

A full-page illustration serves as the background. It depicts a young girl with long, flowing red hair and large, expressive yellow eyes. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved dress with a purple sash and is cowering in a state of panic or fear, her hands clasped together near her chest. Behind her, the massive, scaly head of a dragon looms, its mouth slightly open, revealing sharp teeth. The scene is set in a dark, rocky environment with some sparse vegetation. The overall tone is dramatic and intense.

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I Guess This
DRAGON
Who Lost Her
(EGG) to Disaster
Is My Mom Now

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I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now Volume 1

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I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now Volume 1

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THE ROAR CAME BOTH FROM
KAPHAL IN THE SKY AND LUSHERA
ON THE GROUND. THEIR VOICES
OVERLAPPED, SPLITTING
THE AIR AND SHAKING THE EARTH.

KAPHAL
The red dragon dwelling
on Mount Kugus.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

LUSHERA
A human(?) picked
up by Kaphal.

LIFE ON MOUNT KUGUS



Prologue: Live Bait

“GAH?!”

XXXX looked at the blood-coated blade piercing his body. He coughed up fresh blood, finally realizing he'd been stabbed from behind.

“Sorry 'bout that, XXXX,” said a voice from behind, though the voice lacked even a hint of remorse. “Gotta make it so four people can make it back with the loot instead of all five dying. It's only logical, right? The monsters on this mountain can smell human blood from miles away. Your body'll attract them so we can get out alive.”

With that, Gemmel kicked XXXX's backside and pulled his sword out, then wiped the blade on XXXX's trousers and cleansed it with water from his waterskin. The bloody water splattered across XXXX's back.

“Hey, you sure about this?” asked one of the others.

“Hmph, well it's his fault to begin with, isn't it? He was deadweight, anyway. No way we would make it back with him dragging us down. This is our little secret though, 'cause the moment we make it back in one piece, we're all criminals.”

The others didn't even try to stop him or even criticize him. The other three with Gemmel just laughed.

Adventurers.

These people earned a living by delving into the wilds, where monsters ran rampant, to eliminate the beasts or recover resources. They usually worked in groups of about four members called a “party.”

Gemmel and his group worked together in a party they named the Seven-Sided Die.

XXXX, too, was a member of that party, but he wasn't actually an adventurer. He was registered in the guild as an adventurer for convenience's sake, but he

was actually a manager, someone who handled administrative work.

They'd traveled deep into the wilds of Mount Kugus, where a dragon dwelled. All monsters who roamed this dangerous area were ferocious. Even adventurers who pushed the boundaries of what power is humanly possible had a good chance of dying here.

The Seven-Sided Die snuck onto this mountain despite it being normally forbidden, and, as might be expected, they found themselves pushed to their limits by the waves of attacking monsters. That's when Gemmel shifted their strategy to sacrifice as a means to escape.

"Don't forget his adventuring license."

"Oh, yeah, good catch."

After it was pointed out by one of the party members, Gemmel snatched up XXXX's belongings that had scattered about when he collapsed. He rummaged through the bag to make sure the silver-colored metal plate was in there, then grinned.

Then, he leaned down and whispered into XXXX's ear, "Now, even if someone does happen to find you, they'll have no clue who you are. You'll just be some idiotic poacher who was lollygagging in a forbidden area."

His putrid breath hit XXXX's face. "Damn...you..."

"You know what, for a lackey, you weren't half bad. But you're useless to me now. So. Thanks. For. Everything," Gemmel spat with as much malice in his voice as he could muster. Then, he ordered the other three members to move out. They slipped away with XXXX's bag, disappearing through the trees before the monsters could arrive.

And they never came back.

"Those...b-bastards! Dammit, no, I can't die! I can't...die! I'm not going to die... not here!"

Something cawed in the distance, though XXXX couldn't tell if it was a bird or a monster. He clutched at the underbrush, pulling himself along through greenery unspoiled by human hands. Bright red heat spilled from the tear in his

abdomen, weakly pumping, flowing across the grass.

His breathing trembled, and his body gradually turned colder. The strength left his arms, and he crept forward at a speed a turtle could beat, slowing until even a slug could outpace him.

Even then, XXXX kept thinking how he couldn't die, how he must not die, but it seemed to be futile when the ground below felt distant, when he was struck by a gentle vertigo. He thought his soul had finally left his body and was starting to climb up to the heavens.

But that wasn't quite what was happening.

Rather, some great, rugged beast had scooped him up and carried him away.

Chapter 1: Escape from Death

WHEN XXXX opened his eyes, his body felt as heavy as stone, likely to actually die and become as lifeless as stone if he didn't get his bearings straight. But he was still alive.

He found himself on a bedding of dried foliage large enough for dozens of people to sleep on. This open-air bed looked like the sort of thing a wild animal would use, if you ignored how incredibly massive it was.

The sky was bright, and a gentle breeze brushed the land.

XXXX was so weak that even just thinking was a strain, but he frantically tried to assess the situation. He didn't have to think long though. The mind-boggling truth was right in front of his eyes.

It was curled up next to him, its body tens of times larger than any human's. It was both elegant and powerfully muscular, coated in glossy red scales that blended together to form a thick armor. Its long neck and tail were like supple whips, almost sensual in a way. A jaw that looked so powerful, the head was like a guillotine. Its brown eyes, with vertical slit pupils, burned with the intensity of the sun, and its noble, white horns were so sharp they looked like they could pierce the heavens themselves. Huge, leathery wings were folded on its back.

A dragon!

It was so regal that XXXX could hardly breathe out of sheer terror and awe.

Then, it dawned on him. He was in a dragon's nest. On the peak of Mount Kugus. Where a dragon lived. Where humans shouldn't go.

That's where he was when he nearly died, and, well, there was only one logical conclusion.

Am I...going to be eaten?

There were rumors that the dragon of Mount Kugus had laid an egg. A weakened, nearly dead human...well that would make a decent first meal for a newborn dragon hatchling.

The dragon noticed XXXX had opened his eyes and extended its long neck to move its head closer to him. And then, it sniffed him.

The moment XXXX saw the dragon's teeth, each one as thick as a grown man's arm, inch closer towards him, he accepted his fate; he was going to be eaten.

But the dragon's teeth didn't tear into him. Instead, the dragon picked up something large using its mouth and dropped it beside XXXX with a thud.

It was a huge bear monster with ashen fur, but the fatal wound on the creature's stomach made it clear to XXXX that it was dead. There was no questioning it, this was the dragon's work.

The dragon placed the carcass in front of XXXX and nudged it with its nose.

"Grooor... Rar..."

A sound came from the dragon's throat, like breath tumbling over itself. It wasn't a threatening sound—a human might even liken it to a purr.

XXXX was left speechless. He just sat there dumbfounded, staring at the mass of dead flesh, while the dragon cocked its head back and forth in confusion before biting into the beast's underbelly.

Its large fangs slid effortlessly through the beast's hide, fur so thick it could repel any but the best shots from a bow and arrow. The dragon tore in as it held the body steady with its sturdy foreleg.

It exposed the meat, dripping with blood, but it didn't bite into the carcass. Instead, the dragon just thrust it towards XXXX.

Wh-What? Why is it...?

The first thing that crossed XXXX's mind was that maybe the dragon was planning to eat him after fattening him up. Though, it could just eat the bear monster instead of bothering with something as roundabout as that. But, either way, XXXX knew that if he didn't eat something, he would soon join the carcass

in front of him.

He'd lost too much blood. There was barely any energy left in his body. He was so hungry he thought his stomach might burst. Eating something, anything, so he could recover was of the utmost importance. Even if that something was raw meat of an unknown nature.

He raised his head slightly, pulled himself towards the bear, and bit into its flesh.

The heavy, iron flavor of blood filled his mouth.

And that was all the energy he had. The meat was too tough. With how weak human jaws were, there was no way someone could eat this creature raw. That was even more true now given his weakened state. He couldn't eat it.

"Nnnng... Unnnn..." The dragon let out a sad cry above XXXX as he laid back face down.

Next, it bit into the monster's flesh. It tore off a chunk, pulled it into its mouth and chewed several times, then spat it out without swallowing. It piled the now minced meat in front of XXXX.

Well, with that, he should be able to eat it. He did wonder why the dragon was going to such lengths to get him to eat the meat, but that was the least of his concerns. If he didn't eat while he was still clinging to consciousness, he'd die.

He took the minced meat in his mouth and tried to swallow it down, but it came right back up.

"Blergh! Urrrgh, gah!"

He threw up the meat as he tried to swallow it, along with the contents of his stomach, stained dark with blood. Human bodies weren't meant to consume raw, bloody meat, after all.

"A-Ah...gah..."

He just stayed on the ground, face down, his breathing faint. He couldn't move. It was as if he'd vomited out what little remaining energy he had.

"Nn? Nnn? Nn?" The dragon made an odd sound and poked the prone XXXX

with its nose. Then it tried chewing up the pile of meat more and shifted around as if at a loss for what to do. “Graaah!”

A burst of hot air brushed across XXXX’s cheek and hair. The dragon spat fire at the monster’s carcass seemingly out of annoyance and took out its frustration on the nearest object. The blood-soaked twigs of the nest smoked, and the sad lump of meat, well, started to let off the pleasant aroma of roasting fat.

That’s...?

