the mana flow and technique were clean too."

"Excuse me, what is that board?"

"Oh, this? It's a *tablet*. It lets me consolidate the students' evaluations, and it can also verify if the magic they used was the right spell by measuring the flow of mana in the air."

"Well, I'll be. Sounds convenient." It was a tool I'd never seen before. I'd assumed they could sense the flow of mana in the air without needing such a device. Being a human sure sounds rough.

"Last up... It's the famed girl genius, one Miss Olivia Eldraco."

"Yes ma'am!" She sprang up and waved a little in my direction. Her inability to completely suppress her little grin was the cutest thing. *Looks like she's raring to go!*

"You got an S+ last semester, which you don't see every day... But don't let your guard down. Actively casting the spell can be different in practice from how it appears studying it in a classroom setting. Everyone, I want you to closely observe Miss Eldraco's skills in practice and emulate whatever you can." The instructor looked around at the other five, all of whom nodded slightly.

“Watch me, Daddy!”

“I’m watching, Olivia!”

Her cheeks were red, she was so eager. *So adorable! You can do it!*

“Now then, you may begin.”

“Yes ma’am. Hi-ya!”

“Hm? You need to invoke an incantation or make a magic circle... Wait, huh?!” said the instructor.

Wow, Olivia! You’re terrific! Your flame is bigger than any of the others’, and so pretty! That’s my Olivia for you! Plus, the flame is a nice orb shape. Does she have an artist’s touch too?!

Her classmates were gawking in wonder:

“Whoa, it’s so big!”

“And she didn’t use a circle or incantation either!”

“So she cast it wordless, right?”

Everyone else cast such small flames, though... Were they holding back, maybe?

The flustered instructor activated the tablet. “Eldraco! The assignment is the beginner fire spell, *Incendium*, not the mid-level spell *Incendara*! You’re not allowed to use mid-or higher-level spells as you please... Wait, what the?!” she said after seeing the info on the tablet. “A-According to these readings...it *isn’t* *Incendara*. It’s really just *Incendium*.” She looked flabbergasted.

“Um, ma’am?” asked Olivia. “How long should I keep it up?”

“Huh? Oh, y-you can stop now! Thank you, Miss Eldraco.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Olivia dispelled the fireball, to an enthusiastic round of applause from her classmates. They were all marveling aloud at how amazing she is. *Wow, I’m thrilled for her. Ah, wait, could it be they only cast small flames out of consideration for Olivia because I’m here to watch?*

“Tee hee, it’s because you’re here that I got all fired up, Daddy!” she said smilingly, upon joining back with the rest. She waved a little at me again, and I waved back.

I saw, Olivia. I’m proud of you!

“Were your eyes on Miss Eldraco’s wonderful form, everybody? Well, uh...be sure to imitate her as closely as you can.”

“But ma’am...I can’t imitate that!” somebody muttered.

Just then, the bell chimed again, and so my first lesson observation was over. The instructor seemed really exhausted afterward. I wondered whether she was okay. The secretariat worker made sure Olivia was told about the parent-child meeting slated for that night. I was happy with what I’d seen—it seemed Olivia was having a good time and nothing was hampering her studies. Olivia waved enthusiastically at me as she returned to the classroom with her friends. “See you later, Daddy!”

“Yes, sweetie. See you later!”

I felt a mix of happiness and loneliness as I watched her walk away, smiling as she chatted with her friends. *Children do steadily grow bigger and bigger after all. So yeah...I definitely want her to spend time with her current friends,* I concluded.

* * *

That night, the four of us gathered at the reception office of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Me, Olivia, Miss Courié the Headmistress, and the Director-*cum*-Founder of Florence Academy, Miss Phyllis the elf. The lanterns’ flames flickered, casting shadows on the sofas where we were seated.

“...Olivia, what did you have for dinner?” I asked softly.

“Tee hee, it was hamburger steak!”

“Wow, sounds like a treat.”

“It totally was! It would have been great if you could’ve had some too!”

“I’d have liked some. Thanks, Olivia. I take it dinner here is always tasty?”

Miss Courié cleared her throat. “Ahem! I’d like to begin the discussion, if that’s all right with you.”

“Ah, my apologies. I got lost in conversation.”

“You two get along quite well, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am!” replied Olivia instantly.

Thanks, sweetie. Let’s stay close forever.

“Now, for the issue at hand.”

“The special scholarship, right?” I replied. “Shall I explain it to her, ma’am?”

“No. This is an immensely important decision for the academy, so as Headmistress, she will hear it from me. Miss Olivia Eldraco, you will be deciding on a distinction of high honor, as we have elected to refer you as the special scholarship student, the King’s Pupil.”

Miss Courié’s dispassionate explanation continued at length. She told Olivia how the King’s Pupil was a position of great prestige, how she would be earning a salary even as a student, how she would only be attending important lessons as she’d be treated as though she’d skipped grades. She also explained how she’d be receiving special instruction under Miss Phyllis and how she’d move out of the dorms and into Miss Phyllis’s residence. Olivia listened to all this with her hands on her lap, nodding and murmuring in acknowledgment all the while. I was staring at her, and while at first her eyes were sparkling, I could see her expression start clouding a little when she heard she’d have to leave the dorms and skip grades. I knew she wouldn’t want to leave her friends behind.

“I’m sure you understand, Olivia Eldraco, that this is a tremendous honor... I can’t fathom how you could possibly decline...”

“So I can’t decline, ma’am?”

“...Excuse me?” Miss Courié stiffened, her eyes wide.

Miss Phyllis, seated next to her, was chortling.

“What is the meaning of this, Miss Eldraco?”

“Uh...well, I’m really happy you chose me. Thank you very much,

Headmistress, ma'am." Olivia bowed her head. "It's just, err...I'm just so happy to have my friends at the academy. When I went back home and talked about the time I spent with my friends...Daddy looked the happiest he ever has."

Olivia was choosing her words, doing her best to express her sincere thoughts and feelings. I was deeply touched. *When we met, she could barely talk. She's gotten so big.*

"So while I'd be happy to become the King's Pupil...I'd hate to be separated from my friends."

"Wh-Wh-WHAT?!"

"...And that's how Olivia feels. What are your thoughts, Miss Courié?"

"I, I can't believe you! Like father, like child... The sheer impudence needed to turn down the Florence Academy's special scholarship!"

"But my friends are more important to me," Olivia declared flatly.

At that, Miss Phyllis slowly got to her feet and broke her silence. "Hee hee, very well. Olivia Eldraco, I've taken a liking to you."

"Huh?"

"Your feelings of friendship outweigh any considerations of prestige or expediency... I'd long forgotten such a person can even exist. You're young and pure... Now, you will proceed to the final exam. If you're able to pass my test with flying colors, I will permit you to be the special scholarship student, the King's Pupil—granting you any and all conditions you may have."

"You mean like staying in the dorms and attending classes like normal?"

"I do. However, you will receive my special instruction after school, during weekends, and in the morning...and eventually, I might have you help me with my work."

"Miss Phyllis, you can't—"

"It's fine, Courié. After all, it's not as though we must choose a King's Pupil at all costs."

Miss Phyllis departed the reception office with Miss Courié hurrying after her.

But just before exiting the room, she pointed at us and said hastily, “Miss Eldraco, go to the Spell Training Area at once! The exam will take place there!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Olivia jumped to her feet.

The Spell Training Area. So, the hall from before, huh? It was a spacious and pretty area where they apparently also put on dance balls. *Ah, but how do we get there from here again? This place is so big, it’s hard to remember.*

“Let’s go, Daddy.” Olivia pulled me by the hand.

Right, of course. Olivia would be far more familiar with the academy than me!

Chapter 20: Mr. Dragon Witnesses the King's Pupil Exam

"I will prepare the exam now," said Miss Phyllis. "Please wait until it's ready."

While we were waiting for Miss Phyllis to return, Miss Courié made small talk with us. "Mr. Eldraco, I'm told you live on the Sacred Peak of Olympias... Have you lived in such a holy land for generations?"

"For generations? Well, I've lived there for a long time." And that was no lie.

"I say, your family's history must be storied. Though I surmise you're located by the forest entrance. Too deep in those woods, and the mana is too thick for humans to live there for very long."

"Really? Is that so?"

"Of course. Granted, if one lives there from a very early age, one's body may grow accustomed to the mana...but that's just a theory. In fact, if someone who grew up in that environment is really out there, I'd like to meet them."

You'd like to meet them, huh? Well, Olivia fits those criteria...not that I can tell her that.

"If, hypothetically, a child were raised on Olympias, how would they grow up?"

"It's all theoretical, but they would probably possess superhuman amounts of mana. Enough to surpass even dark-kin and elves."

"I see..." Maybe that's why Olivia's so good at magic. I thought it was because she'd read in the Library of Grimoires while airing out the books.

We kept chatting until at last:

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Miss Phyllis entered the Spell Training Area.

"Wow, Daddy, look! The Director's so pretty!"

“She is, honey.”

Miss Phyllis was in shining white robes and holding a stave studded with a jewel shining in all the colors of the rainbow. Even more so than before, she had an aura about her.

“Miss Phyllis, could that be...could that be one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, the Gem-Stave of Eternity? The bejeweled magic tool that greatly amplifies your immaculate mana!”

She chuckled. “When facing off against a candidate for a hero of legend, it’s only polite of me to get serious.”

Wow. Guess that’s Miss Phyllis’s favorite staff. I stared at it. Wait, the “Gem-Stave of Eternity”... That rainbow-colored stone at the tip...

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What is it, Mr. Eldraco?”

“Is that the pretty stone I dropped way back when...?”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing; it’s just, I brought a gem that looks just like it out of my shrine...err, I mean my house, and dropped it someplace.”

I remembered it like it was yesterday. It stood out from among the jewels strewn in my shrine-den as it was particularly big and shiny and I was quite fond of it. A thousand or so years ago, I got real depressed when I lost it.

Miss Courié sounded irked. “How dare you! I’ll have you know this vaunted treasure fell from the sky when her predecessor, the Elven Philosopher-Queen Phyllia, witnessed the good omen of a soaring elder dragon over a thousand years ago!”

“Ah, is that so? So I was right...”

“You were right?”

Yep, I was right. I used to bring it with me because it was so shiny and pretty. *I lost it while I was flying, huh? Well, I guess I’m happy somebody else took good care of it. So there’s that.*

“Ahem. Now then, let’s pull ourselves back together... Olivia Eldraco.”

“Yes, ma’am!” she replied, raising her hand. While she seemed nervous from how Miss Phyllis was staring at her, she was holding her head up high nonetheless.

“Let us begin the final exam for the selection of the King’s Pupil.” She was still gripping the staff adorned with my pretty stone. “Now come at me with no reservation and no holding back,” she declared solemnly.

“N-No holding back, Miss?” Olivia flashed me a worried look.

* * *

So this is what the selection test for the King’s Pupil scholarship entails. Miss Phyllis would attack Olivia with holy mana, testing to see whether Olivia could defend against it. Then, the attacker and defender roles would flip, and Olivia would need to break Miss Phyllis’s barrier.

Talk about simple.

Miss Courié whispered softly to me. “Don’t fret. There’s no earthly way Olivia can defeat her. All in all this is just a formality.”

“Uh-huh...”

“In other words, she still has a chance of becoming the King’s Pupil even if she doesn’t succeed. So you don’t have to look so anxious.”

“Ah, yes, yes of course.”

That’s not what I’m worried about, though. Didn’t the Dark Queen tell Olivia not to use her full power? I recalled what Olivia’s magic mentor had said:

“Listen up, Olivia. It’s fine that you’re going to this ‘school’ place or what have you, but you need to practice holding back your full power first! You’re already, well, *overpowered* just from learning magic straight from your glorious Dark Queen and sword and fighting skills from my right hand, the beauteous Dark-Kin Knight Captain Clowria. I even taught you magic that packs such a punch that only this castle can withstand it, which in hindsight...yeah. So never, ever go all out at school, you got me? Never ever!”

That’s what she said! I remember!

“Daddy...” Olivia looked lost.

I gave it a moment’s thought. Then I gave her a strong nod.

“It’s all right. If that’s what the Director says, then that means you can go all out.”

This is the Elven Philosopher-Queen we’re talking about. I’m sure she can handle Olivia’s all. The Dark Queen did say Olivia shouldn’t go all out on humans. Ergo, if her opponent’s an elf, she shouldn’t have to worry. Plus, Miss Phyllis was talking up her wisdom earlier.

With my encouragement, Olivia took a step forward, buoyed by renewed resolve. “Thank you very much, Miss Director.”

“You’re welcome. Show me your full power.” Graceful and composed, Miss Phyllis smiled as she assumed her stance. Clearly, she was confident. *I expect no less of the Elven Philosopher-Queen. I’m sure she’s really powerful.*

First, it was Miss Phyllis’s turn to attack. Headmistress Courié whispered in my ear again. “Rest easy, sir. She will doubtless hold back such that your daughter’s life is never in danger... Though the world may be vast, few indeed can endure a full-power attack from so grand a sage.”

“S-So she’s that strong.”

I see. That sort of stuff’s not in my parenting books, so it’s all news to me.

“Now,” said Miss Courié, “deploy your magic at the starting signal.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Aaaand...START!”

Miss Phyllis brandished the stave that bears my favorite stone. “*Photon Ray!*”

The gem flashed. *Wow, well blow me down! Who knew that pretty little rock had that use to it?*

The ray of light enveloped Olivia.

“Hi-ya!” Olivia thrust out her hands. That instant, blinding light drenched the arena.

“Naturally, she cannot emerge totally unscathed. This is a harsh test designed

to impress upon the taker the gap between their power and Miss Phyllis's sheer wis— Whaaaaat?!"

"Ah, Olivia! You're safe! Phew!"

The light cleared up and there she stood, without a scratch on her. I was so relieved! If she'd been hurt, I might have rampaged a wee bit. To be fair, they should've told me beforehand if there was a chance she could get injured.

Olivia's eyes were screwed shut. *Is she okay? Was it too bright for her?*

"No, wha...?" Miss Phyllis was shaking, the Gem-Stave of Eternity still in hand. She kept looking at it and Olivia in turn, visibly mystified.

Finally, Olivia broke the silence, tilting her head in puzzlement and asking, "Err... Is that the end of the defense part of the exam?"

"Ah, uh, err, I, uh, y-yes, yes, it is! Defensive magic seems to be your strong suit and then some, Olivia." Miss Phyllis loudly cleared her throat.

It looked as though Olivia had passed the first half. *Amazing, sweetie!*

"N-Next, it's time for you to attack."

And for Miss Phyllis to block it.

"The quintessence of elven light magic is defense and healing...so don't expect this to play out the same way as b-before. Know that exerting yourself to the utmost is a sign of respect toward me, the one and only Phyllis Florence!"

"Yes, ma'am! Understood!"

That's my girl. Always with respectful and energetic replies. It's so late, so she must be sleepy too. What a trooper!

Miss Courié raised her hand up high. "N-Now then... START!"

Miss Phyllis wasted no time. "Threads of light, weave thyselfes! Barrier: *Hydroshimmer Shield!*"

My pet rainbow-colored gem shined, and a gigantic magic circle appeared that reached all the way to the ceiling. It was made up of several smaller magic circles, and I could tell that each of the small circles was bound up in powerful mana. *I see. So this is even stronger magic than before. These "elf" people are*

really skilled at this kind of magic, I take it?

I watched Olivia as she stood before Miss Phyllis's defensive barrier. "All out... All out, huh?" She seemed to be mulling it over like crazy in her head, and who could blame her? She'd never unleashed her full power before, so it must have been tough for her. If she went all out and failed... My parenting books tell me that's scary for a growing child to have to deal with.

"All right," she said. "Daddy, Miss Maredia, Miss Clowria. I'm going to try going max power!"

She slowly ambled up to Miss Phyllis's barrier.

"What is she doing?" asked Miss Courié. "You can only break a barrier created through magic with magic. That's beginner-level magic theory."

"Oh, no, that's probably magic," I muttered in reply. I knew where this was going.

"I'm sorry?" she said, a dubious look on her face.

"Hi-ya!" With impeccable form, she punched Miss Phyllis's barrier.

"Whoa!" I blurted, impressed.

Her fist was clad in the Dark Queen's forte, darkness magic. Add to that the martial arts form she'd learned from Miss Clowria. *So that's what Olivia pictured as "going all out."* I felt all warm and fuzzy inside. It was times like these Olivia felt like leaning on her big sisters, the two ladies with whom she shared a home.

CRACK. Fissures ran through the barrier before it broke into thin shards. The shards fell to the ground, dancing through the nighttime air of the Spell Training Area.

"Wh-What the? Sh-She broke her barrier!" The dumbfounded Miss Courié muttered to herself. "And with a punch, at that?"

Well, actually, that was a spell.

"You..." Miss Phyllis, equally dumbfounded, spoke in a barely audible volume. "Y-You pass. Olivia Eldraco...your talents are genuine. I... I..."

“Y-Yay!” Olivia jumped for joy and ran toward me.

I hugged her tight. “Way to go, Olivia! You passed! Daddy’s so proud!”

“Tee hee! I was a little nervous back there, Daddy!”

“Really? You didn’t look it.”

“I didn’t? Tee hee...” She nuzzled her soft cheek against me. Her cuteness levels were off the charts.

“Now I’ll be able to keep studying alongside everybody, right?”

“Yep! That’s what they promised me!”

“Phew!” She sighed a sigh of deep relief.

I see. To her, this was a fight she couldn’t lose, lest she lose her time with her friends. And she stepped into that battlefield all by herself. Olivia, you are your father’s pride and joy.

“Although...” She was pouting a little regretfully.

“What is it, honey?”

She whispered her secret: “Looks like going all out is a bit difficult for me. I was so embarrassed...so I did end up holding back.”

It’s always the cutest thing in the world when she giggles like that. I gave her a nice wide grin. “It’s okay. From here on out, you’ll get to train under a master like Miss Phyllis, so get lots of practice going full power. That’s what Miss Phyllis said, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh! Ah, but Miss Maredia told me, ‘Don’t do the beam! Never do the beam!’ so I intend to keep that promise. She said the school would collapse!”

“The school, collapse? We wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Olivia nodded, her voice excited. But behind her was someone who didn’t sound so cheery. Miss Phyllis shrieked. “Eek!”

What happened? I wondered. *Did she spot a bug or something?*

While we were expressing our joy and relief to each other, Miss Phyllis cleared her throat. “Ahem. With that, the exam is now over. You will be notified

about the King's Pupil investiture ceremony at a later date. Phew, I'm...exhausted... That's it, I'm not feeling well today... My true powers aren't so easy to beat..." She groaned, her shoulders drooping.

Oh, okay. To think she conducted the exam for Olivia's sake while she was feeling out of sorts... What a nice lady!

"Now then, Miss Olivia Eldraco," said Headmistress Courié, "return to the dorms for today. And sir, please make use of the guest room. What a shame, though, all things considered... I can hardly believe it. Possessing such unrivaled talent, only to desire a bog-standard school life for the sake of run-of-the-mill friendships..."

Why's she bad-mouthing a normal school life when she's Headmistress? Boy, that's sad.

Olivia must have been thinking the same thing, because her eyebrows lowered.

What's this? Olivia looks sad! As her Daddy, I need to step in and say something.

I recalled the wise words of a parenting book I'd read recently, *The Difference Between Monster Parents and Good Parents*. I bought it thinking it was for dragons like me or orcs or any other kind of "monster" who found themselves parenting. Who knew "monster parent" is a term meaning an over-demanding, nightmare parent? And I never expected that book would help me out here either! Also, that book said that conveying your justified reasoning in a rational way is different from how "monster parents" do things. As such, I started searching for words to give Miss Courié a piece of my mind.

Just then, the door to the Spell Training Area opened with a BANG.

"Wah!" I yelped in surprise. There was a group of small shadows, silhouettes of children, at the noise's source. They were all wearing pajamas. My dragon eyes have night vision. *Wait, I know her...*

"Daisy!" Olivia ran over to her.

I knew it.

“Are you all right, Olivia?!” asked Daisy.

“Ruby! Iria! Lena... You’re all here!”

Together they were six in all, and by the looks of it, they were all Olivia’s friends.

“You’re all in violation of school rules!” said Miss Courié, her voice stern. “It’s already past dorm curfew...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Headmistress,” said Daisy. “I was the one who took the others here.” She was facing Miss Courié, standing resolute with her head held high.

“What did you say? But you’re the young heiress of the House of Palestria, which so prides itself on its moral rectitude...”

“When we heard Olivia would be taking the King’s Pupil selection exam, we could hardly bear the anxiety. We’ve heard how there were those who took the test and got injured, or left school because their confidence in their magic was shattered... And we wanted to help her however we could.”

The other girls nodded in agreement:

“We’re not as good at magic or physical combat as Olivia, but we figured we might be able to do something if we worked together!”

“Right, so it’s not just Daisy’s fault!”

“...Urgh...”

“Yeah! We wanted to save her... I came because I wanted to!”

“What she said!”

Wow! That made me so happy. They all snuck out of the dorms out of concern for Olivia.

Miss Courié was rubbing her temples. “Goodness gracious... Do none of you regard Miss Olivia with envy or frustration...?”

It was Daisy who replied. “I do, but only just a little. Regardless, she’s my precious friend.”

“Daisy...” said Olivia, touched. Her eyes were gleaming. “You guys...”

Miss Courié gasped. “Friends...” She slowly soaked in the scene of all of Olivia’s friends crowded around her. The wee first-years’ eyes were square on their Headmistress. Then, a while later, Miss Courié heaved a deep sigh. “I remember now... School life isn’t just about honing one’s abilities or academic know-how. It appears that despite serving as Headmistress, I’ve forgotten something quite basic indeed.” She smiled a little, then clapped her hands twice. “Now then, you lot. You may have heard already, but Miss Olivia passed the King’s Pupil exam unharmed... And not only that, but she will be the King’s Pupil in an unprecedented way, living her school life together with you.”

The kids rejoiced.

“You all hold a place in your hearts for your friends. That warms my soul as the head of the Florence Academy. That being said, celebrations must take place at a later date. Now get back to the dorms. You do have lessons tomorrow. And for leaving the dorms without permission and violating lights-out time, a suitable punishment... Let’s see... Yes, I think extracurricular lessons will do the trick.”

The kids seemed relieved to hear that was all. They went back to the dorms, hand in hand.

Olivia waved at me with a truly satisfied smile. “Goodnight, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, Olivia. Sweet dreams... And thank you, girls. I hope you stay friends with my Olivia.”

Miss Courié wore a peaceful expression. *Good, I’m certain she’ll see the worth of a normal school life for the children without my having to say a word.*

And with that, I put the Spell Training Area behind me. Relieved that Olivia passed the test unscathed, I slept like a baby that night.

Early the next morning, I heard a knock on my guest room door at the Florence Academy.

“Good morning, Mr. Eldraco.”

I got all flustered. It was the woman from the secretariat. “Ah, uh, good morning... I’m sorry, I’m still in my pajamas.”

I'm just glad the knock didn't jolt me back into dragon form. The room would've collapsed for sure.

"That's okay, sir. I came here to tell you the schedule has been decided. I must say, your daughter is impressive. I heard she passed the King's Pupil selection exam."

So she's already aware. My day was getting off to quite the pleasant start, hearing Olivia's praises.

"Thank you very much. So, err, about that schedule..."

"It's the King's Pupil investiture ceremony... Though due to Miss Olivia's own wishes, it won't be the usual grand-scale affair, but rather, it will be held within the academy. In fact, it will be carried out before dinner today. Apologies for the short notice."

"Um, may I attend as well?"

"Yes, of course. And we don't mind if you stay another night either."

"Thank you. I'll take you up on your kind... Ah."

"Ah?"

It just hit me. There were two ladies back home who'd be thrilled to see Olivia's hour of triumph.

"Do you think I could step out until the ceremony's on?"

"There should be no issue with that..."

I thanked her again and set about dressing myself. *All right, a quick flight and I'll bring the two ladies here.* The round trip takes me half a day, so I was able to bring the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria to the academy in time.

Unsurprisingly, the Dark Queen grumbled about going outside, so I had her assume cat form. She was snugly tucked inside the breast of Miss Clowria's clothes.

"Haugh... I never thought I'd see the day I'd be riding aback an elder dragon. H-How far I've fallen!" But her tail was wagging. *I'm glad she had a fun flight.*

"If I recall," said Miss Clowria, "'tis a hundred students per grade, correct?"

With all six grades in one place, it will be quite the sight to behold.” She stroked the Dark Queen’s head as she scanned the auditorium.