The scent of life was wafting into his nostrils.

He mustered the last of his strength to move. The minced meat was at best cooked rare from the dragon’s fiery breath, but it was cooked nonetheless. Evident by the juices on its surface sizzling.

XXXX reached towards the meat and shoved it in his mouth.

There was the stench of raw flesh, but it wasn’t as strong as before. That was enough to make it palatable to a human.

“Nn?” The dragon made a quiet sound in its throat then carefully observed XXXX.

He picked up the meat, only the cooked meat, and practically slammed it into his mouth. Warmth spread through his body which had been so at risk of growing cold.

He finally stopped when he started having trouble breathing from how desperately he devoured the food. His stomach felt heavy, and his fatigue started to win out against his hunger.

Huh...? I could’ve sworn I had a hole in my stomach...

XXXX was worried the food he just ate might fall out of the hole in his stomach, and only now just realized his wound was gone. In any normal situation, that wound would’ve killed him. It wasn’t the sort of thing that easily healed, though it probably could’ve been instantly mended with a magic potion or high-level healing magic.

“Rnnn, nn, rnnnnn...”

The dragon rubbed its nose against XXXX. It had seemed in a panic a moment ago, but now it calmed down. XXXX didn't have the strength to move, so he just let the dragon do as it pleased.

"Urrrrr... Mrrrrr..." The dragon called out something, gently.

It was in a language that XXXX didn't understand in the slightest, but the moment he heard it, he felt like his heart lit up with fire, pounding fiercely. A single word blazed in his mind, as if branded there with a white-hot iron: Lushera.

He somehow understood the nuance of it, that this was a name, and a girl's name. Or, a female dragon's name. The dragon was calling him Lushera.

Lushera? Who is that? Is that...my name?

XXXX realized something. He knew for a fact that he'd lived his life as a human for twenty-some years, but he couldn't recall what name he'd went by during that time.

Lushera.

That name blotted it out, like oil paint smeared over the original.

And then, Lushera noticed something else.

"...Huh...?"

Her voice was quiet and high-pitched. The shirt she wore was baggy, the sleeves too long. The belt barely staying up on her lean hips was too long, no longer able to function even if she tried tightening it to its smallest hole.

She was certain she had been an adult man, but now she was a child. And... the parts she knew had been there, weren't anymore. She was a young girl.

She didn't have the faintest idea what was going on, but the dragon had, for some reason, brought Lushera to its nest and made her eat meat. Then, before she knew it, she was a little girl.

Lushera. Lushera... It's weird... I feel like that's always been my name.

As odd as it was, the name felt like a perfect fit. It was like she'd been forcefully changed so that she fit into the vessel that was the name "Lushera."

She wondered if maybe she was having hallucinations since she was on the brink of death.

But she quickly understood she didn't have the luxury of pondering that right now.

"I-It's cold..."

Eating had given her warmth, but it was fleeting. Chills racked her body despite being in the bright summer sun. She'd been numb to everything until just a moment ago, but now that she had eaten and got a hint of warmth, she realized she was actually close to freezing.

She'd heard that the higher you climb into the mountains, the colder it gets, but this was a relatively low mountain with abundant foliage, so that was unlikely to be a factor. She was still cold though, her body as frigid as if she'd just rolled in the snow. She burned like she was on fire, and yet she was still cold.

"U-Urgh..." She curled up on the bed of sticks and leaves, thinking about how she needed to maintain as much of her body heat as she could. It made no difference though. She shook, her teeth chattering as they hit together.

"Nnnn..." The dragon brought its face closer to Lushera, observing her. It rubbed its nose against her, as if trying to see how she'd react, but Lushera lacked the energy to respond.

She curled herself up as tightly as she could to withstand the cold. There was nothing here to protect her from it, no coats, no blankets. Her only means of resisting it was to curl herself up.

"Grnnnn... Nnnn..." It sounded like the dragon was muttering something, then Lushera felt like fire was pouring down her throat. It filled her with so much energy she could barely get her bearings straight.

Is this...magic?

This feeling reminded her of the healing spells cast on her a few times throughout her life. Just...the force of those spells were nowhere near on par with this.

Dragons were monsters with massive amounts of mana. What would happen if a dragon, as huge as it was, used that power to cast a spell on a human? It's in the realm of possibility it could save even someone on the brink of death.

That was when Lushera realized what happened. The wound healing and the fact that she was alive were both thanks to this dragon casting a healing spell on her. But magic wasn't some miraculous power that created something from nothing. In fact, it was despite the incredible spell that she was still in this near-death state. In any normal situation, she would already be dead.

After having the spell cast on her, Lushera felt her breathing starting to stabilize. She still trembled from the cold, but it felt like the shadow of death was receding.

The dragon laid its massive frame beside her, stretched out its neck then rewound it, curling it around her. The tightly packed, fine scales on its neck pressed gently against Lushera's back.

"It's warm..."

Just as Lushera wondered what the dragon was doing, she felt warmth spread across her back as if she was resting near a campfire.

The dragon's breathing sounded like someone working a set of bellows. Little tongues of flame peeked out from its mouth, glittering with fangs.

Dragons were practically synonymous with the powerful breath attack they spewed from their maw, an exhalation of fire that became a symbol of fear for its ability to burn anything to ash. And yet, this dragon was passing that same fiery breath back and forth through its neck to warm Lushera.

A dragon could risk crushing its own egg if it tried to warm it with its huge body, and the thick scaly plating meant little of its body heat escaped anyway. The scales on its neck were relatively thin though, meaning it could keep its neck warm as much as it liked by passing its flame breath out and back in, allowing them to use their necks to warm eggs or hatchlings.

The tremors racking her body calmed, and merely thinking about anything was too much trouble. She slipped into a deep sleep, like sinking into a murky swamp.



HER memories of the next few days were a blur.

It seemed the dragon picked up on how to get Lushera to eat meat, because it would bring meat from somewhere, chew it up, roast it with fire, then offer it to her. Lushera would eat in a fever haze until her stomach was full, then pass out again. The dragon continued to warm Lushera with its neck.

Lushera vaguely remembered cool water running down her throat, falling and flowing from somewhere. She wasn't entirely sure what happened, but she also remembered the dragon licking her entire body clean when she soiled herself.

One morning when she woke up, she was finally able to truly comprehend that she was still alive. She put a hand on the dragon's neck to pull her small, sweat-covered body up to stand and look at the morning sun.

Even though the dragon's nest was in the mountains, it was located in a fairly open area, on top of an unnatural mound formation. The stunning sunlight seeped into Lushera's eyes as it rose, birds crossed the sky singing about the start of a new day. The dragon slept, its breathing akin to a blacksmith's forge.

Lushera took an unsteady step forward and something immediately came into view. It was there at the edge of the nest: the broken remains of a huge, thick shell. It was broken into three fragments, even what originally would have been the inside was dried out and covered in mud. There wasn't enough there to make one whole egg based on the shapes of the curves, perhaps not even enough for half.

From here, Lushera could see over the trees to a cliff. A large section of it had crumbled in a landslide. Before coming into the mountains, this region had been hit with storms that were said to be the kind you only saw once in a hundred years, even though this area was prone to high rainfall already. All the mountainous regions, including Mount Kugus, experienced various water-induced disasters, such as landslides and flooding of their rivers.

That landslide on the cliff must have swallowed up the remaining fragments of the egg, along with the unborn dragon inside.

There were rumors that the dragon had built a nest halfway up a cliff and was

keeping the egg warm. A location like this would normally protect the egg from predators and poachers, as well as flooding, so long as there wasn't a once-in-a-century downpour that could collapse a cliff.

Hm? How do I know where this nest is? Lushera wondered, and yet she did know.

She felt like she'd heard it somewhere, from someone, but she couldn't remember from who or under what circumstances she got the information. All the memories in her head of living her life as a human up until now had only vague traces left, like someone had roughly taken an eraser to words written in pencil about her life.

But as she looked at the broken egg, understanding gently came to her. It was all over. She didn't know how, but yes, it all made sense now. A feeling of loss crept in through the tips of her fingers and toes.

The name, Lushera, was meant to be the name this mother dragon gave to her unborn child. Lushera knew the importance of giving something a name from a magic user. The act of naming was the act of defining something's existence. It was the process you used to take something vague and undefined, and give it form.

So then, what would happen if something with as powerful an existence as a dragon defined Lushera as her daughter by giving her the name of her own child? Perhaps it would be a redefining that came along with a certain amount of force.

Even though Lushera understood this, she didn't think it was frightening. She actually felt moved in a way. Though, part of her did wonder why she had to be turned into a little girl.

The dragon had saved Lushera's life. Not only that, she cared for Lushera in the same way she would care for her own ill child. Lushera felt warm emotions well up in her as she thought about how much she'd done for her, even if she was a dragon.

Still, there was a small part of her that found the situation hard to accept, it was a feeling like she'd swallowed a sliver of ice, or been jabbed in the finger with a thorn. She felt like something important slipped her mind. There was this

formless feeling of loss inside her, though she didn't know the source of this feeling.

When the dragon woke up and saw Lushera walking on her own two feet, she nuzzled against her in all her excitement.



AT the base of Mount Kugus was a city called Kugut'hulm. Around the same time Lushera found herself in the dragon's nest, the party known as the Seven-Sided Die was in a room in their two-story rented home which acted as their base of operations.