We were seated at the furthest back seats of the auditorium, waiting for the investiture ceremony to begin. Just as Miss Clowria had remarked, with every student from Olivia’s first grade all the way up to the sixth grade, the crowd in the auditorium was quite impactful.

A short time later, Headmistress Courié was on stage, and she began speaking in her dignified way. “As you’ve all been informed, the special scholarship student, the King’s Pupil, has been selected from the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.”

Applause burst out from the students.

Miss Courié continued. “What’s more, the student chosen to be the King’s Pupil this time around does not desire special treatment. She has chosen to live out her school life here as normal. Under the condition, of course, that she doesn’t neglect her studies as the King’s Pupil. In short, she has chosen to maintain a close fellowship here with her friends. And I feel as though she may have just reminded your Headmistress of a valuable lesson.”

Once again, the students applauded. We clapped for Miss Courié too. *Her speech was neither too long nor too short. She did a solid job conveying Olivia’s sentiments to the students,* I thought happily to myself.

“Now, allow me to introduce the King’s Pupil selected from among the students of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Grade One Class Zero’s Miss Olivia Eldraco.”

Olivia got up on stage, and the applause grew louder.

“My, it seems the rumors of the girl genius were true!”

“That’s amazing. She’s so tiny too!”

“I hear she’s got a great personality to boot. Apparently, she’s even on good terms with kids outside of Class Zero.”

“I’d sure like the girls in my grade’s Class Zero to learn a thing or two from her.”

Hearing the students' whispers filled me with pride. *How about my daughter? She's a gem, isn't she?!*

Olivia delivered her remarks on the stage. Her address was short, but a credit to her. And at the end, she grinned and said, "I am grateful for my beloved Father, who helped me enroll in this academy."

I couldn't hold back my tears. *She called me "Father"! She's always shouting "Daddy" with that carefree smile and rushing over to me, but she's matured enough to call me "Father" when addressing other people. Olivia, you have my unstinting kudos!*

Later on, Academy Founder Miss Phyllis appeared in her stately manner to bestow her with a pure white mantle. Apparently, the black velvet mantle, which was adorned with a crest, served as proof of her King's Pupil credentials. It was big enough to completely cover her down to her bottom, and it swayed whenever she moved.

Cuteness alert! Cuteness overload!!!

I mean, it's not fair. She looks good in anything... It's enough to throw me for a loop.

The assembly came to a close, and in sync with the voices of the choir, the students exited the auditorium in neat files.

"She's gotten bigger in the short time we've not seen her, our Olivia," said Miss Clowria.

"Haughh," whined the Dark Queen discontentedly, still in Miss Clowria's top. From what little of her nigh unintelligible muttering I could make out, while she was happy to see Olivia so honored, being in a room with so many people was rough for her. "Urgh... This really reminds me of how rotten middle management was back when I commanded the army. It was a super black company. C'mon, Clowria, let's go home already!"

I see the Dark Queen has her own hardships to deal with... I was living a free and carefree life by myself, so I can't imagine what she went through commanding an army. "Middle management? What's that?"

The Dark Queen jumped down to the ground and tried leading Miss Clowria

toward the exit. “Haugh. We can talk about that some other time. Let’s get out of here! I got to see Olivia strut her stuff, so I’m satisfied... Haugh whaaa?!” she shrieked the second she skittered out of the auditorium.

What the? Worried, I ran to her location...only to find her surrounded on all sides by the students.

“Look, a cat! It’s so cute!”

“Wonder if it’s someone’s familiar?”

“Is it just me, or did it *speak* just now?”

“Look, it’s wearing cute sheep horns... Wait, they’re real!”

“Maybe it’s a chimera or some such. That aside, it’s just so adorable!”

Bombarded by comments as to her cuteness, the fur on her tail was standing on end. That was when Olivia arrived, her brand-new velvet mantle swaying as she walked. “Daddy! And you both!”

“Olivia! That mantle looks great on you!”

“Tee hee. Thanks, Daddy!” She smiled sweetly.

The students who surrounded the Dark Queen grew louder, their eyes sparkling.

“So that’s her family!”

“I’m so jealous, her father is so cool.”

That’s a bit embarrassing to hear, but they’re calling me cool as her Daddy, so I’ll take it!

“Tee hee, even Miss Maredia’s here!” Olivia picked the black cat up in her arms.



Olivia could tell it was the Dark Queen, her shapeshifting notwithstanding. “You’re my precious friend!” She nuzzled her cheek against her, beaming all the while.

The Dark Queen, for her part, seemed to calm down somewhat while in her arms. Her slit eyes narrowed and she purred, just like an honest-to-goodness cat.

The students fawned over the Dark Queen for a good bit. She looked pleased with herself. “Heh heh, these young lasses must know their stuff if they took note of how cute I am!” It wasn’t long before she headed back home in Miss Clowria’s arms, but I got the feeling she enjoyed her brief school sojourn too.

Chapter 21: Mr. Dragon Dispenses Advice

We watched the two ladies' carriage leave, and, just as I was thinking about bidding Olivia goodbye and heading home myself—

"Mr. Eldraco, sir."

I turned to face the source of that familiar voice and there stood Miss Phyllis.

"Ah, Miss Director. Thank you for everything. I'm still grateful you conducted the test for Olivia while you weren't feeling well."

"Ahem! Yes, well, we needn't discuss that incident any further. Mr. Eldraco, I would like to ask for your advice."

"Huh? It's not about Olivia?"

"It's not. It's about a personal matter... And, if possible, I'd appreciate it if you don't tell anyone else about it."

"I don't mind lending a hand." It wasn't as though I had anything to do once I got home. I'd just sit back and relax all day anyway. I had no one to talk to besides Miss Clowria and the Dark Queen, and they probably wouldn't be interested in giving advice to a stranger.

"To be frank...Olivia is so extraordinarily outstanding, and you two are so close as well. I'm almost envious. As such, well..." Miss Phyllis played with her pretty hair as she spoke to me with nervous diffidence. "I'd like to ask for some parenting advice."

Huh? Parenting advice?

Miss Phyllis invited me to the reception office where she began confiding in me, her expression meek and humble. She was telling me what they call her "life's story." This was the first time I'd ever talked to anyone this much outside of Olivia or the two ladies back at the castle.

"The Florence Clan is a lineage of great repute among us elves... I would like my daughter to inherit my title of 'Philosopher-Queen,' which is passed down

our family line. And yet...”

“And yet?”

“She’s so pessimistic with regard to learning magic.”

“She doesn’t enjoy it?”

“Indeed, I believe so. Either that, or she is, perhaps, lazy at heart.” She heaved a deep sigh as she rubbed her temples. “To tell the truth, it won’t be long at all before my term as the Philosopher-Queen is up.”

“How long do you have?”

“Only two hundred and fifty years.”

“Whoa! You really are pressed for time.”

“Hm?” Miss Phyllis tilted her head in puzzlement as she stared unblinkingly at me. “Mr. Eldraco... It seems you understand my predicament, unlike most humans.”

“Ah, ha ha... I have an elf acquaintance, you see.” And I wasn’t lying. If I’m not misremembering, the old man who came to see me in my shrine-den from time to time said he was an elf. I haven’t seen him in around five hundred years. I wonder if he’s doing well.

“I see. Then you might already be aware that an elf’s reproductive period only comes once every five hundred years. My daughter was born twelve short years ago, and I won’t be able to give birth to another heiress before my term is over.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I’d like for that girl to at least be more interested in magic... If she could just accede to her place as Philosopher-Queen knowing the light magic that the House of Florence are masters of, that would suffice.”

Alarm bells. All I want for Olivia is to be healthy and happy. I just hope she never stops smiling in life, and that her childhood and adult life are happy. I do what I need to do for that to happen, but wanting her to do anything specific with her life would be too imposing.

“I’m sorry, Miss Phyllis. I don’t think I can be of much help to you.”

“Please, sir, I insist!!!” Miss Phyllis suddenly stood up and bowed deeply. It was so jerky that I figured she must not be used to bowing.

I remembered a children’s book (*Choosing a Job, Starting at Age Thirteen*) that said there are a lot of elves in high places across various nations and organizations. “Err... Well...”

“I’ll do right by Olivia, so please!” Miss Phyllis lowered her head deeply.

I crossed my arms and mulled it over. By the way, I notice I’ve been crossing my arms whenever I get absorbed in my thoughts. Very human-y. “Well, all right... There’s no harm in talking, for now.”

Miss Phyllis’s face lit up. “Th-Thank you very much!”

“So, err, what’s your daughter’s name?”

Little did I expect she’d need to take a deep breath to tell me. “Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence.”

“...Come again?”

“Like I said, she is Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence.”

“Wait, what?!”

Hold on. Was that a name just now?

“In the elven tongue, the name means ‘Renewed glory and affection and wisdom be upon the angelic rose of a girl.’ A majestic name, don’t you think?!” She puffed up with pride.

“Uh... Uh-huh... And your name is just Phyllis?”

“That’s right. I’m Phyllis Florence. The daughter of the great Phyllia Florence!”

“And your daughter’s named...”

“Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence.”

“That’s Seraphy do Riphyllia... Uhh...”

“It’s Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence.”

“W-Wow...” I could only wonder whether I’d be able to memorize a name that long.

* * *

I sat on a bench in the courtyard early in the morning, thinking.

Miss Phyllis wanted me to meet her daughter and Florence Academy would apparently let me stay as a guest until I fulfilled her request for parenting advice. The futon was fluffy and the meals were exceptionally extravagant and delicious. I woke up early, basking in the morning sun. It was nice and cold out, which made the sunlight feel oh so pleasant as the courtyard gradually grew warmer and warmer. And the courtyard itself was truly a thing of beauty. Seasonal flowers bloomed in profusion, and I didn’t spot a single dead or withering plant. Plus, they were in aesthetic harmony with the fountain and statues, and the air was clean and pure.

“Miss Phyllis’s daughter... She may be an elf, but she’s still only twelve years old, which makes her Olivia’s age.”

Miss Phyllis’s request echoed in my mind as I gazed around the courtyard. She’d said it seemed her daughter didn’t like studying magic. *But why in the heavens might that be?* I’d read in *Different Races, Different Parenting Styles* that elves, as a race, are really good at magic.

I pondered while soaking in the warm sunlight, when, all of a sudden, my field of vision turned black.

“Ah!”

“Guess who!” came her cute voice.

Oh, I don’t need to guess, blindfolded or not. That’s my favorite voice in the whole wide world.

“Is it Olivia?”

“Tee hee, I lose!”

The darkness went away, and the bright light flooded back in my eyes. I

turned around, and there stood Olivia in her uniform and mantle. Her light brown hair, which she normally wore braided while at school, swayed lightly in the breeze, unbraided.

“What’s up, honey?”

“A teacher told me you’ll be here for a little while longer, which is great. I came looking for you!”

“I see!” *Gee, you know how to brighten your Daddy’s day!* Just from seeing her smile so early in the day, I felt my energy levels rising.

“I knew you’d like this courtyard. I always thought you would!”

“Yep, Daddy’s taken a liking to it.”

“Me too!” She took a seat beside me.

“Hey, sweetie, do you have a ribbon?”

“Yep!”

“Why don’t I braid your hair, like old times?”

“You’ll braid it?! Yay!” Her body bounced in her seat on the bench.

I used her red first-year ribbon and braided her light brown locks. “Olivia...”

“What is it, Daddy?”

“If, hypothetically, you didn’t like studying or magic, or you were good at fewer things...I think you’d still be just as important to me.”

“Uh-huh. And if you were bad at cooking, or a bit weak, I’d still love you, Daddy.”

“Is that so? Thanks.”

How does Miss Phyllis view her daughter? If she dislikes any child of hers who doesn’t study magic...that’s awfully sad, isn’t it?

“All right, your hair’s all done.”

“Thanks, Daddy!”

I got the feeling she was the tiniest bit taller, and her hair the tiniest bit longer, than how I remembered her. *Man. Human kids really do grow up*

lightning-fast.

“See you later, honey!” I watched and waved as Olivia left with a pep in her step for her morning assembly, and I felt it keenly in my heart.

I could say so much about the magnificence of the courtyard at Florence Academy that you’d never hear the end of it. First of all, the ventilation is on point. The school was built atop a small hill overlooking the meadowlands and the winds that run across these lands hail from the sky. The breeze that shakes the courtyard’s trees reaches the building after passing through the tall walls surrounding the school, the planted forests, and the gardens. The statues and fountain are so well-maintained they look shiny and new. The trees and their fragrant blossoms, the potted plants with larger, showier flowers, and the seasonal flowers in the flower beds were all in full bloom. The lawn and the stone steps running across it are so well-maintained too... The winds smelled sweet, redolent of tea olive. I breathed in the crisp morning air. The sun was rising and the air was getting warmer...

All of this to say you can’t blame me for nodding off a little as I waited for my afternoon appointment to meet Miss Phyllis’s daughter.

I was snoring softly when I heard cheerful children’s voices. I was half asleep, but I smiled.

“Daddy, you’re going to catch a cold like that!”

“Hrmm... Olivia?”

I opened my eyes and Olivia was peering at my face. *Talk about a lovely image to wake up to!*

“Hey, honey... Wait, do you not have class?”

“Second period is free since the teacher has research to do. So we thought we’d have a picnic in the courtyard!”

“Oh, a picnic, eh?”

I looked around, and saw the girls were wearing their red first-year scarves around the collars of their uniforms and the black scarves of the all-star class around it. They were holding teapots and placemats and small tables and

baskets covered by cute cloths and the like.

Olivia's best friend, Daisy with the nice indigo blue hair, bent a wee bit at the knees to greet me, still holding a teapot in hand. "How do you do, sir?"

"Oh hey, Daisy. Hello!" I waved.

The children spread a large mat on the lawn and shouted, "Okay, ready!" Right away, they started setting up the tables and the tea, and opened their baskets full of treats like scones, cookies, and more.

A girl with jade-colored eyes and very short blonde hair deftly poured tea in everyone's cups before handing me a cup. "Would you like one too, Mr. Eldraco?"

"Wait, I can have some too? Wouldn't you rather just have a tea party with the other girls?"

"I wanted to try having a chat with Olivia's Daddy. What do you think, guys?"

The children all agreed with her. "Olivia's Daddy should eat with us!" said one.

"Tee hee, thanks, Iria."

"You're welcome," replied the girl with the short blonde hair, evidently named Iria.

"Daddy, Iria's the daughter of a general, so she's really good at martial arts and the sword!"

"Is that right? Impressive!"

"Not that I can beat Olivia, mind you. It was the first time I'd ever lost a sword duel. I'll beat her one day, I swear it..." she said, burning with a quiet competitive spirit.

Wow, so she has one of those "rival" things now. And she's got a good one too. How nice!

Olivia introduced her five classmates in order. As I was already acquainted with Daisy, she started with the girls I was meeting for the first time.

"This is Ruby. Her eyes are bright red and she's so pretty! Her family is in the jewelry business!"

“It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

She had slick red hair and scarlet eyes. *What a dazzler of a friend she’s made.* Her freckles gave her the vibe of a very spirited girl.

“This is Lena.”

Lena bowed her head wordlessly. Her silver starlight-like hair was long enough to drag on the floor, even though it was lightly braided. She was expressionless, like a doll. *Another really pretty girl.*

“Lena doesn’t speak much, but she’s actually super fun to be around.”

“I see. Nice to meet you, Lena.” I smiled at her, and she looked down shyly.

“Kate’s an incredible cook!”

“My family line works as the head chefs of the royal court, you see. An apple a day, and all that. I plan on studying pharmamancy at the academy!”

“Wow, so, medicinal herbs!”

That reminds me of the independent research project Olivia submitted... I wonder what became of those plant specimens. They’re just so commonplace to me that I was surprised when Miss Courié called it an extinct miracle herb or what have you.

“Yep! Olivia really knows her stuff when it comes to medicinal herbs too. What was she like when she was little?”

“Hm, well...” I shared stories of my old times with Olivia. They apparently found reminiscences of their friend’s past amusing, and they came at me with one question after the other as we all enjoyed our tea and confections. *Oh man, it’s enough to make a man blush!*

Enjoying a fun chat with Olivia’s classmates was like something out of a dream. I could only beam happily as they called me “Olivia’s Daddy” or “Olivia’s father.” *That’s right! I am her Daddy!*

A while later, after the tea and confections had run out, Ruby, the girl with the nice red hair, stood up.

“Excuse me, sir, but your hair’s all disheveled. Do you want me to re-do it for

you?”

“Huh?” *Ah, right, my braids must have gotten tousled after I dozed off earlier.*

Ruby fetched a brush and started to do my hair.

“Ooh, ooh,” said Olivia, “I wanna do it too!”

“Well then I wanna do it too! His hair’s so beautiful!”

“It really is! It’s a sunset purple color.”

“Wh-Whoa there...”

Before I knew it, I was surrounded. They styled and braided my hair far more neatly than I could ever manage on my own. They gave it a really stylish arrangement too... *Wow, human girls sure know fashion.*

“Tee hee, Ruby’s so good at doing people’s hair!” said Olivia as she clapped and applauded the finished product, which was completed in the blink of an eye. “Oh, I know, I’ll add this, Daddy!” She gently plucked a small, cute flower growing in the courtyard lawn and placed it in my hair.

“Hold on,” I said. “Doesn’t a flower on Daddy’s hair look kind of off?”

“No way, Daddy! It looks great on you!”

Just then, we heard a rustling from the other side of the courtyard. I looked in that direction to find the figure of someone slightly bigger than the first-year girls. “Are they a student?”

But she wasn’t wearing the school robes. She was glancing our way from behind her blonde bangs, the rest of her hair trimmed to reach her chin. And her ears were pointy. The girl was an elf.

“Ah!” When Olivia spotted her, she waved enthusiastically. “Seraphy!”

Seraphy turned to face her, and the next instant, she pulled a super uneasy expression.

“Seraphy, you say... Wait, didn’t I hear that name somewhere?”

“Well, Daddy, she’s the one who’s always at the courtyard...” She dragged me by the sleeve to go greet her.

Then Daisy, who'd begun cleaning up after our picnic, whispered to her. "Hey, Olivia, we're going back to the classroom in a moment."

"Okay. I'll be there in a second! Thanks, Daisy!"

I tried to remember where I had heard the name before. *Seraphy. An elf. Ah, I remember!*

"Hello. Might you be Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence?"

Seraphy's eyes opened wide with surprise. "W-Well, it's true that my real name is Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence...but..."

Her blonde hair swayed as she nodded.

"Wait, Daddy, you know Seraphy?" Olivia went on to tell me she was acquainted with Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence. Since Olivia'd taken a liking to the courtyard soon after her first day here, she noticed her sitting on the bench and gazing at the trees nearly every day. That was how she came to know that Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence never skipped a day taking care of the place.

"Seraphy knows everything there is to know about flowers! She tends to all of it: the trees, the flowers, the herbs, everything! And the other day, she told me the plant I covered in my research project might be the all-purpose healing herb called moonglows—the 'plant-acea'!"

"Oh, that... I just happened to be there..." Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence looked down, embarrassed.

"Err, I'm Olivia's father. Nice to meet you, Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence."

"Umm, sir?"

"What is it, Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence?"

"It's just, could you please stop calling me by my full name? I-It's

embarrassing!!!”

“Huh?! Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know...” *I’d spent time and effort memorizing her whole name, since it’s a lovely name Miss Phyllis put her heart into, but it seems Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence—err, I mean Seraphy—doesn’t particularly like to be called by her full name.*

“Oh, all right then. So, Seraphy... Hello! And thank you for being a friend to Olivia.”

“Tee hee. Thanks, Seraphy!”

“Oh, uhh, it’s nothing. I should be the one thanking you. Olivia has been so friendly to me, despite the fact that I’m not a student here.”

Yep, I had a feeling. Seraphy wasn’t wearing the school uniform’s robes or the color-coded scarf indicating a grade. Instead, she was nearly dressed shoulder-down in brown. She wore a cute green checkered hunting cap that was the spitting image of the headgear worn by the canine detective in one of Olivia’s favorite picture books. Her thick jacket sported lots of pockets, all of which were bulging. I wondered what was in them. The hems of her knee-length trousers were tight on her slender legs, and she also wore cotton socks tucked into leather boots with rounded toes. The well-organized leather pouches she wore around her waist contained tools like small and big scissors, easy-to-use knives, and neatly coiled thin string. She didn’t wear anything reminiscent of the white dresses or sparkling tiaras other elves favored. Her attire screamed “boy gardener.” It was like she’d popped straight out of a picture book.

Just then, the ding-dong of the bell echoed through the courtyard. Class was out. The secretariat worker, holding the small bell, walked down the halls while ringing its pleasant tones.

“Ah, third period’s about to start. I need to go.”

“All right. Thanks, Olivia. Tell everybody I had fun at the picnic.”

“Sure thing! Thank you, Daddy!” She picked up her basket and ran off, her light brown braids swaying.

If I recall correctly, there should be ten minutes till the next period begins. It’s

the mid-lesson break time now. The classroom doors all along the hallways opened one after the other, and the voices of the students, exuberant due to their liberation, filled the corridors. Seraphy gave them a sidelong glance and pulled her hunting cap over her eyes.

“I hate break time...” she muttered, and she made to slink out of the courtyard.

Wait, hold on! I felt it’d be better to hear Seraphy’s story from the girl herself, rather than anywhere her mother was present. She did seem a bit shy, after all. “Wait, Seraphy.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Then how about we meet here in ten minutes’ time? You know, once class is on and everything quiets down again... What do you say?”

She stood in place to give it some thought, before leaving without a word. I knew if I tried to keep her, it’d just make her freeze up and panic. That’s what my home’s landlady, the Dark Queen, taught me. If I used a hands-off approach, perhaps she’d come to me if and when she was so inclined. “That aside...”

I enjoyed the break time, surrounded as I was by the sounds of the schoolgirls’ laughter. I surveyed the courtyard once again. “It really is a fantastic courtyard.” I plopped myself back down on the bench. *Being in human form’s got its perks.* Sometimes it’s better to be small, though I have to be careful as I’m still physically powerful in human form. Of course, I can’t fly or breathe fire as a human. In fact, in some ways, being in a human body is nothing but inconvenient and limiting. Yet in that moment, feeling the wind on my skin while surrounded by the trees and flowers of the courtyard, I felt so cozy and relaxed. The bright light of day, the smell of the soil.

Olivia said she likes this place. But then, of course she does. Ever since she was little, she’s always adored all things peaceful and pretty. And seeing as Seraphy created this courtyard...I’m sure she must be a gentle soul too.

I contemplated this as I admired the sunlight filtering through the foliage.

* * *

I heard the sound of leaves crunching underfoot.

“Mister.”

“Hello, Seraphy. Thank you for coming.”

Seraphy was standing some distance away from me, half-hiding behind a tree.

“Have you been here the whole time?” she asked, almost inaudibly.

“Uh-huh. It’s such a wonderful courtyard, after all.”

Up until that point, Seraphy’s expression had hardly changed, but now it had gotten less tense. Or rather, she was desperately striving to keep her face expressionless.

“Y-You appreciate how wonderful this courtyard is too, mister?”

“I do. Gardening isn’t my area of expertise, but I’ve always loved trees and plants.” I was being honest. I was fond enough of them to live a relaxed mountain life for millennia.

“I, I see... I’m the one who maintains it all, a-actually.”

“Really? That’s amazing. It’s such a pretty courtyard.”

“I love trees and plants and flowers and stuff, so I did some research.”

“You *must* love them. Look what a fantastic job you did... Did you use some sort of trick to get the seasonal and out-of-season flowers to bloom at the same time?”

“Oho, I’m impressed you noticed. You have promise, mister.” Little by little, Seraphy was getting closer to me. “Mister, over here. Look at these, they’re crimsonia flowers. They don’t actually bloom outside of early spring. But, by planting a lot of springbides at the roots...”

She kept on pointing at this flower and that tree, explaining it all to the best of her ability. Judging by her expression, she was having a ball doing so.

Miss Phyllis called Seraphy lazy, but from where I’m standing, she’s not lazy at all. I dunno where she got that idea... Look how hard she works at what she enjoys.

“Now to show you my trump card. Look, mister! Over here!”

“Ah! Please don’t dash off like that!”

She led me by the arm up a tower located on the north side of the school building. At the tower's top, one could look down upon the whole school. *Wow, this is one tall tower.* I could see far out to the horizon of the meadowlands. The view was superb.

"Look, mister!"

"Oh no! Don't lean forward like that; it's dangerous!" I looked in the direction she pointed. "...Huh. Would you look at that?"

"It's a magic circle for maintaining the temperature and humidity!"