"Dammit! After all that, we didn't even get the best loot!" said Gemmel, grumbling in front of a sack of gold.

It was definitely a large amount of gold, but if things had gone as planned, the bag would've been four times what it was now.

"Hey, don't say that," said one of the other members. "We got all sorts of rare medicinal herbs, after all."

"Exactly what I was hoping for from a dragon's mountain," said another.

They were all smiles while Gemmel resented the fish that got away.

Kugut'hulm was the town closest to Mount Kugus. The fishery and farming industries boomed thanks to the rivers flowing from the mountains, and the city was also well known for its spas.

The mountains themselves, though, were left nearly untouched. Adventurers would normally dive right into any dangerous location, whether it be caves or ruins, but the local branch of the Adventurers Guild put a ban on entering the mountains.

The first reason was simple: a red dragon lived there, and the so-called variant monsters were rampant in the area, making it too dangerous.

The other reason was that there was an ownership dispute involving the mountains between Martgarz, the country in the north, and Setrayu in the south. As a general rule, the Adventurers Guild remained politically neutral, meaning the Guilds in both countries had a hard time doing anything with the

mountains.

This situation was worsening as of late, but the presence of the red dragon meant no one could enter and the whole issue was tabled for the time being. That was just how dangerous monster-infested lands with a dragon were.

And while the area might be so dangerous that entry was forbidden, it was still a treasure trove of resources. Explorers blinded by greed often went in anyway, and they often never returned.

The Seven-Sided Die was among the lucky ones. Five members went in, and four came out with resources that earned them a killing. Their morals were questionable, they often took these big gambles for money, and they were very familiar with how to exchange these kinds of goods for money without disclosing where they came from. The money they had now was the result of that.

“Not a bad deal, exchanging one lackey for all this money,” said one party member with a guffaw.

Their leader, the large-framed Gemmel, joined in the laughter and said, “Yeah, that, uh...”

But then his expression turned serious.

“Hey, what was his name again?” Gemmel asked.

“Hm?”

“I mean, I know he was utterly useless, but that doesn’t mean I’d just forget his name...”

Silence was Gemmel’s only response.

The Seven-Sided Die had employed a manager. It was rare that an adventuring party would have someone in such a role, but this individual approached many different parties asking to be hired as a manager.

Gemmel only hired him because he was thinking they needed someone to clean their base of operations, and he worked hard. He had called himself a manager after all, so he did more than just your menial cleaning tasks. He handled paperwork with the Adventurers Guild too, and that’s why Gemmel

paid him a rate appropriate for an average gofer.

The only complaint Gemmel had was that the man had to have a say in their adventuring work as well. He got in their way of attempting to make money, insisting it was dangerous, and would insist they do other jobs instead. And vice versa, Gemmel would refuse tedious jobs that came in. The manager would research monsters they might fight in upcoming jobs and arrogantly butt in with information that seemed useless in combat. Several times Gemmel debated giving the man a good beating.

The manager had zero combat capabilities. He couldn't use magic. And yet he seemed to think he'd become an expert adventurer just because he worked with a first-class adventuring party (at least, Gemmel thought of them as first class). Because of this, Gemmel and the others called him a parasite.

That parasite for some reason volunteered to come along up Mount Kugus. Where he died.

Gemmel didn't think of this man as much more than trash, so he had no qualms killing him, but now, he couldn't even remember his name.

"What the...? I can't remember," said Gemmel.

"I can't either..."

"Don't be dumb, his name's...uh..."

Everyone in the party looked at each other like they'd just woken up after a night of heavy drinking. They'd experienced all sorts of unsettling events during their adventures, but this was a different level of unsettling.

Regardless of the actual means of his participation in the Seven-Sided Die, he had been in the party for over a year, yet they still couldn't remember his name.

"You picked up his adventuring license, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I did. That'll have his name on it." Gemmel took the silver metal plate out of the backpack tossed in the corner of the room. It was an adventuring license issued by the Adventurers Guild.

The license showed the owner's name and several values that indicated their

condition and status. Even if an adventurer died on a job and left nothing behind but a bleached skeleton, so long as that license was on them, you could identify them.

Adventurers had a concept called “statistics,” or “stats” for short, that they referred to, and that information was written on their adventuring license.

Stats were a convenient numerical representation of an individual’s abilities. The prosperous civilizations of old used these techniques for computing abilities to make games apparently, and those techniques had been rediscovered in ruins.

The Adventurers Guild adopted that for use in the adventuring license at some point, allowing the licenses to show the owner’s capability numerically, and for those numbers to be automatically updated.

One facet of this adoption of “stats” meant an adventurer’s actual power was easily determined, making it more difficult to lie about one’s ability. Stats became a set standard for use by requesters and overseers of the industry, as well as something adventurers could boast about. This also led to a trend in reduced importance placed on abilities not expressed in numbers, but...

Well, regardless, there was something odd about this adventuring license.

=====

Name: XXXX

LV: 3 | HP: 27/27 | MP: 0/0 | STA: 13/60

Strength: 10 | Magic: 0 | Speed: 11

Dexterity: 10 | Endurance: 11 | Resistance: 14

=====

His name should have been there on the adventuring license as if written in soot, but it was gone, like it’d been smudged out.

“Why’s he still got HP? He should be at zero if he’s dead, right?” asked Gemmel.

“Forget about that, what about his name? That’s weird, isn’t it? Why’s it like

that?”

The four of them peered down at the license, their breath caught in their throats.

“Adventuring licenses were like the ancient people’s toys or whatever, right? If we don’t really understand them, then maybe it broke without us realizing it?”

“They’re not exactly flimsy things, though.”

Gemmel did think it weird that the name on the license was broken just as they were trying to use it to check the manager’s name, but he was more concerned with the HP it was showing.

It was generally assumed that 0 HP was the line where one died from their physical wounds, so HP was essentially a numerical representation of how much injury one could endure. In short: zero HP means zero life.

Gemmel was certain he’d inflicted a mortal wound on the man when he ran him through with his blade. He hadn’t delivered the killing blow because he thought he would make better bait alive, but he had left him on death’s doorstep. There was no reason to think he wouldn’t die from that.

“He must’ve hidden a healing potion on him or something.”

“Wh-What do we do?! If he comes back here alive—!”

“Caaalm dooown! Did you forget where we left him?” shouted Gemmel at the party member starting to lose their composure. “Even if he managed to survive, he’s gonna end up food for a monster or the dragon. And if he’s still hiding somewhere, he’ll eventually starve. We just need to keep an eye on this and wait till his HP goes down to zero. Then we can have a round to celebrate our huge profit.”

Chapter 2: Dragon Teachings, Dragon Rearing

“A week, no, five days. I can manage something in that time.”

There was a voice in a dream, a stifling dream, one like mud sticking to his body.

“Okay. Five days. Just keep her alive for that long.”

XXXX cried out in his memories, and screamed at a man he didn’t know.

“Hey, wait! What are you planning on doing?!”

“I’ll be back within five days, I promise! So, while I’m gone, just don’t—”



“AH!” Lushera bolted out of her sleep. She raised her head and saw she was on a massive bed made of sticks and leaves. The wind rustled her long hair, stroking the nape of her neck. Her entire body was slick with sweat and chains of unease wrapped tight around her heart. “What...was that, just now?”

She’d dreamt, but it was more than that. Almost like a memory. But whose? And from where? Why did she feel a need to return? She couldn’t remember at all, but remnants of unease and panic lingered, threatening to crush her.

Lushera’s memories of her life before had been erased, though she wasn’t certain if that was because a dragon named her as her daughter, or if it was because she’d been on the brink of death. She didn’t even remember why she was on Mount Kugus or why she was on death’s door. She had a feeling she’d told someone she’d be back in five days, but it had already been nearly half a month since she’d entered the mountain.

“I guess the dragon’s gone out...” she said. Even tilting her head, she couldn’t see the huge, vibrant crimson form beside her. She was alone on the giant bed of foliage.

The dragon left the mountain about once every three or four days, seemingly to hunt. Though, she wasn’t attacking human settlements.

Apparently, when it came to dragons that left a flight to live in solitude, some of them attacked human settlements and looted livestock and valuables, but the dragon of Mount Kugus was well behaved. Despite having lived here for a significant seventy years, she'd never touched a city. The people living near the mountain were wary of monsters wandering towards their homes, but the dragon flying through the skies was treated as not much more than a part of the scenery.

It seemed like the dragon flew to some nearby, untamed region where no humans lived in order to hunt. She ate what meat she needed to sustain her huge form, then brought back some for Lushera. Lushera didn't know why the dragon bothered to leave this mountain, since there seemed to be plenty of prey right here. She just assumed the dragon knew of a place with more bountiful hunting grounds.

Lushera might have staved off death, but she was far from full strength and spent the days, all day long, lying in the dragon's nest. When she wasn't preoccupied with other things, her thoughts turned to herself.

She had the feeling she thought before that she had to return alive. She also vaguely felt a burning hatred towards someone. Perhaps the only hints at her own nature were the items on her.

I don't think I was a hero who came here to vanquish the dragon. Hm... I hadn't really thought about it, but I imagine I wouldn't have been on the verge of death if I was particularly strong. Why was I about to die in a place like this? Why'd I bother climbing up a mountain where a dragon lives?