Looking down on the courtyard from the tower, I could see how the plants were arranged in such a way that they formed a large magic circle. To be honest, for a dragon like me, adjusting the temperature and humidity levels of my surroundings is easy as pie; I don't need a magic circle to do it. I did read in *Parenting Lifehacks: The Magic Item Catalog*, though, that to the little folks, doing so involves very difficult magic. Apparently, magic items that can change the temperature or humidity of one's surroundings come with a steep price tag and most people can't afford one.

"The ideal way to do this would be planting a garden over land that's been made into a magic circle at the substructural stage...but I thought I could maybe make up for it through positioning the plants in just the right way... And it was a huge success!"

"That's incredible, Seraphy! So that explains why the courtyard feels as nice as it does."

And that wasn't just flattery. *To think she worked out a way to craft such a lovely courtyard all on her own! I think that really is pretty incredible.*

She blushed a little at my words, but then she turned her back to me. "...But my mother wouldn't be pleased. Mister, you're Olivia's father, Mr. Eldraco, right? Mother told me you would 'teach us your ways' this afternoon."

"Oh, I see... Yep, I'm Eldraco."

"I'm sorry a shoddy student like me will be taking up your valuable time... I just don't think I can do what Mother wants of me. Bye for now."

And with that, Seraphy ran down the tower staircase. All I could do was watch as she fled—she kind of looked like she was about to cry.

I crossed my arms and turned it over in my head. It seemed to me neither daughter nor mother thought very much of one another. Or perhaps, I figured, they just didn't really know each other. I was slated to give Miss Phyllis some parenting advice over lunch, and I knew Seraphy would probably be sitting with us as well. "Hrm... I just hope this goes in the right direction."

I racked my mind as I went down the stairs. The noon recess bell rang.

The academy was bustling during recess. The classroom of the all-star class, aka Class Zero, contained only six girls, including Olivia, who stared up at me. "Wow! A secret mission from Daddy!"

"Can I ask you to do that for me, Olivia?"

"Of course, Daddy! Tee hee! I'll give it my best shot!"

"Thanks. I'll leave it to you."

"Uh-huh!"

I gave her a hug, and then we parted for our different destinations. Olivia went to the dining hall, where the midday meal was being served. I hastened for the reception office, where the Founder of the Academy and her daughter were waiting. When I arrived, Miss Phyllis and Seraphy were already sitting on the couch, side by side. The resemblance was uncanny. Especially how their eyes shone like sparkling jewels. But they were both frowning with grave looks on their faces.

Don't tell me they didn't speak a word to each other before I got here?

Miss Phyllis was wearing a white, long dress. Seraphy, meanwhile, wore the same gardener stylings as earlier with her hunting cap on her lap. She was staring holes through her kneecaps.

"Sorry I'm late... And sorry to take this liberty." I threw open the window facing the courtyard. The trees of the beautiful courtyard of Seraphy's creation pleased the eye. With that, my part in the mission was complete. I sat gently

down on the sofa.

“Mr. Eldraco, this is my daughter, Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence.”

“Mother, please, that name...”

“What do you mean, Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence?”

“Ah, it’s just... Well, that name could be a bit more...”

“My apologies, Mr. Eldraco. Her manners could still use improvement. Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence’s name was inspired by the pearls of wisdom I’ve gathered as the Elven Philosopher-Queen. It is a noble name that is sure to bring good fortune.”

“Nice to meet you, mister,” said Seraphy, ignoring Miss Phyllis’s words as she bowed her head.

“Hey there, Seraphy. Short time no see.”

“Mr. Eldraco, please, call her by her full name! Wait, you’ve met before?”

“Yes, ma’am. A moment ago, in the courtyard. And there, she...well...”

At the courtyard, she’d asked me not to call her by her full name. But now, she was biting her lip. Her twinkling eyes, the spitting image of Miss Phyllis’s, were misty. I gave her a gentle nod. The two were operating under mistaken assumptions regarding each other. I was sure of it.

I chose my words so as to wound Miss Phyllis as little as possible. “She asked me not to call her by her full name, you see. Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence... I do think it’s a wonderful name. You crafted a name for her that symbolizes a whole bunch of nice ideals for her.”

“My word, you’ve already memorized my daughter’s name!”

“Yes. Yet she herself doesn’t want to be called by her full name.”

“She herself? That can’t be...” She looked at Seraphy, who was sitting nearby.

Seraphy’s voice quavered. “It’s...It’s long...”

“Pardon?”

“IT’S TOO LONG!!!” she cried.

Yep. It really is.

Miss Phyllis’s expression turned sharp. “Wha—”

“My name’s too long... By the time I’m finished saying it all, my friends have already started talking about a million other things. And when I failed the Florence Academy entrance test? The other kids had already started reading the questions before I finished writing my name on the paper! Th-The teacher said ‘Seraphy Florence’ would be fine, but since you’re always insisting it has to be my full name...”

“But your name has honorable and storied origins, and it’s auspicious—”

“So what?! That doesn’t change how annoying it is to use my full name every single time!”

The words gushed out of Seraphy like a busted dam. *Maybe this is the first time they’ve ever actually discussed this.*

Miss Phyllis’s face looked white as a sheet. She was shocked.

“Err, I understand where you’re coming from, Miss Phyllis...” I said quietly. “When naming your child, you want to put all your wishes and prayers for them into that name.”

I read all about it in *The Big Book of Naming: Watch Out for Postpartum Euphoria!* Right after your child is born, you may be so elated that you try to give them the greatest name ever...which tends to lead to *eccentric* names like that behemoth. I was just guessing, but I had a hunch Miss Phyllis was on cloud nine when Seraphy was born.

“But...But I just want Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence to be an exemplary inheritor of the Elven Philosopher-Queen title.”

“Mother...please, call me Seraphy.”

“I just want you to be a paragon among elves...Seraphy,” she said, hanging her head.

I gently got to my feet. *I'm guessing Olivia's more or less finished her preparations.* "About that, Miss Phyllis. I heard you don't come to school very often."

"Hm? Yes, that's right. I'm usually busy with my duties as Philosopher-Queen. I leave school affairs to Headmistress Courié."

"Then how about we all take a stroll around the courtyard?"

"The courtyard... Ah, now I remember. We have a courtyard here too. But what about it?"

I stood by the wide-open window, and my incredibly cute and dependable daughter stood in the courtyard, smiling as her light brown braids swayed in the air.

"You're up, honey."

"Okay, Daddy. Leave it to me... Hi-ya!" She raised her right arm overhead in a grand fashion, and winds blew across the courtyard from the skies. It was neither too strong nor too weak. It was enough to cause human hair to sway heavily, and it blew into the reception office, bringing with it the wonderful aroma of the soil and grass and flowers of the courtyard.

Perfect! Excellent work, Olivia!

"...Wh-What's that fragrance? It smells just like a mystical forest...and like various seasonal flowers. This is from our courtyard?" Miss Phyllis was perplexed as her long blonde hair blew in the gale.

That's right. The Florence Academy's courtyard is suffused with nature and mana that wouldn't be out of place in a forest where elves live or in the mountain I live in. How's that for a kind of magic?

"Miss Phyllis. This courtyard..." But I left it at that and gave Seraphy's back a soft push.

Her blonde bangs blowing in the wind, Seraphy was in a daze but she gently told her mother the truth. "I'm the one who looks after everything in this courtyard."

"Wh-What did you say?"

“I don’t like the elven light magic that you want for me. Light that’s too harsh kills the plants. Water magic, earth magic, and a smidgen of darkness magic...that’s the kind of magic I use to help my beloved plants grow strong and healthy. That’s what I was studying this whole time.”

When Miss Phyllis said that Seraphy was totally pessimistic about learning magic, she was only half right. I asked Olivia what Seraphy was like, and according to her, Seraphy was always trying out all sorts of magic. She used a unique array of spells that could be called “Gardenmancy.”

“She’s far from academically hopeless,” I told Miss Phyllis, who hadn’t said a peep. “She’s actually a heck of a researcher.”

Seraphy looked up at her worriedly. “Mother...”

“I’m sorry, Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia—no. I’m sorry, Seraphy, my love. I was so obsessed with the passing down of the Philosopher-Queen title...that I completely failed to see you for you.”

She got on her knees and hugged Seraphy tight.

“Umm, Mother...”

“I went too far, pushing too much on you...Seraphy.”

“Mother...I...” Seraphy hugged her right back, tightly as a small kid would.

Aww, I’m happy for them! They’ve made peace.

“If you’re up for it, would you care to take that stroll around the courtyard?” I suggested. The courtyard was a marvel of a garden of Seraphy’s making, after all. When we entered the courtyard, my cute little mage gave me a smile.

“Ah, Daddy!”

“Olivia!” I realized she was still working her wind magic. “Thank you. You can stop now.”

Olivia lowered her arms, and the continuous gust ceased.

“H-Hold on!” shouted Miss Phyllis. “Are you telling me...that *Olivia* was behind that wind?! I’d understand if it was a momentary gale, but for her to have kept it going like that, it’s enough to rival forbidden weather manipulation

magic...”

“Huh? But I always use it when I dry my laundry!”

“Your laundry?! I...I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Wait, so weather manipulation is forbidden? But why? Occasionally, when I’m in dragon form, I blow away clouds or big old storms or the like. I guess that’s a no-no in the human world? I’ll have to be careful from now on!

Just then, Olivia trotted briskly over to me and pulled lightly on the hem of my clothes. “Hey, Daddy, did I do good?”

“You did fantastic! Not that I expected any less!”

“Tee hee, yay! I love your compliments, Daddy!”

I stroked her head as she smiled wide. Her eyes squinted as her smile deepened.

Meanwhile, Miss Phyllis was touring the courtyard. Seraphy was explaining this and that, and the great sage looked very surprised to learn the plants formed a magic circle. The two were taking their time, walking hand in hand. Watching them from behind, they cut the perfect figure of a close mother-daughter duo.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I wanna hold hands with you too!”

“I’d love nothing more!” I gave her my left hand, and her tiny right hand gripped it. *Come to think of it, it’s been a while since we’ve held hands like this, hasn’t it? We just don’t get to see each other much anymore, now that she’s at school.* “Hey, do you feel like taking a trip into town during the next break?”

“Really, Daddy? Yay!” Olivia jumped for joy. “I’m super looking forward to it! I’ll do my best at school!”

Seeing her get all ruddy in the cheeks like that, her joy was infectious. *Where should we go for our fun little outing? What should we do?*

Miss Phyllis cleared her throat. “Ahem. It needn’t be during the next break,

for I will grant you a leave period.”

“Huh?”

“She’s officially the King’s Pupil now, so she will be given a week of preparation time. Under normal circumstances, that time is meant to be spent preparing to skip grades and moving, but that isn’t necessary for Olivia given that her life at the academy won’t change much at all... Please take this time as a token of my appreciation. Might I suggest you return home?”

“Do you mean it, Miss Phyllis?!” asked Olivia.

“I do. Also, if you can, I’d like it if you can bring back some more of that plant-acea.”

What a pleasant surprise! Time off out of nowhere!

Olivia and I were heading home. The moment we stepped through the gates of the academy, which rested atop a low meadowland hill, we felt a nice autumn breeze on our faces. It was a tad nippy—a sign winter was almost here.

Miss Phyllis, her daughter, and Headmistress Courié were all gathered there to see us off.

“Daddy, let’s go shopping!”

“Totally, honey. Ah, but let’s drop by home first. I’m sure the two ladies are worried.”

“Okay!”

We’ll get there faster if I revert to dragon form once we’re out of sight...

Suddenly, Miss Courié handed me a letter. “I forgot to tell you...”

“What’s this?”

“It’s about the all-purpose herb—the species that could be the plant-acea. That paper might earn one Miss Olivia Eldraco public recognition from the Royal Institute of Pharmacology. If it suits her, she might even be given an honorary doctorate.”

“For real?”

“However, they need to see it for themselves. If you do have the goods, then please bring the number of specimens stated in the letter.”

Well, since we’re growing lots of it in the castle garden, that should be no problem at all. So this would make her a doctor... Olivia, you’re tremendous! A doctorate only goes to people who have studied a whole bunch! I was so pleased I could hum.

Meanwhile, Seraphy was waving at us in her fidgety way.

“Thanks, mister. I think I’m going to hang in there and give enrolling in Florence another shot.”

Miss Phyllis was moved to tears. *Glad that bridge is mended.*

“And if I do get in, then I’m going to create a gardening club...and I’ll grow the plant-acea Olivia found here at the academy.”

“I’ll be rooting for you and supporting you, Seraphy,” said Miss Phyllis. Mother and daughter, hands tightly clasped.

“It’s great to see you two reconcile,” I remarked.

“Indeed. From here on out, Seraphy and I will work through our issues head-on. We are each other’s only blood relative in the world.”

I took pause at the term “blood relative.” Olivia and I aren’t connected by blood. *I trust Olivia. And yet...and yet...*

“I’m rooting for you two as well,” I said, shaking off my doubts. “Until we meet again!” I took Olivia by the hand.

People have their customs. We have ours. I’m sure that with our bond, we’ll be all right.

I waved them goodbye. *Now then, home we go.*

Chapter 22: Mr. Dragon Drives Them Off

Our week off was wonderfully fun.

I went shopping with Olivia and bought a ton of dried fruit which we later used to make some melt-in-your-mouth, crispy cookies with the two ladies. We enjoyed those cookies together, planted some plant-acea in a flowerpot, and strolled around the mountain. The tree leaves that swayed in the autumn winds were a fiery red. Olivia was entranced by the breathtaking scenery. Now that she was bigger, there were more places we could go together even just within the mountain.

That week came and went in the blink of an eye. She would return to school the following day, and we planned to eat lunch together before I took wing and whizzed us all the way back to the academy. The plant-acea was glossy and seemed healthy in its flowerpot, so it'd probably hold up during the trip.

The Dark Queen enjoyed some apple honey stew in the dining hall but raised her eyebrows. "Augh... Is it just me, or is it a little noisy?"

My ears picked up on the commotion outside as well. "That's not just the wind...is it? Are those...*footsteps* I'm hearing?"

"Are we having a guest over, Daddy?"

"Nope. I'm fairly sure the only other person who knows about this castle is Daisy." *How strange.*

BOOM.

"Whoa!"

BOOM. BOOM. The castle kept rattling.

"If I'm not mistaken," said Miss Clowria, "the castle gates must be under attack!"

"What?!" *Such violence! What happened to knocking on the door when*

visiting a person's home?! “Olivia, be safe and don’t move from there!”

“R-Right!”

“Aughh, what do we do?!”

“Allow me to go survey the scene,” said Miss Clowria. “I vowed many centuries ago that I shall protect Your Darkness with my life.”

“O-Okay. I’m counting on you, Clowria!”

“I’ll go too,” I said. “Miss Dark Queen, do you mind sticking with Olivia?”

“Augh?! W-Well, I’ll stay with Olivia, since it’ll reassure her! Oh, and also, I’m the mighty Dark Queen!”

“We shall leave it to you, my Queen.”

Miss Clowria and I gave each other a nod and headed for the entryway.

I believed Olivia was safe in the Dark Queen’s hands. But if something bad were to happen to her... Just the thought of it sends chills down my spine.

When Miss Clowria and I stepped outside, we were met with a sight we could scarcely have imagined.

“Keh ha ha ha! Ya finally dragged your ass out here!”

“Wh-Who are you?!”

Standing there was Olivia’s father, that human male who discarded Olivia on the mountain when she was a wee infant and crowed about it to his chums over booze. A big, clunky mask covered the lower half of his face, but that irritating laughter identified the man without a shadow of a doubt. Other men in masks crowded behind him, armed with swords, spears, and slingshots—nothing that was of any use for my family’s everyday lives.

“But, but why?”

“Whaddya mean why? I read it! In the newspaper!” The man tossed the paper, which hit the ground with a THUD. There was an article with a photo portrait of Olivia. The messily-written headline read “NEW KING’S PUPIL NAMED AT FLORENCE ROYAL ACADEMY FOR GIRLS!”

If it were me, I’d most likely hang up an article like that in a nice frame. In fact,

I'd love to frame it and put it up in my bedroom right this second. Yet Olivia's photo was burnt in spots as if several people had put out their cigarettes on it. How...How could they? How could they do something so vile?

"Oho, a sissy man and a broad. Well, this 'Olivia' is my kid, ya see." He flashed a sick grin.

My heart raced. It thumped. It hurt. *Why did you show up here before my eyes? I'm her Daddy. I'm her Daddy!*

"One day, an evil dragon snatched her away! The poor thing. She was cryin' a river, she was so scared!"

Liar. You're the one who abandoned her. She may have been scared that day, but not because of me. She was scared of you. Just imagining what sort of hell you put her through before then is enough to make the tears flow with rage. I still dream about the day she found me from time to time.

"S-Sir Elder Dragon... That knave..."

"He's Olivia's father. There's no mistaking it." I bit my lip.

"...I dunno why a sissy like you's got Olivia locked up in a castle like this, but the kid's mine. So hand her over, why don't ya?"

"What?!" I was speechless, and could you blame me? This man had not once approached the mountain until that day. Sure, the mana swirling around the mountain is too dense for humans, but that wasn't stopping him from standing before me with a weird mask on at that moment. He could have come searching for Olivia whenever he wanted.

"Why now, after all this time?!"

"I need a reason? I'm her blood father!"

"...You..."

"Sides, you're exploitin' Olivia for your own purposes, ain't ya? I heard all about it! This 'King's Pupil' deal or whatever it's called. Looks like the kingdom's payin' her a salary!" The corners of his mouth curled in a twisted smirk.

I was about to reply that he was the one who just wanted to use her, when the words died on the tip of my tongue. It was true that this man was her blood

father. “How did you find this place?”

“Oh, I took it up with the kingdom. I told ‘em the girl in the article got kidnapped. Then they pointed me here, real courteous-like. Let me warn ya, these guys’re a crack band o’ mercs. One wrong move, and they’ll thrash some broad and a sissy like you like it’s nothin’. The broad’s a fine-lookin’ lady, so I don’t wanna make her damaged goods, mind you.” He flagrantly leered at Miss Clowria.

“They’re dead.”

“N-No, Miss Clowria, you can’t.”

“Sir Elder Dragon?! But why? ‘Tis plain as day all he wants is the coin granted to Olivia.”

“Even so...he’s still Olivia’s father. We can’t harm him...” My head was a dizzying whirlwind of wrath and confusion. The bastard wasn’t aware I’m a dragon, as I’d never met him before while in human form. If I assumed dragon form, they would almost certainly head for the hills. But what would the aftermath be like? What if a rumor spread that the dragon of this mountain abducted a human child? Maybe it would lead to the formation of a suppression squad. To be frank, the little folks, humans included, can band together to attack me all they like, and I wouldn’t get so much as a scratch. But what if I struck back at that squad? Even more humans might come to attack me afterward. Olivia might not be able to go to school any longer. We might not be able to live in the castle anymore.

That would be awful. I want Olivia to have a happy and peaceful childhood. That’s all I wish for. Argh, I’m so confused!

“I’m sorry, Miss Clowria. L-Let me think for a second.”

“But Sir Dragon!”

The man was still smirking. *What do I do?*

“Judging from appearances,” said Miss Clowria, “they’re all just ordinary humans. I can dispatch each and every one of them such that this ends here. As the Dark-Kin Knight Captain, I have witnessed my share of carnage.”

“N-No, Miss!” *Wait, Miss Clowria. If we lay a hand on them here, then...* “If we do away with these people, I’m sure I’ll regret it.”

“You’ll...regret it?”

“Yep. After all...if I were to...err, injure these people...would I then be able to hug Olivia tightly with those same hands? Would I be able to stroke her head? No, that’s just not possible for me. No matter what the reason...I refuse to ever injure a human. I *am* a dragon—but I’m also the Daddy of a kind and gentle little human!”

“...Sir Dragon...”

“For cryin’ out loud, what’re you two yappin’ about?! Shut up already! Just bring the brat out, an’ make it snappy!”

“Gah!”

The bottle he threw at me (apparently he was holding one!) hit me on the head. If I were a normal human, I’d probably have hit the ground bleeding.

“Where’s she at?! She belongs to me! Just bring her out! Or else ya get THIS!”

“S-Sir Dragon!”

“Miss Clowria, run! Run with Olivia and Miss Dark Queen!”

At the man’s signal, the mercenary band threw ropes at me in unison. I thrust Miss Clowria away so she didn’t get hit. The ropes caught hold of my limbs, but I wasn’t worried. This was my problem. I wasn’t about to let Miss Clowria get involved in this.

“Haw ha ha! We brought special-made ropes in case the damn dragon was here, but it looks like there ain’t no dragon around! You’re ours now, sissy man!”

These ropes are totally immaterial to me. I can tear them off in a second.

“Sir Dragon... Why?”

“Olivia’s still inside. I’d hate it if Olivia saw me do something terrible!”
Besides, this lowlife with the revolting smirk is Olivia’s blood father. There’s a chance, however slim, that she’ll want to be with her blood family. If, by some

million-to-one or billion-to-one chance, she picks him over me, I don't want to crush that potential future for her. The only one who ought to decide Olivia's future is Olivia herself.

"Out with it! Where is that little snout?!"

"Guh!"

Maybe the sight of me immobilized by lassos put him in a good mood, because he kicked me. But I didn't attack back. *I won't attack. I'm her Daddy. A Daddy she can be proud of!*

Just then, her voice rang out from behind me. "Daddy!"

Her voice was always like the sun up above to me, but it sounded strained.

"Olivia... Stay back!" *You mustn't come near this man, Olivia!*

"...You? Y-You're Olivia?! I didn't recognize ya, ya cleaned up so nice!" He approached her, speaking to her in that buddy-buddy tone.

I noticed the men of the mercenary band grip their weapons again. Their guard was up in case I attacked back.

Olivia paid that no mind as she ran in my direction. The man walked at a brisk pace, arms outstretched. *Is he trying to grab her? Don't you dare put those filthy hands on her! Please, I'm begging you, Olivia. Don't take that man's hand!*

"Daddy!"

"...Olivia..."

She slipped past the man and embraced me. "Daddy! Daddy, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"Don't worry about me, honey. Just run—"

"I can't do that! I don't wanna run away from the people who'd treat you so awful!"

"...Olivia..."

She stared at me with those clear, unclouded eyes. In them, I could see her faith, her affection, her kindness...everything my little one has within her.

“Hey, babe, what’re ya sayin’? I’m your Daddy, ain’t I?!”

“In your dreams! I’ve only got one Daddy in the world...and it’s not you!”

The man grimaced, and he glared at her like she was beneath him. I’m sure that to him, any human who doesn’t serve his purposes is disposable trash. Just like how he discarded her like so much trash on the mountain said to be inhabited by a fearsome dragon.

“I...” I’m sorry, Olivia. I was wrong. I let my judgment get clouded by a matter as trifling as your blood connection to this man. I doubted you, even if only for a moment. And the fact that you ran toward me as fast as your legs could carry you removes all doubt in my mind I was wrong.

“...My apologies, Sir Dragon. Olivia wouldn’t listen to me. She said she’d go save you and wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

I looked and Miss Clowria was standing there at the entrance to our home. I’d almost forgotten she’d run to the dining hall to evacuate Olivia.

The Dark Queen stood right by Miss Clowria and she stared intently at me. “...Tell me, Elder Dragon,” she growled quietly. “I don’t know what’s got you so unsure right now, but are you going to keep spouting ‘if’s and ‘but’s at a time like this?”

“No, I won’t. I get it now.”

“Good... In that case, haven’t you had enough? You ought to be able to do it. Just like when you salvaged my precious library.” She smirked and pointed at the man. “We ought to punish the humans who dared approach my castle, at least a little.”

“Daddy, I know you’re super gentle and nice, but I also know you’re as crazy strong as you are kind.”

Olivia’s voice was all I needed to cement my resolve. *That’s right. I vowed to myself that I’d protect Olivia come hell or high water.*

“Tch! Whaddya mumblin’ about?! C’mere, Olivia. Move it!” He yanked Olivia’s arm, only to fall forward. “What the?!”

“...Don’t pull me, Mister.”

Olivia didn't budge an inch.

"Hmm," said the Dark Queen. "Because Olivia's mana levels are so extraordinary, no normal human can cause her the least bit of harm if she so much as *wishes* otherwise."

"And Olivia already possesses a full mastery over the dark-kin martial arts as well," said Miss Clowria.

"Dumb brat! C'mere!" He raised his hand at her.

I could no longer bear it. "...Don't you dare..."

"Whazzat?"

"DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HER!"