The shirt she had was made for an adult male but was now nowhere close to the right size for her, so she'd wrapped it around her now for clothing. She looked at the shirt, with a hole in the front abdomen and back, stained with blood, and couldn't help feeling confused. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn't the kind of equipment an adventurer would wear. It was just a normal shirt. There was a knife on the belt around her waist, but it looked like the kind of general outdoor-use knife you could buy anywhere, not something meant for combat.

That wound, piercing through her...either she'd been stabbed with a sword,

or perhaps run through by a monster with a long horn.

She didn't remember herself being strong. She couldn't come up with anything that would explain why she would have died in a place like this. The mystery was, why would a man who couldn't fight at all climb up a dangerous mountain?

It was because she was thinking about these things that she noticed the odd breathing too late.

"Huff... Garrrrr..."

"Huh...?"

She heard the sound of leaves crunching underfoot, coming from the bed of dried foliage flattened by the dragon's massive form. She turned around and saw...a strange beast, ten times the size of Lushera's new body, a creature that looked like you added a boar and a bear together, then doubled the resulting creature in size.

She'd never seen a monster like that before. It was likely a variant, a monster spurred into abnormal mutations by the aura the dragon emitted. These sorts of monsters wandered the region where the dragon lived, preventing people from entering.

And that kind of monster was close enough to Lushera that it could lunge at her and hit. Saliva dripped from its jaw in its excitement, a maw lined with teeth like steel spearheads. Its eyes burned as they stared at her.

"Eep..."

Lushera froze, not even breathing. Moving even just a finger might be the signal that caused the creature to rush towards her.

The boar-bear circled slowly closer to her, watching her. It wasn't letting its guard down just because Lushera was small prey. It hunted carefully, wondering if she might be stronger than she looked, or if she might use unexpected means to escape. Its intelligence was frightening.

Lushera's eyes darted around, observing her surroundings, the rest of her body as still as stone. She desperately looked for something that would keep

her alive, even if the chances were slim.

They were in the mountains, but this was a fairly open space. There was nowhere to run and hide. There was nothing that seemed useful. The only thing she had close was the knife on her belt, but that wasn't made for combat, and it didn't seem to have any magical effects. Even a seasoned adventurer would have difficulty defeating the beast with that.

In other words, she was going to die.

Her only real hope was that when the monster went to attack her, it stumbled and fell.

“AAaaaaaaah!”

“Groaaaaar!”

Lushera dashed away, and the beast instantly followed suit with an agility unsuited to its large body. She felt like both time and space had slowed, become thick and viscous. Powerful footsteps pounded the earth behind her, following.

Four steps away.

Tremors.

Two steps.

Breath.

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

Just as Lushera was thinking one more step and the boar-bear would have her, a roar struck the mountain with such force it nearly shook. Lushera froze midstride, her feet tangling together, sending her tumbling. The monster chasing her trembled and looked around.

Wind howled, wingbeats cut through the air.

A deep crimson form appeared, hurtling down like a comet, coming this way. Her legs were folded up, compressing her body smaller, the tip of her nose outstretched to streamline herself. She looked like nothing more than a red pebble in the sky, but she grew larger and larger, until you had to crane your

neck up to take her in. The queen of the mountain had returned.

The boar-bear did an about face the moment it saw her and raced away like a rabbit from a fox, but it was too slow. The red dragon beat its wings as it came to the mountain, slightly reducing her speed, then reached out with her sturdy rear legs and slammed to the ground in her landing.

The land boomed, rumbling like an earthquake.

The monster was crushed below the dragon's rear legs and sharp claws. It let out a pathetic whimper like a dog who'd been struck, then died.

"Groooooor... Nnn..." said the dragon.

"A-Ah, uh, th-thank you..." said Lushera, trying to express her gratitude while getting her still thumping heart under control.

It seemed the dragon had saved her once again. The huge red dragon was intimidating enough when she was curled up beside her, but seeing her move like this was overwhelming. She was maybe around sixty-five feet tall, her rugged form sleek. She was the height of living elegance.

Most people did immediately think of fire breath when you mentioned dragons, but comparing it with this, that just seemed like the cherry on top of everything they were capable of. Dragons were simply creatures of a greater magnitude. A light rake from her forelimb could tear a person, and more, as easily as tearing dried leaves.

But she never used those claws or teeth to shred Lushera. She nuzzled Lushera with her huge face in greeting upon returning home, then peered at her from all different angles to make sure she was unharmed.

She then stamped several times in annoyance on the remains of the intruder, but then stopped and sniffed it as if she had an idea before using her forelimbs to dissect the creature.

She always butchered the prey like this when she brought it back to the nest after hunting, but she must have dropped her other prey in her hurry to get back. That likely wasn't a problem though—she found another prize here.

Dragons did walk on all fours, but standing on only their hind legs didn't seem

to hinder this one's movement at all, and she seemed capable of dexterous work with her forelimbs and the sharp talons they were equipped with. Her claws slipped between the hide and meat of the beast as she neatly skinned it, separating the fur and flesh of the creature in a matter of moments.

She bit a chunk of the meat off, chewed it a few times to make it softer, then blasted it with fire while still in her mouth.

Lushera couldn't help thinking how that might be the most luxurious oven in the world.

After a bit, the dragon spat out the cooked meat in front of Lushera.

"Thank you," said Lushera, looking up at the dragon, this time expressing her gratitude for the food.

The dragon didn't respond though. She didn't seem to understand what Lushera said.

Dragons were more intelligent than people, and there were even stories that they could transform into human form, but Lushera had never seen this dragon do that. She didn't even understand what Lushera said. She didn't think this dragon was particularly stupid. It was more likely this dragon had just lived her life never encountering humans and had therefore never learned their language. Lushera couldn't help thinking about all sorts of things that didn't make a difference, such as, if that was the case with this dragon, did other dragons somewhere learn human language in order to interact with them?

Monster meat roasted with dragon fire had a particular kind of flavor to it that was hard to describe. It was hunted meat, without the blood removed. Eating it left Lushera with an odd heat condensed in her stomach.

As Lushera began eating, the dragon swayed her head back and forth while watching her. Lushera wasn't very good at understanding dragon expressions, but she seemed happy.

It was a weird story. This dragon lost her egg to a natural disaster caused by extreme rains, then picked up a human on the verge of dying, gave him the name of her daughter, and now cared for her.

And she worked hard to take care of Lushera, like she was her own daughter.

And she enjoyed it. Or...seemed to anyway.

Maybe it was just a whim. Maybe Lushera was like a pet to her. Or maybe the dragon was just filling the hole of loneliness with something. Maybe it was all of those things.

Lushera was grateful the dragon saved her life, but she didn't know how to respond to her feelings. She couldn't even talk to her. She didn't really know what the dragon was thinking, their only means of communicating with each other was with gestures.

As the dragon watched Lushera eat, she began slicing up the boar-bear's hide. She chopped off the arms and legs, took off the head too, scraped off any remaining meat, leaving her with a neat hide of just the trunk of the animal. It was a dark gray fur with colorful, tassel-like accents.

The dragon held up the fur to inspect it, then suddenly draped it over Lushera's shoulders as she was eating.

"Ah?!" cried Lushera. It was fairly heavy. "Huh? What is this? Are you saying I should wear it?" She looked up to see the dragon's head swaying back and forth.

At the moment, the only clothing Lushera had was the baggy shirt that didn't fit, which she was wearing like a dress. It wasn't exactly a good look and didn't have much potential for warding off the cold.

They were still in a warm season, but the nights would be cold once fall set in. One shirt probably wasn't enough to make it through. Lushera didn't know how much of the full situation the dragon understood, but she did seem to realize the need for her to have warm clothing.

"Thank you," said Lushera. The third time today, but the dragon still didn't respond.

Looks like saying "thank you" doesn't get the meaning across. I think if it were said to people, they'd get the gist or understand from looking at each other even if they didn't understand the language, but a dragon...

That's when Lushera had an idea. She walked up to that powerful creature and nuzzled her face against one of her legs. It was the mannerism she'd shown

Lushera several times before.

“Nnnn...”

“Haha, hey... Ack!”

The dragon immediately returned the gesture, making a gentle noise in her throat as she stretched her neck out and rubbed against Lushera. Having a huge dragon do that to her sent Lushera tumbling backwards to the bed of leaves, tangled up in the fur draped over her back.

“...It smells...” The animal fur had only just had most of the meat scraped off it, there was no other work done to it, leaving it with a stench strong enough to make her gag. But...it was better than freezing to death. She could only hope the smell would get better over time.

“Roah... Nnnn...” said the dragon. The sounds were just simple animal cries, but they brought with them so much information pouring into Lushera’s head that it made her nauseous.

There was a kind of magic called telepathy that let people communicate using nothing more than their minds and emotions. This seemed like it might be similar, but the dragon’s words slammed mercilessly down into her, as someone who couldn’t even use magic.

Obviously, Lushera didn’t understand Draconic. It felt like she was being forced to solve a complex cipher in her mind.

But, there was “Lushera.” That name, that meaning she understood. It was the name she was given.

“Lushera... Lushera...” she said over and over, patting herself. Then she touched the dragon’s face and looked up. She tried to convey the idea, to say, “Tell me your name.”

It took the dragon a few moments to understand, but then her lips pulled back, showing her teeth, and she let out a sound. “Kuuooo... Aaarr...”

“Kaphal.”

That’s what Lushera heard, she was sure of it. “Kaphal? Huh...Kaphal...”

When Lushera said her name back, Kaphal nuzzled her with joy, quite capable

of crushing Lushera if she misjudged her own strength.



SEVERAL days passed.

“Hmm...”

Lushera stood there, arms crossed as she looked at the poor excuse for a fence of stakes that was really nothing more than a gap-filled row of tree branches stuck into the ground.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work. This isn’t keeping pests out, let alone monsters...”

It took quite a bit of courage to acknowledge that her full day’s worth of hard work was a failure. While Kaphal’s nest was in the mountains, it was in an oddly open area, on top of a hillock. She must have cleared an area that once had thick foliage and used those plants as materials for the bed.

Now, Lushera was attempting to build a barrier on the edge of the area to keep monsters out.

Kaphal emitted a dragon aura that caused the vegetation in the area to grow particularly strong, but Lushera went about hacking one way or another with her knife, shedding blood, sweat, and tears as she trimmed branches, shoved them into the ground, and sharpened the tips.

The result was some undetermined creation that didn’t quite live up to the name “fence.” Maybe some clueless moneybags would take it away if she showed it to them and called it a work of avant-garde art.

“Guess I really can’t do a whole lot. Compared to Kaphal’s marking, this might as well not exist in terms of how much it keeps monsters away...”

Lushera sighed as she looked out over the burned patches of vegetation mixed in here and there with the greenery. A dragon’s fire breath had a particular smell to it, leaving a distinct scent on anything burned with it. It seemed like Kaphal used that to claim her territory and ward monsters off. But there were some intelligent variants out there who realized Kaphal left the nest and snuck in, like what happened the other day.

It might have been because of that that Kaphal then marked her territory with such gusto that Lushera was concerned she'd start a forest fire, and she also didn't go so far when she left the nest.

She was out at the moment, hunting in the mountains. Lushera wouldn't have been put in that dangerous situation if she'd done that from the beginning, but Lushera wasn't in a position to be making demands since Kaphal was doing all the work protecting her and taking care of her. Whether Lushera lived or died was all up to Kaphal.

"Grooaaar!"

A roar echoed through the mountains and Lushera looked in that direction. "Ah, she got one?"

There were a lot of locations that were hard to see on the mountain, with all the abundant foliage growing there, but Kaphal's nest was on a slightly raised area, and Lushera was looking for a creature that was the size of a small mountain anyway. She was easy to spot.

Lushera shaded her eyes with her hand and looked in the distance and saw a crimson back and wings poking up from the other side of the sea of trees. It looked like she had dived from high in the sky at her prey and was just finishing it off after a short battle. She grabbed something in her claws and lifted off, her powerful wingbeats making the trees creak and bend away.

That red dragon was so huge that Lushera could still clearly see her outline despite how far away she was. She grew larger and larger until Lushera had to look up at her, a monster's body gripped firmly in her thick, sturdy legs, by claws sharper than mithril.

"Agh!" Lushera was nearly sent flying by the downdraft from Kaphal's wings. Just her landing was enough to make the mountain shudder.

"Rooor..."

"Welcome back."

Kaphal dropped the spearheaded deer at the side, now nothing more than a lump of meat, and rubbed her nose against Lushera in greeting. Then she pointed a claw in curiosity at the fence-like thing Lushera created. "Nnn?"

“Uh, it was meant to keep monsters out...” said Lushera, waving her arms about trying to get some meaning across.

Kaphal looked at the barrier, so piddly a dragon could easily smash it just by stepping on it, then let out a long slow breath and went into the forest, crushing underbrush and pushing trees aside.

“Urar,” she said.

“Huh? You want me to follow you?”

Lushera went, though confused, and the two reached the bank of a beautiful river without having to walk too far.

There were a lot of springs in these mountains. Even if the great rains of not that long ago were rare, the region still saw plenty of rainfall. Abundant rains meant abundant water. These rivers that flowed down the mountains were a source of life, enriching the people who lived downstream.

Dappled sunlight glittered on its mirror-like surface. A cool breeze fiddled with Lushera’s hair, then rushed away.

Kaphal plunged her face into the river, gulping up its water along with any poor fish that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was such a mighty drink of water that Lushera actually worried she might lower the river’s water level.

She wasn’t sure if she should drink along with Kaphal. Her drinking water up until now had all been provided by Kaphal using magic to condense pure water from the atmosphere for her. Which meant Lushera didn’t drink when Kaphal was gone. Lushera decided it would be good for her to get used to the mountain’s water and joined Kaphal in drinking from the river.

Gazing back from the water’s mirror surface was a beautiful young girl with wild, long, flaming red hair.

“Who’s that?!” said the girl in the water with a somewhat strained smile. She only had a vague idea of what she’d looked like before, but she knew it was nothing like how she looked now.

She looked about the age of a ten-year-old human child. Her hair was a

beautiful shade of red, as vibrant as Kaphal's scales, grown all the way to her waist, long and unruly like a sheep's wool when put to pasture.

Her features were cute and innocent, appropriate for someone her age. Well...the age she looked anyway. Her eyes were the same clear brown as Kaphal's and, unlike a human's, her pupils were vertical slits like a cat's eyes in the sun.

Her skin was like Kaphal's horns, a sharp, unblemished white. She had a slender build, elegant and taut, with the kind of functional beauty you might see in a wild animal.

She currently wore her baggy, tattered shirt like a dress, cinched with the belt and the brown pelt of a wolf-like monster draped over her like a cloak.

She had considered finding a suitable underwear substitute, since she was a little girl now, but gave up on that since she didn't have the tools to make something so delicate. She also had the boar or perhaps bear pelt Kaphal first gave her, but it was so big and heavy she instead used it as both clothing against the worst cold and a sleeping bag.

"Graaar," said Kaphal, poking Lushera gently in the back with her knuckle as Lushera gazed dumbstruck at the girl reflected in the water.

"Hm? What is it?"

Kaphal held up a hand capable of crushing a boulder and a flickering flame appeared, eventually turning into a whirling mass of fire.

"Grah!"

"Aaagh!"

Kaphal let out a short bark and flung the ball of fire above the river's surface where it exploded with force. It didn't even touch the river, but the explosion was still great enough to send the surface plunging down and rolling back as waves.

Lushera's ears rang. Fish, lots of them, floated belly up then were stolen away by the clean waters.

"That wasn't...your breath attack, was it? It was a spell?" asked Lushera. She

knew about a similar spell, though Kaphal's was far larger and more powerful. It was called Fireball, a spell for attacking with an explosion of fire.

"Grrrrrrrr..." Kaphal's throat rumbled and some huge amount of mathematical formulas, or perhaps like a design schematic, flitted through Lushera's mind. There was so much information she felt like it would burn through her head.

This sound Kaphal made was different from her normal sounds, she was trying to express something. She made another ball of flame in her hand and threw it.

There was another explosion so big it seemed it could strip the mountain of its foliage, and the river nearly shrieked as the water heated and evaporated.

"Grrrrrrr..."

"Oh... Are you trying to teach me?"

The same information slammed into Lushera's brain, and though she didn't understand it, she guessed what Kaphal was trying to do. She was trying to teach Lushera how to do that.

She was saying that Lushera couldn't protect herself with that wall she built, so instead she needed to learn to fight, learn to protect herself that way.

"Grrrrrrr..."

"But I... I'm pretty sure I've been told I have zero talent for magic..."

Magic wasn't some convenient ability that anyone could use, at least not any human could. About one in every ten people lacked any ability in using it. Lushera was one of those. Most of the remaining nine people would be able to learn one or two minor spells if they studied, only just becoming a poor excuse for a magic user after intense practice.

Only a handful of people could make a living using magic, and even amongst those people, there was an evident difference between those with an innate ability for it, and those without. Kaphal's magic likely surpassed that of even the greatest of human magic users.

I guess all dragons can use powerful magic. Maybe she doesn't even realize there are weak creatures in this world...

Kaphal looked at Lushera, who was at a loss, and her head fidgeted uneasily. “Urar,” she said.

“All right, all right. Guess I’ll give it a go!”

Kaphal looked at Lushera with expectation, so Lushera caved and held her hand up with frustration towards the river. She thought she’d start by getting in position. But she didn’t even know how to manipulate mana. She had heard though that what was important with magic was to have such a clear image in your mind of what was going to happen that you could see every tiny detail.

Meaning, she just had to vividly imagine the explosions she just saw. She replayed in her mind the incantation-like thing Kaphal just taught her, though she still didn’t understand the meaning.

Slowly...bit by bit...heat built up inside her body.

“Fireball!” she cried, her voice on fire.

A glowing flame leapt from her palm and exploded.

“What the...?”

Lushera’s hair whipped about in the blast she created herself, though she stood in shock at that. She had just cast a spell. She did it.

Fireball’s not that easy a spell... Being able to use that means you’d never go hungry as an adventurer... How the heck can I use it? Is it just because I learned directly from a red dragon?!

Just as their flaming red scales might suggest, red dragons had an affinity with fire. Perhaps if those same red dragons taught someone directly, even someone with no magical ability could learn to use those spells...maybe.

“Nrrrrrr! Raar!”