I instantly transformed back into dragon form with my legs burly, my wings great, and my fangs sharp.

The man fell back on his bottom helplessly. "Wha... Huh? Y-You're not a sissy man?"

The ropes snapped off like nothing. And they weren't the only thing that snapped. "Leave this place! The Sacred Peak is where I dwell! And Olivia is my precious...my *number one* most precious daughter in the world!"

VWOOSH! I spat a forceful blast of fire.

"Yeaaarrgrh!"



Cowering on the ground, he let go of Olivia's arm and ran without a second look at her. The mercenaries dropped their weapons and scarpered off at full speed.

"If that thing burns off our masks, the high-density mana'll do us in!"

"There really is a wild dragon out here! I—I can't believe it!"

I breathed fire down on the men but I made sure it didn't transfer to the plants, trees, flowers, or anything else. The men might have felt a bit hot, but I kept it under control such that they'd get off with light burns. I am a dragon that has lived since time immemorial, and I decide what my fire does and doesn't burn.

"Daddy!"

I felt a warm embrace on one of my feet. Olivia was clinging to me, her eyes full of tears.

"Olivia... Sorry I frightened you. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay! You protected me!"

"Daddy did...but I still need to apologize. Those people will tell everyone about us. We might be forced to leave this mountain."

"Daddy, does that mean if those people don't tell anyone, we can stay on the mountain?"

"Ah, now that you mention it...maybe we can do something about it."

"In that case, Daddy, give me a ride and let's chase them down from above. I've got an idea! 'Cause I wanna view the fall colors together with you and the two ladies next year too!"

After hearing their cute daughter say something like that, there's not a Daddy alive who'd be able to say no.

Olivia and the Dark Queen got onto my back and I took to the air. Miss Clowria stayed behind to patrol the castle's vicinity. Soaring high, I circled around and before long I spotted the humans fleeing like rabbits. "Olivia, over there."

“I see them! I’ll do my best!”

“Aughh, as your spellcasting mentor, I’ll watch over you! You’re gonna use that spell, right, Olivia? The one you saw in a grimoire while airing books out the other day?”

“...Uh-huh! Here I go... *Memories, fade beyond the threshold of oblivion!*”

“Elder Dragon, close your eyes! I’m slipping on some shades!”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

“Forget-Me-Flash!”

I could tell how harsh the light Olivia emitted was even through my eyelids. *What is this?*

“Aughh, it’s memory-erasure magic. Elves use it when an unwelcome visitor stumbles upon their forest dwellings. But if Olivia’s casting it, it’ll probably work—despite how ultra hard it is for anyone apart from elves!”

“Memory...erasure?” I couldn’t believe Olivia could use magic like that too. She’d grown so much without my knowing it.

“...It’s okay now, Daddy, Miss Maredia,” Olivia called out to us shyly.

I cautiously opened my eyes. The humans that had been beating a hasty retreat through the forest were now sitting with vacant, absent-minded looks on their faces.

“Give them a bit, and I think they’ll forget everything and put this place behind them. They’ll forget about you, the castle, and me... I cast the spell so they forget everything about today.”

“That’s incredible, Olivia! Thank you... You saved us!”

She chuckled bashfully. “Hee hee!” Her stiff expression was gone now. She was back to the same cute little Olivia I knew.

“Augh... The lass did it. She really did it.”

“Only because you taught me how, Miss Maredia! Hee hee!”

“I can’t use that spell myself. It’s light magic. That aside, that bastard left a rotten taste in my mouth... I found myself thinking humanity needs to be

destroyed again for the first time in a millennium.”

“I just hope the extra effect I applied did the trick...”

“Extra effect?”

Olivia nodded. “I cast that spell to make the other people forget about today... But for *him*...I made it so that he forgets about me, how he abandoned his own child, *everything*. So he should forget not just what happened today, but every last thing about me.”

“Whoa! Olivia...” *So she does indeed remember what that man put her through. I wanna scoop her up in my arms right this second. When we get home, I wanna revert to human form and hug her tight the first chance I get!*

“Are you sure you’re okay with that, Olivia?”

“Uh-huh. My only Daddy is the nicest Daddy in the world! My super strong, dragon Daddy!”

The autumn winds whooshed by. *I’m sure I... No, I’m sure we’ll be okay from here on out too.*

Epilogue

After Olivia departed for school, the landlady, or the Dark Queen I should say, could often be found in the living room whining her dejected little heart out. “Haugh...”

“Oh hey, Miss Dark Queen, what’s the matter?”

“Her Darkness is, well...” Miss Clowria rubbed her back.

The Dark Queen sniffled and started to explain. “Augh... I was looking forward to the incoming tempest... I picked out a cool-looking cloak and I practiced doing my makeup... I was planning on uploading a picture of my beyond gorgeous self, cloak fluttering in the storm, to Bleater...”

Bleater? What’s that? Some kind of technology of hers, maybe?

“How many times have I pleaded with you to cease?! ’Tis too dangerous, my liege! In any case, you can see the condition she’s in thanks to the storm vanishing in mid-course... Queen Maredia, you needn’t take a photo of yourself in a storm. You are the Dark Queen, and you are more than gorgeous enough.”

“Aughh, Clowriaaa... ≡” The Dark Queen smiled like a baby.

Meanwhile, I scratched at my cheek. *Oopsy. Guess I wasn’t supposed to get rid of that storm, huh?*

“Sorry about that... Olivia wrote to me that she’d be having a picnic today, and I thought it’d be bad if it got rained out...so I huffed and blew away those big rain clouds.”

“Haughh?! Dragon breath is way overpowered!”

“My bad, Miss Dark Queen. I didn’t know you were looking forward to it. Oh, I know... If you’d like, I’ll flap my wings and kick up a storm for you sometime!” I said, hoping to console the whimpering woman. I also decided to make her some of the sweet hot milk she liked in the meantime. *Cheer up, Miss Dark Queen.*

“Ah, sorry. I need to dip out to the garden for a second.” I gave the two ladies their hot milk, took off my apron, and headed for the garden. I needed to take care of those super-common plants Olivia was growing, or rather, the all-purpose plant-acea. Giving them plenty of water was now part of my morning routine. *Grow big and sturdy, little guys!* I enjoyed humming as I watered them (humans hum when they’re in a good mood!), but suddenly, a shadow flitted over me. “Hm?”

I looked up at the sky, following the flapping of wings I was hearing. A rotund owl was flying above me. It glided and landed on the branch of a bush.

“Hello there, Mr. Owl. Thanks as always for the letters.”

“Croo,” hooted the owl, whose silver leg band bore the crest of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. It was a postal familiar and it delivered mail from Olivia or from the school once a week. I took the bundle of letters bound with hemp twine from the bag attached to its neck. It stood upright, a dignified look on its face as it did so. *So well-behaved.*

“Thanks. Well, be seeing you... Ah, here’s a little something for the road.” I handed it the dried chicken tender I’d set aside for the owl, and it took it in beak and flew off. *Bye-bye.* The bundle of letters in hand, I hastened cheerily back inside. I always look forward to Olivia’s weekly letters.



Dear Father,

We’re deeper into autumn now, and the trees in the courtyard have taken on a vivid host of colors. How are you faring, Father? I am in good spirits.

I was chosen to take part in the model demonstration for the autumn athletic meet. Together with my sixth-grade upperclassmen, we participated in a mock battle. I was grateful to them for holding back, as I won first place.

Unfortunately, at today’s off-campus autumn colors picnic, we were attacked by a flock of monster birds. However, they didn’t seem all that strong and they dropped to earth when I threw a little magic their way. When we returned, the teachers were very surprised. Apparently, those birds are a high-class cooking ingredient, and so they will be serving them as the main dish of this weekend’s

Thanksgiving meal. While I feel a little bad for them, I'm still somewhat looking forward to it.

I'm enjoying every day here, but what I'm looking forward to most of all is my outing with you, Daddy...I mean Father.

I'll keep doing my best. You be well too, Daddy!

To my dearest Daddy,

Signed, Olivia Eldraco



“Would you look at that? Olivia’s plugging away, as always!” Delighted and excited, I put pen to inkwell. I’d actually begun writing letters back to her myself. While I’ve liked reading books for a long time, I’d never written letters before. Although I kept encountering perplexing roadblocks, it was worth it since Olivia was always happy to hear from me.

Miss Clowria delivered my letters for me. Just as the Dark Queen is good at transforming into a cute black cat, Miss Clowria’s specialty is shapeshifting into a large eagle.

I’m a slow writer, so I’m lucky if I write her one before three of hers arrive, but jotting down recent goings-on with Olivia in mind is quite a fun exercise.

After that incident, neither that man nor other humans came to the mountain or Olivia’s school. It was all thanks to Olivia. These days when I can write letters in peace like this are so very dear to me. “Oli...via... Nothing here...has changed... Your Daddy...is very...very happy to hear...you’re having fun...at school...”

Whenever I’m happy, the script I write seems to be skipping and dancing messily across the page. Looking at my own penmanship always has me embarrassed. *Come to think of it, the writing in Olivia’s letters never fails to be hopping and dancing too, albeit in a prettier way.*

I felt a warm glow inside me as my pen’s ink dashed across the paper.

When, somehow or other, I’d finished writing half of my letter, I remembered there was another unopened letter that the owl had delivered to me.

“Wonder if it’s from the school?”

Every week, a letter entitled the *Florence Academy for Girls Guardians Bulletin* informed parents and guardians of their students’ current academic status.

Apparently, as the King’s Pupil—the special scholarship student recognized as manifestly talented and a prodigy for these times—Olivia would no longer be given grades. Her school record was frozen at the highest evaluation, S+...not that I’ve ever seen her get anything other than an S+ before then.

Compared to Olivia’s letter, the *Florence Academy for Girls Guardians Bulletin* was a bit meh to me. But this time, there was something different about it.

“Wait, is it just me or is the envelope bigger than usual?” Usually, the envelope contained a letter folded in thirds. Olivia’s letter came in the same kind of envelope. Yet this time, it was noticeably bigger. The envelope was nearly square in shape, oddly enough.

“Come to think of it, is it just me, or is Mr. Owl’s letter bag bigger than usual too?” I opened the envelope with care. “Hmm? What’s this about?”



Dear Mr. Eldraco,

Thank you very much for your continued support of this academy’s foundational principles and guiding dictates. We have sent you a portrait that your daughter, Olivia Eldraco, composed during art class. We apologize for the lateness of this post as it took time for the paint to dry.

Enclosed: One portrait (Title: “DADDY”)

Comments:

Miss Olivia has extremely unique artistic tastes.

That is all. Please direct any questions you may have to the Secretariat of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls



“A portrait?” And one named “DADDY” at that! Carefully, I took the thick paper out from inside the envelope. I was greeted with a painting of my face that took up the whole paper!

“Awww, this is amazing, Olivia!” I ran while holding it up high. “Look, Miss Dark Queen, Miss Clowriaaa!!!”

They’re probably in the Library of Grimoires. I can hardly wait for them to see it!



The Dark Queen stared at the portrait and moaned. “Haugh...”

I figured she was astonished by Olivia’s work of fine art.

“How do I put it...” said Miss Clowria, who was staring at the portrait with a serious look on her face. “She has unique artistic sensibilities.”

“So you agree! The academy wrote that same comment in the letter. They said she has unique sensibilities! Olivia’s so talented...”

Delighted, I held it up to the light shining in from the window and soaked it in. *Hee hee, I’m downright elated!*

“Uhh... Hey. Elder Dragon.”

“What’s up, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Am I wrong, or has Olivia never done anything artsy before going to school?”

“No, she hasn’t. As for why... When I learned about drawing and painting in one of my parenting books, Olivia was already immersing herself in grimoires.”

“Haughh...” The Dark Queen didn’t say anything else.

I took another good long look at the portrait. The painting was of a smiling man with silver and purple hair. The smile looked so kindly and good-natured. That was me! The incredible thing is while the face was human, the body was drawn as a cool-looking dragon’s! Its big wings extended, and its thick feet planted firmly on the ground—that was me too!

“Olivia thinks the world of me, doesn’t she...?” I was utterly touched. *Look,*

the wings are exactly like mine! She really did a great job drawing this.

“Miss Dark Queen, do we have a picture frame? I’d like to hang this portrait up in the living room.”

“Haugh?! I, I have spare frames, but...why don’t you put it up in the Bedroom of the Elder Dragon instead?”

“Miss Dark Queen!!!”