“Ack!”

Kaphal twitched her head back and forth as she moved it towards Lushera then licked her with her gigantic tongue. Lushera was tossed about, buffeted by the large, soft, warm mass.

“Eurgh, it’s slimy...”

Lushera was drenched after Kaphal licked her up and down. Kaphal had licked Lushera all over several times like that. It was likely something mother dragons did for their children in order to clean them and ward off any illnesses. And, maybe it was also an expression of parental love.

In this situation, it was probably to excitedly say, “Good job.”

Dragon saliva was used as a component in magic potions. Crystalized saliva was known as dragon stones and had various uses. It didn’t feel gross and dirty or smell like human saliva did, it had an odd, hard-to-describe scent.

It also happened that the blood stain on Lushera’s shirt had faded quite a lot along the way. It didn’t seem that it was being washed out. It was more like it was absorbed into the cloth’s lifeforce, like the shirt gained a metabolism.

That, too, might have been because Kaphal kept licking Lushera all over. She decided it didn’t feel dirty and wasn’t unpleasant either, so there was no issue.

“Should I...take a normal bath?”

There was no one looking anyway, so she stripped off her clothes and threw aside the fur then dove completely naked into the river.



BEFORE she knew it, even the trees reaching over the clear waters started to lose the vibrancy of their green. The air was filled with traces of autumn approaching, but the river’s banks were darkening even before the falling leaves had turned red and yellow.

“Scorching Beam!” yelled Lushera and a bright red stream of light burst out, burning the rocks on the riverbed and sending them flying, gouging a perfectly straight groove.

A month had already passed since Kaphal began teaching Lushera magic, and Lushera had been practicing from dawn until dusk. She was desperate—this was about her safety.

It didn’t matter how much protection she received from a dragon, this was a dangerous region populated with monsters so powerful they exceeded all human expectations. She needed to learn to defend herself. It was odd that she

was now able to use magic though she never had been able to before, but it was fortunate.

Only tangentially related, but the ability to produce fire greatly improved Lushera's day-to-day life. She could cook her own meat and warm herself without Kaphal. The ability to produce fire at will was the turning point between living like an animal and like a civilized human during her mountain-survival days. Though...she did think she'd far surpassed being able to just use fire for everyday life.

Lushera wasn't a magic user. Probably. Her memories were vague so she couldn't say for certain, but she had a feeling she wasn't. And yet, for some reason, she had a decent amount of knowledge about magic. There were several spells she'd been able to recreate just because she'd known about them.

She hadn't studied the proper methods for them, so she imagined her process was a mess, but she still could somehow manage to cast them.

"Think that's enough for today," she said. She looked at the riverbed burnt from her latest practice session and wiped the sweat from her brow.

She practiced her magic at the river, not at the nest, to avoid starting a forest fire.

Kaphal originally kept Lushera from walking around. If she tried to leave the nest at all, Kaphal would let out a low sound and push her back in, and she always led the training sessions.

Lushera did understand that the mountain was dangerous. That's why she stayed with Kaphal when walking about, or stayed put in the nest when Kaphal was out hunting.

Maybe Kaphal started to feel more at ease as she watched Lushera though, because she had been allowing her to walk around a little. She never actually saw any monsters in this area though, maybe because Kaphal's marking was doing its job.

"Kay, maybe I'll take that way home."

She walked in a large circular detour, exploring the area as she went home.

This was partially to slowly familiarize herself with the lay of the land, but there was another reason: as she continued through the thickets, she found splashes of color, even more vibrant than the greenery she found them in. Red, orange, purple. The color and shapes varied. They were more beautiful than flowers in full bloom, these luscious fruits hanging by the dozens from the trees around.

“Wow. I wonder what this fruit is... Maybe the fruit here comes in variant forms because of Kaphal, not just the monsters,” she mused.

The area around the nest was practically an orchard, bursting with fruit she’d never seen. Kaphal didn’t seem interested in them, perhaps because they were too small to act as sustenance for her, but Lushera was grateful for this bounty from the earth.

Lushera spread the spare pelt she’d brought on the ground. She hopped up to a sturdy branch where she plucked every fruit she could reach and tossed them down onto the soft fur.

“Plenty for me to eat even if the birds and bugs get some of them. More than I can eat, in fact.”

The pelt quickly filled with fruit. Lushera decided that was about good and bit into the last fruit she picked.

“Mm, yum.”

It was filled with nectar, sweet and juicy. There was nothing better than freshly picked fruit.

“Man am I thankful for the mountain’s bounty!”

Lushera dropped to the ground, wrapped the fruit in the pelt, and slung it over her back. Kaphal always gave her meat to eat, but humans were omnivores. A diet of only meat was going to fail her at some point.

This just happened to be the bountiful period of fall. This fruit was perfect for supplementing the lack of nutrients she was getting, and for adding variety to her meals.

Eventually, though, this seemingly endless fruit would age and rot, then winter would come. In a civilization, you would sell the fruit you couldn’t eat to

someone in exchange for money, which you then saved for winter, but life on the mountain meant being self-sufficient. She couldn't sell things, but she did try to think about if she had any other options.

“Oh!”

There was a rumble, wind roared, and Lushera almost went down along with her goods. The hem of her ragged shirt and the fur she wore like a cloak whipped about.

It looked like Kaphal had returned from flying above the mountain, her wings beating in the lower portion of the sky as she landed in the nest. Whenever Lushera was out walking, Kaphal was either flying above the mountain or sitting in the nest, her neck stretched up high as she surveyed the area.

Today was not one of those days, though, where she simply went flying to be on guard.

“Welcome home! Uh...what's that...?” said Lushera.

“Kraaar.”

She likely arranged her return so it would coincide with Lushera's, and she had the result of her hunt gripped in her powerful forelimbs. She must have been hunting while Lushera was practicing magic. Except, this was different. Her prey was still alive.

“Grar! Graaaar!” It was a wolf-like monster, but larger than a bear.

Blood flowed from its head and abdomen, red rivulets running over its vibrant green fur. It didn't seem weakened though. It glared at Lushera, huffs of breath escaping through its clenched teeth.

“Uwar,” said Kaphal.

“Are you...telling me to fight it? Maybe?”

Kaphal didn't kill the creature. She released it instead.

The green wolf immediately jumped to its feet, its eyes locked onto Lushera, seeing nothing else as it rushed towards her to attack without a moment's hesitation.

“Ah!” Lushera threw aside the sack of fruit she’d been carrying, then dove sideways to avoid the wolf’s advance.

No way! I can’t take on a variant! she cried in her mind, but the wolf didn’t stop. It was already readying itself for its next attack by the time she sat up.

“Okay, fine! Let me show you my magic then! Fireball!”

A sphere of flame appeared from her hand and launched towards the approaching wolf, crashing into it with an explosion.

“Graaaaaaag!”

“A-Ah!”

But the wolf burst through the flames, shrugging off the explosion and heat as it continued forward.

This was a variant monster that roamed a dragon’s lair. It was the sort of beast that could only be taken down if you combined the skills of several top adventurers, the kind of people with superhuman powers. A middling attack spell wasn’t going to leave a scratch, it did nothing but distract the wolf.

It leapt towards her, blood-flecked spittle dripping from its bared fangs.

“Aaah!” Lushera rolled, somehow barely evading the claws and fangs.

But the wolf was swift, agile, quick. When Lushera got to her feet, the rapidly approaching jaws of death were already right before her.

“Grarg!”

“Aark!”

Just before the teeth reached her, Kaphal slammed the wolf down with a forelimb. Even that giant wolf could do nothing against the extreme power of the dragon. It squirmed desperately, trying to escape its restraint.

“Raaaar...” said Kaphal, like she was trying to tell Lushera to try a bit harder.

“I knew it, there’s no way! I’m just a human!” said Lushera with a vigorous shake of her head.

She knew that this was the sort of place this was. She was under Kaphal’s protection right now, but if she didn’t learn to fight monsters like this, she’d

probably never be able to freely walk the mountain. Even worse, she might be attacked in the nest while Kaphal was gone and die without being able to do anything. Even if she didn't get to the point where she could defeat them, she needed to be able to stand against them.

And yet, Lushera just thought this training was too much.

"Grarg," said Kaphal, her shoulders slumping slightly, then she crushed the wolf in her claw.

"Gyaagh!"

Every bone in its body broke, its heart burst. It spasmed several times, then fell still.

"Oh, good... I would've died if you made me practice against something like that," said Lushera with a sigh, feeling like she narrowly escaped death.

Kaphal looked at her out of the corner of her eye, then flapped her wings and took off.

"Hm?"

She then looked down over the mountain from the skies, then eventually dove towards something in attack. Trees swayed, birds fled to the air, and a roar followed something's shriek.

"Uuuh?"

She eventually came back, carrying something from the mountain with her. It was a gigantic, two-headed spider, its entire body bristling with black hairs while a translucent fluid dripped from it.

"Kraaaaaaaaah!" it shrieked.

"Uwar," said Kaphal.

"Did you just go off to get something a bit weaker?!" asked Lushera.

Kaphal dropped the spider near the nest. It landed awkwardly, then squirmed until it righted itself. Its twelve, hook-tipped legs rustled as it moved closer to attack Lushera.

"F-Fireball!" yelled Lushera.

“Kyaaaaaaah! Kyaaah!”

“Ah? Aaaaah?!” she cried.

The spider was slightly slower than normal because of its injuries, making it so Lushera could just about stand against it. That meant Kaphal didn’t step in to stop the fight. She shifted her head back and forth, watching as her child bravely fought.

And that life-or-death game of tag continued around the nest until nightfall.



AROUND that same time in the Adventurers Guild branch in the center of Kugut’hulm, Gemmel appeared in the luxurious bank-like lobby, and the employee assigned to reception blanched. She immediately put on her usual business smile, but that mannerism was plenty to annoy Gemmel.

“Heya,” he said.

“A-Ah, Gemmel, of the Seven-Sided Die. Welcome back. I haven’t seen you in the branch in a while.”

“Yeah. Our lackey took care of all this sort of stuff. Now that he’s dead I got no choice but to come here myself until we find a replacement. I just wanna put this out here, but I tried to stop him, you know that, right? But he insisted on coming along for the job.”

The Guild had already become aware that “he” had died. The Guild actually went to ask Gemmel directly about it when they started worrying about the fact that he was no longer coming into the office, despite having been there often before.

“Yes, of course,” said the receptionist. “Please accept my sincerest condolences on the loss of...uh...your manager.”

Did she just stammer? Wait, did she forget his name too? thought Gemmel.

He didn’t care at all about her condolences, he just thought it odd that she didn’t say “his” name. But he didn’t say anything about it, because he had this feeling that he would uncover something utterly terrifying if he dug too deep into the issue.

“Eh, whatever. Anyway, give me our requests. Any asking for us specifically?” he said.

After their huge profit from their trip up Mount Kugus, the Seven-Sided Die spent their time doing whatever they wanted, not working at all, but Gemmel recently took another look at their funds and decided it was about time they started working again.

“There are no requests for you specifically, at the moment,” said the receptionist.

“All right, just give us whatever looks good then.”

“Well then, can I ask you to take over this investigate and defeat request? The estimated threat level is five.”

“That’s about our level, then, so the pay’s gonna be good too, right?”

The receptionist took out the request form and showed Gemmel. It was incredibly difficult to read since it was written in formal legalese, but this was the gist: My livestock was getting attacked and I asked the Guild to take it out, but they estimated the threat level to be so low that no one would accept the job. I had no other options, so me and a group of locals set up a watch for the thing, and three people were killed. This is definitely a monster on the loose, just send us the help already.

The frustration and anger were evident.

“Our preliminary investigations indicate this is the work of a pack of legion wolves. Here is the investigation report. Compensation will be a standard per-unit structure: base rate plus an additional fee per unit defeated,” she explained.

“Sounds good, this is the job for us,” said Gemmel, not even glancing at the report she gave him. And then he had to wait for twenty minutes before being forced to sign several documents for the formal acceptance of the job.

This is a serious pain. We really need a lackey again. No way I’m coming into the branch every time to do this boring paperwork.

Gemmel was already fed up with the paperwork he had to do for the first

time in a while, since he'd always left it up to the manager.

The Seven-Sided Die was making such a name for themselves that birds, no, dragons would drop dead from the sky in sheer fright upon hearing their name (or at least Gemmel thought they were that well known). They fulfilled well-paid job after well-paid job, and Gemmel's miracle-work with their finances meant they could spend all the money they wanted without running out (at least he thought he was a miracle worker).

They had the money to hire one lackey. They could get one gofer to push this boring work on. And their next one would be someone meek, someone who wouldn't butt in when their opinion wasn't wanted. Even better if they were a young chick. With huge boobs.

Eh, I'll think about it after this job.

He took the request form and went home. Then it was a week later when he burst into the Guild shouting.



“YOU damn liars, you tricked me!”

“Eeek!”

Gemmel slammed his fist on the counter. He was a big man and had plenty of combat experience as an adventurer, meaning his physical abilities went beyond any normal person's. The counter was supposedly sturdy, but it cracked like dried soil when struck.

“What the hell was that about legion wolves?” he shouted. “There weren't even any normal wolves, it was just a group of pathetic goblins! There weren't even any of the high-ranking kind! It was just six sad little goblins! We're the Seven-Sided Die! You know that, don't you?! And you still gave us this shitty little job!”

His shouts boomed through the lobby.

It hadn't been the powerful monsters presumed from the preliminary investigation; it was a measly low-paying job. It was an easy job, but the compensation was like pocket change by Gemmel's standards. If they had time

to be doing something like that, they should be working on something more suited to their level, something they could earn a lot from.

“I-I am very sorry! But everything was in accordance with Guild procedure, and—”

“Then you need to fire whoever did the investigation! This idiotic mistake wasted the time of a top-class adventuring party!” (at least, Gemmel thought of them as top class)

“But, th-this sort of situation is fairly common, where the actual monster defeated deviates from the preliminary investigation, and we always set the estimated threat level at the highest calculated end so as to protect the adventurers!”

“Don’t make excuses! I never once had to fight garbage like that this past year when we thought it was a high-paying request!” roared Gemmel, and all the adventurers in the lobby exchanged looks of confusion.

“Huh? What’s he on about?” said one.

“That’s totally normal, isn’t it?” said another.

“What’d you say?” said Gemmel, feeling a slight chill as they looked at him like he was insane.

The receptionist was cringing away, bunched up in fear on the other side of the counter. She didn’t respond, instead, an older worker in the back came forward and said, “I am very sorry about what happened, but this is quite normal. Even exceptional adventuring groups such as yourselves occasionally get these ‘off mark’ requests.”

“Then how the hell—?” said Gemmel, taken aback.

“He, your, uh, manager, always rejected those kinds of requests,” said the younger worker, her words clear despite the tears in her eyes.

The older worker nodded in agreement. “He had an exceptional eye. He would read every single word of the investigation report. He knew the quirks and habits of all the report writers and investigators. He could read in between the lines and rejected any off-mark request. I would actually ask his opinion on

occasion. He would say there were some things he couldn't be certain of, but would still give me an opinion. And his opinion was accurate to the point it was hard to believe. I actually used his coaching as reference for improving our branch's investigation process."

"He...did all that?" said Gemmel, understanding as much of that as if it'd been said in Elven.

All he did get was that the lackey he killed not long ago had some sort of special skill he didn't really understand.

"F-Fine then, whatever! Just give me any jobs asking for us specifically then!"

"There...aren't any."

"What?!" Gemmel leaned in towards the receptionist like an angry chicken, and she looked down and trembled. "You saying not even one came in while we were off dealing with that off-mark job? They were flooding in before! After everything you put us through, are you stopping our requests now?!"

When a request came in for a specific adventurer or party, the base compensation for the job was much greater, in proportion to their rank. These specific requests were particularly nice for parties like the Seven-Sided Die who stood head and shoulders above the masses. And, compared to normal jobs where you ran the risk of getting an off-mark job that wastes your time, even a specific request that ended up with inaccurate information still made you decent money.

Gemmel had come to the Guild believing it was a given that there'd be a job waiting for him. Before, they'd had so many specific requests coming in that he could refuse the ones that he just didn't like.

"Um, the Guild...we aren't involved in acquiring direct requests," said the receptionist, trembling as she explained. "I imagine your manager went to the requesters and negotiated directly with them, asking them to place a request at the Guild for you."

"...What?"

Once again, this guy he didn't want to think about was being brought up.

Him again? Urgh, this is disgusting...

Gemmel wasn't thinking about how what he did was a waste, or even immoral. It was just that learning that someone like him was being supported by a lowly, incompetent person like XXXX was as unpleasant as learning that part of his body was actually made up by this parasitic jerk.

"Mr. Gemmel, please don't raise your voice in the lobby. And, in accordance with Guild regulation, we may enact disciplinary measures for the intentional damaging of Guild fixtures," said the older worker, her triangle spectacles gleaming coldly as her eyes bore into Gemmel.

Gemmel noticed someone approaching from behind. He turned to see two large men, just as large as himself, their arms crossed as they glared at him.

"Dammit! I need a drink!" He rushed out, having lost his venue for complaining, and went home in a state of confusion.



"OH, that was scary. Thank you for the help, ma'am," said the receptionist.

"Not at all. Much of the blame lies on his manager for spoiling him so much," said the older worker.

With the violent presence gone from the Guild, the atmosphere slowly returned to the usual bustle of peaceful times. In that midst were the two Guild employees, letting out a sigh.

Gemmel had a reputation for his poor conduct. Adventurers like him weren't actually all that uncommon, but more than one employee of the Guild felt relieved when his manager started coming into the branch instead of him.

"So...did you remember the manager's name?" asked the older worker.

"No, not yet... I'm a terrible project manager if I can't even remember the name of one of the adventurers I'm responsible for..." said the receptionist.

"It's all right. I can't remember his name either."

"Why would someone like him work with someone like Gemmel, anyway?"

"Well...everyone has their own things going on. Perhaps he didn't think any

other party would hire him as their manager. It’s apparently commonplace in Martgarz, but quite rare here.”

“With everything he was capable of, he should’ve just worked for the Guild...”

“I know you know how strict the Guild is about the academic backgrounds of its employees,” said the branch manager as she rubbed her temples, like she was trying to dislodge all the abnormal occurrences bothering her lately. “All paperwork with his name on it in the Guild has disappeared... This is more than just someone dying. What happened to you, manager...?”