“Haughh?! No, it’s just, I thought it’s too *out there* to have to look at day in and day out, you know what I mean?”

“Miss Dark Queen, that’s such an amazing idea!!! By hanging it up in my bedroom, I can view the painting Olivia made for me when I get up and when I go to sleep!”

“...Yeah, uh-huh.”

The Dark Queen then brought me a really fetching picture frame from her room.

“This really puts a smile on my face. I hope Olivia comes back home soon!” I wasted no time hanging the portrait on the wall of my spacious, mostly empty bedroom so I could admire it. I could feel my smile get wider and wider. And my counterpart in the painting was smiling too, his gentle human face on a big spread-winged dragon body.

“Boy howdy, she really captured me!” The next time she’s on break, I’ll show her I hung it up in the bedroom. And then I’ll make sure to thank her for creating this masterpiece for me.

* * *

Her voice resounded across the castle. “Daddy, I’m home!”

It was the first day of winter break.

“Welcome home, Olivia! Thanks for sending that lovely picture. I admire it every day.”

“Daddy!”

Olivia, who’d grown a little bit taller, tossed her suitcase aside and ran up to

hug me. Her body was warm and smelled like the sun in the sky.

“Daddy, something *amazing* happened at school! You’re gonna love it!”

“Oho, I can’t wait to hear it! I made you your favorite, those nut cookies. The two ladies have been waiting since this morning for your homecoming.”

“Tee hee, I missed them too!”

“Are you enjoying school?”

“Uh-huh!” Her smile was like a warm spring breeze. It threatened to snow any second now, but it was like her smile had the power to keep the cold air at bay.

“I love school, my friends, the teachers, and the older girls at the dorms! But...”

“Yeah?”

“I love you and our home most of all!”

“...Right!”

I hugged her again. She’s my one and only precious daughter. We’re not connected by blood, but that doesn’t matter. Olivia taught me that herself.

I’m sure Olivia’s world will steadily expand from here on out. The sparkling possibilities in Olivia’s future will await her, at school, the kingdom at large, and the world stage. That said...

“I love you too, sweetheart. You’re my one pride and joy in the whole wide world.”

That was true then, as it is now, as it always will be. Olivia will always be my treasure and the light of my life who sows my joy every single day.

And that won’t ever, ever change.

That night, the first snows of the year fell over Olympias. The snow was fluffy, white, and unspoiled. All of us watched it snow from the castle windows and we listened to Olivia recount tales of her school life late into the night. Lots of laughter rang in the warm air that enveloped us. It was a blissful day.

The Spring’s-Near Festival was just around the corner. It was Olivia’s birthday,

and mine as well. Together as father and child, as family, we would see another season pass. The brooch I gave her for her first birthday party was still shining on her collar.

I prayed. For Olivia's happiness. And for Olivia's life to remain a wonderful one chock full of fun times, no matter how many seasons pass.

I'm always praying for that from the bottom of my heart.



Afterword

Salutations! This is Ameko Kaeruda. Thank you so much for reading this book!

To describe the general state of mind I had while writing it:

“TRUSTED WHOLEHEARTEDLY BY A LITTLE GIRL WITH CUTE SQUISHY CHEEKS!!!”

“DOTTED ON AND RAISED BY A MEGA-POWERFUL DRAGON THAT’S ALSO A HUNKY OLDER MAN!!!”

“A CLUMSY, CUTE SHORTY OF A DARK LORD AND A PRINCESS KNIGHT, YURRING IT UP!!!”

I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.

The amazingly cute, squishy-cheeked illustrations really help you see the series’ world through a gentle, tender lens, so I thank Sencha-Sensei from the bottom of my heart! Every one of the illustrations was so cute that I was *squirming* as I worked.

I’d also like to express my gratitude for the manga adaptation that’s now in the works. Thanks to Kajiya-Sensei, who’ll be in charge of that project, we’ll be able to get an even more vividly rendered look at Olivia’s life with her Daddy! My respect for both senseis’ magnificent work is immense!

In addition, my editor-in-charge, whom I’ll call “I,” gave me swift and accurate advice that helped make this absurdly cute series even cuter. Then there are my light novel comrades (including my mentor, Seiichi Takayama, who’s always offering me his guidance) to thank, and not to mention all of you readers for picking this up! I thank you all from the depths of my being! THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOUUUU!!!

As a token of my appreciation, I’d like to give back to society, even if my contribution ends up being modest. As such, I’m donating a small portion of this book’s royalties to an organization that provides support for children who can’t live at home with their parents for any of a variety of reasons. Everyone who

picked up a copy of this book at a bookstore and purchased it will be helping this effort, albeit indirectly, so thank you. I hope all children everywhere will be able to lead safe and happy childhoods, just like Olivia.

Now then, I'll see you in the next volume! (Oh yeah, important news: there'll be another volume!!!)



This is Kajiya.

I'll be handling the
manga adaptation.

It's a pleasure to meet you!!

I like Maredia!

AUTHOR Ameko Kaeruda

ILLUSTRATOR Sencha

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Bonus Short Stories

Mr. Dragon Plays Hide-and-Seek

Our home, the Dark Queen's castle, is roomy. Very roomy. So roomy that if you were to play hide-and-seek in there, you'd be playing it for a whole day.

My human-form voice reverberated through the castle. "Are you ready yeeeeet?"

I strained my ears for the replies as I basked in the light that shone through the window from day till dusk. The sunlight was making me a bit sleepy.

"Not yeeeeet!" came Olivia's voice.

"Not yeeeeet!" replied the Dark Queen.

"Not yeeeeet!" called Miss Clowria.

Recently, the diminutive Dark Queen and her attendant, Miss Clowria, had taken to joining in our games. Typically, they stay holed up in the Dark Queen's room in the Western Tower, but whenever they play with us, we're on the same wavelength. The Dark Queen, being around Olivia's height, plays hard and has fun doing it when she's with my little one. Miss Clowria, meanwhile, makes sure Olivia doesn't trip and fall, as she's still a wee bit unsteady on her feet. They're practically her older sisters, more or less.

"Ready yeeeeeeet?"

"Ready!" replied the three of them.

"Found you, Miss Dark Queen!"

"Augh!"

The castle contains several stone statues of the Dark Queen striking cool poses—and she was trying to blend in with them.

“Aughh... How did you know, Elder Dragon?”

“Err, I mean, it’s kind of obvious. And I found you too, Miss Clowria!”

“Oh my, ’tis game over for me.”

“A ha ha! Well, it wasn’t exactly difficult to find you.”

Miss Clowria was also disguising herself as one of the stone statues. A vacant expression on her face, Miss Clowria was clinging to the leg of a Dark Queen statue that stood boldly with her arms crossed. To be quite honest, she was pretty conspicuous.

“See?! It’s all your fault, Clowria! I was hidden from view!”

“M-My apologies... However, is it truly fair to have made such a statue of Your Darkness’s likeness? That pose fully captures the majesty of my beauteous queen!”

“Well... Would you want a Clowria statue clinging to its leg?”

“I would!”

“Augh. Really? You can be real assertive sometimes, you know that, Clowria?” the Dark Queen retorted, blushing.

I chuckled at their back-and-forth. *They’re so close!* I then turned, ready to continue the game. “Now then, Olivia’s the only one left.”

I scanned around the area. Olivia was quite good at hide-and-seek. With her tiny body, she could hide basically anywhere. My dragon eyes are able to see far into the distance, and they negate disguises so I can see the true nature of people and objects. What I can’t do, unsurprisingly, is see through objects to find a little girl hiding behind something. I put my game face on and earnestly looked for her, searching the kitchen, the bath, Olivia’s room, the top of the Eastern Tower, and the Library of Grimoires... *Wait... Where is she?*

“Where could she be?” I was getting more and more worried. The light of day had given way to the red glow of the setting sun, and it would soon be night.

“Augh. Well, she must be around there somewhere! That’s what I think. And I’m right...right?” The Dark Queen was drenched in a cold sweat.

I started tearing up. Miss Clowria alone looked calm and collected. “’Tis okay. Let’s calm down, shall we? Sir Elder Dragon counted down at the entryway so Olivia can hardly be out, outside—” She deflated.

“Clowriaaaaaa!”

She’d been in no way calm. She was just so worried that she’d rolled right back around into an expressionless daze.

“Olivia...” I took a deep breath. I knew she was probably okay. *Think. Where might she be...* Could the balmy weather have made her sleepy too? But she wasn’t in her room...

“Ohh!” An idea suddenly dawned on me, and I set off running. I hadn’t checked the spot where Olivia’s always wanting to take a nap. I opened the door to my bedroom. “Olivia!”

I saw a resting form bulging out from under the sheets and heard her soft snoring. I sighed at the sight and smiled. “I’m so relieved, sweetie.”

“Hrmm? Daddy...” Her still-sleepy face looked so peaceful.

I found myself nuzzling my cheek against her smooth forehead.

Mr. Dragon’s Summer Day

I occasionally reflect back on that one summer, the year Olivia became my daughter. The sun up above was blazing down on the Sacred Peak of Olympias, but since we were high up on a mountain, it wasn’t too hot. Olivia and I enjoyed feeling the scorching summer sunlight warm our bodies when we spent time outside. Besides, as I’m a big old dragon, I was able to give Olivia some shade with my big old wings. My parenting books told me overly hot sunlight could hurt human children.

Humans are such feeble little folk! I was astounded to discover how weak humans truly are, but since I knew how soft and flabby Olivia was, I could believe it.

Olivia frolicked around, having a good time. “Wow, Daddy! It’s so hot!”

“Uh-huh, it’s hot, Olivia.”

“Mr. Morning’s so shiny!”

“Uh-huh, the sun sure is shiny.”

“This is fun, Daddy!”

“Uh-huh, this is so much fun, Olivia.”

We were enjoying our sunbathing excursion by the edge of an Olympian spring. The spring, which was always just the right temperature come winter or summer, was about the size of a human’s bed, which is to say it wasn’t terribly big. It was the sole fountainhead of water that gushed forth from the mountain. Of course, Olympias also has those “phantom springs” that suddenly appear and disappear here and there, but this little spring was way safer. In all the years I’ve lived here, it’s offered the wildlife a place to sate their thirst without ever drying up or freezing over.

“Take that, Daddy!” My wee one dipped her ickle hands in the little spring and splashed the water. Water droplets flew my way, and they sparkled in the sunlight, looking just like jewels in the air. “Tee hee! The water’s fun!”

I found myself smiling. *She’s so cute! My daughter’s so cute!* “Come to think of it, I hear humans do like to go swimming in the ocean.”

“Swimmin’ in the ocean?”

“Yep. They swim in this really, really big lake of saltwater called the ocean.” I’d read all about it in a book. They get wet from head to toe and swim all splish-splashily. *Where’s the fun in that, I wonder? Won’t they end up having to shake a lot to dry themselves off?*

Olivia must have been thinking what I was thinking, because we both hummed in thought at the same time.

“They go in the water, and it’s not a bath?”

“Yep. They go in the water even though it’s not a bath.”

A pause.

“How weird!” we both said in unison.

I was taken aback. I said the same words as someone else at the same time. It

was the first time something like that had happened to me in my whole life with a human. And the first time in my whole dragon life too.

And it appeared as though that was the first time it had happened to her too, because she looked up at me with her eyes wide. Then, with the sunniest smile she'd given me that day, she said, "Daddy, you said what I said!"

That really must have tickled her funny bone, because she rolled on the ground cackling, giggling, squealing. Looking at her, I became super pleased myself. I mean, can you blame me? We'd had the same feeling, the same thought, and said the same sentence. If you ask me, that's a lovely thing. No doubt about it!

"Yayyy!"

I stooped down gently and brought my big old dragon cheek down to her. She hugged the tip of my nose. My warm, fuzzy feeling only heightened.

"What the?!"

Before I knew it, the clear water of the little spring sprayed into the air. It appeared that happened because of my overflowing elation. This sort of thing happens from time to time. Oops...

Despite the sparkling droplets raining down on us, Olivia smiled again. No harm, no foul!



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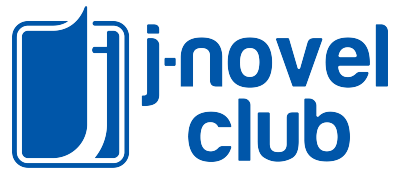
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Dragon Daddy Diaries: A Girl Grows to Greatness Volume 1

by Ameko Kaeruda

Translated by Giuseppe di Martino Edited by T. Burke

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