“**GEMMEL?** Did you just get back?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

Gemmel had picked up whatever alcohol sounded good to take his mind off things, and the moment he got back to his party’s home base, all three of the other party members rushed to meet him at the entrance.

They looked in a panic, like newbie adventurers about to fight their first monster, an expression that shouldn’t be possible from seasoned adventurers like them.

“Just...look at this, will ya?”

They dragged him into the house and showed him a silver plate just sitting on the table.

“Is this that jerk’s adventuring license?” he asked. Confused, he picked it up, and his expression immediately switched to match his party members’.

=====

Name:~~XXXX~~

LV: 5 | HP: 621/621 | MP: 1090/1090 | STA: 559/559

Strength: 17 | Magic: 43 | Speed:15

Dexterity: 12 | Endurance: 39 | Resistance: 78

=====

“What...the hell?”

Gemmel took one look at the adventuring license with its disconcertingly smudged out name and his face paled at the impossible numbers he saw there.

“I was going through his things to get rid of them and found it like this,” said one party member.

“Gemmel, what’re your stats like right now?” asked another.

Gemmel pulled out his own adventuring license and looked at it.

=====

Name: Gemmel

LV: 22 | HP: 139/139 | MP: 5/5 | STA: 112/112

Strength: 24 | Magic: 3 | Speed: 14

Dexterity: 14 | Endurance: 19 | Resistance: 16

=====

When it came to the stats from Strength down, the average person had a 10, other than magic, where only those with an innate ability had 10. Twenty was top class, masters. Thirty was inhuman, for heroes.

Different people advanced at different rates of course, but they developed themselves as they trained and fought, until they eventually exceeded the limits of their body. They said a stat of 20 was the point where you surpassed the physical limits of your body’s abilities. You were living magic at that point.

But the stats on XXXX’s adventuring license far surpassed that point. His HP and MP were even more extreme. Only a few heroes of the country reached around 200 HP or MP. Three hundred was generally impossible.

Gemmel had recently carried out a run of good jobs, meaning his body was in prime condition. In all honesty, his stats were deserving of pride. Any requester who knew how to interpret stats would be impressed by his and have faith in his strength.

Gemmel’s stats were higher than XXXX’s in some places, but everywhere else, XXXX’s stats made his look pathetic.

“That’s weird, look at his Magic and MP...”

“How high is an expert magic user’s?”

“His HP’s weird too.”

“He’d be fine even if a dragon stepped on him.”

“Who cares about that, a resistance of 78?”

“None of these stats can be real. Someone with these stats could survive an attack from a demon king!”

It was disconcerting seeing something so familiar as an adventuring license showing impossible numbers like this.

“I-It’s definitely broken. No one can get this strong, definitely not *that* parasite,” said Gemmel.

“Weren’t you the one saying adventuring licenses don’t break?”

“I didn’t say they never break! I meant they don’t break normally!” he shrieked, hearing his voice go hoarse. “What do we do? It’ll be bad if someone finds it. We can’t destroy it easily.”

He thought calmly, forced himself to think calmly, and made a careful decision.

If he were being honest, he didn’t want to keep something this disturbing around. But he was a top-class adventurer (or at least, he thought he was). If he didn’t carefully plan out how to get rid of something this troublesome, it’d only come back to bite him later.

“Leave it for now. Just throw it in a drawer somewhere or something,” he said.

“Yeah, don’t let this get out.”

The rest of the party nodded.

But none of them looked confident. None of them were at ease.

“And...what if it’s *not* broken?” asked one of them. Maybe it was Gemmel.

That couldn’t possibly be the case, but it was like there was a heavy weight on

their throats, and none could get the words out to deny the possibility.

Chapter 3: She Who Lives on the Mountain

“AH...”

Lushera stretched inside her cocoon of furs then crawled out. Wind swept the open-air nest, the morning sun pouring down without mercy.

“Hm? Where’s Kaphal?” she wondered aloud.

There was no sight of the huge sprawling form that normally slept overlooking Lushera’s sleeping bag. Lushera looked around, then quickly found her.

She was sitting coiled up at the edge of the huge nest. Her upper body was pressed close to the ground, something shiny and hard in front of her snout.

The eggshell...

Lushera could guess from the curves of the fragments that the egg had been quite big. What was left there was probably less than half of the original egg, but she didn’t have to wonder what happened to the rest of it.

The three fragments of shell had stayed there at the edge of the nest, like a headstone. It was pure white, glittering and beautiful, because Kaphal occasionally licked it clean.

“Nn?”

“Good morning,” said Lushera.

“Nnnnn...”

Kaphal noticed Lushera had come out of her bed and nuzzled her for her usual morning greeting. She then chewed up the remaining portion of her last hunt that had been off the side of the nest and cooked it while in her mouth. It was the same meal as always.

“Mm, thanks,” said Lushera.

She cut off the blackened parts of the roast meat with her knife, slicing into what was inside and eating it. The meat had a strong gamey taste, smelled of

beast—of blood—but Lushera was pretty used to that by now. It was far easier to eat than raw meat. If she grew tired of the flavor, she would rub it with some herbs she found on the mountain for a change of taste.

Now that I think about it, this isn't a variant, is it? It's a normal monster. The prey she brings for my training is always a variant, but everything else she feeds me is normal monster meat. Maybe even dragons don't take variants lightly? thought Lushera as she ate like it was work.

She'd eaten variants on several occasions, and they always tasted better than normal monsters. They still had the same gamey flavor, but they felt warm in the mouth. It was hard to explain, but they gave a feeling of satisfaction.

She sometimes wondered if Kaphal would treat her to some variant meat that day, but she couldn't very well ask for any sort of luxury, since Kaphal was already doing so much to care for her.

Once Kaphal saw Lushera start to eat, she flapped her wings and took off.

"Woah, ah!" Lushera nearly tumbled over as gales swept the area. "Hm? Are you going out far for hunting today? It's been a while since you've done that. Have a nice hunt!"

Lushera waved to Kaphal as she climbed higher and higher, moving away from the mountain.

Lately, Kaphal had only hunted on this mountain to bring Lushera food, but Lushera was getting worried because Kaphal didn't seem to be eating much herself. She gave everything to Lushera, only eating the meat Lushera couldn't finish just before it spoiled. There was no way that was enough to sustain Kaphal's massive form, and she didn't seem to be otherwise hunting for herself.

Lushera didn't know what this fast of Kaphal's meant and was worried about whether this was really all right, so she thought it was a good thing if Kaphal finally decided to go hunt for herself.

She worked in silence on the meat until her stomach was full. Now with nothing to do, her eyes drifted to the eggshell Kaphal had been looking at before. It was there, as if it was a given it would be there, so constant it nearly tricked Lushera into believing it was just part of the scenery. But, while it might

just be a background sight to Lushera, it carried a different weight for Kaphal.

Kaphal kept the egg there at all times and sometimes cleaned it, as if cherishing the child that could never come into the world.

"I guess Kaphal's had this for so long; the real Lushera..."

That word, "real," hit Lushera's core so much it surprised even her.

What does that mean, "real"? Aren't I Lushera?

She felt terror, the fear of something threatening the foundation of her very existence, and a melancholy, like she was being neglected.

And then she realized. She was being arrogant by having a desire to hoard Kaphal all to herself just because Kaphal had at some point started focusing entirely on her even though she was simply a replacement for the real Lushera who was lost in the landslide.

She understood now she was just being self-centered, feeling nothing but shame at her childish insistence she get her own way. She started to feel like she should properly address the real Lushera, a feeling helped along by her guilt. The least she could do was treat the real Lushera with sincerity since she was here and the real Lushera was not.

She knelt before the fragments of egg.

If you were a human, I'd pray to the gods that your soul rests in peace...

But dragons didn't pray to gods.

It was said that humans were created by gods and received countless divine favors in their life. When they died, they returned to their god's bosom in the great cycle of life and death.

Dragons were different, though. They had the shape of a living creature, but they were actually fragments of what formed heaven and earth. It was said dragons would exist so long as the world existed. They didn't have a god watching over them, they had no concept of heaven or hell. When they died, both body and soul returned to the earth. It was hard to imagine something as powerful as a dragon praying to some great being for protection anyway.

Lushera wasn't a dragon, she was a human, so she had no idea how a dragon

would mourn the loss of a child that died before they could be born. But she did know that Kaphal still mourned Lushera, she still felt sorrow for her loss.

I wonder if I've even become enough to help soothe her sorrow...

The only way Lushera knew to mourn was to pray to a god. How much would that really help Kaphal and the real Lushera in the end? She didn't know. She didn't know, yet she still did it, praying as she gently touched the eggshell.

A jolt hit her.

"Agh!"

It was like being hit by electricity. She pulled her hand back on reflex. Blood flowed from her small, tender-looking hand.

"What the...?"

There was a wound on her palm, her flesh torn deep. And in front of her were fangs, dripping with blood.

To be more accurate, there were invisible fangs with blood coating the surface, making just a few of the teeth barely visible.

Lushera's hair stood on end as breath, like a warm breeze, brushed across her.

An invisible monster! There're even variants like that here?!

They weren't very common, but there were some monsters who could turn invisible. Either a monster that already had the ability had become a variant, or some monster had developed the ability after absorbing the dragon's power.

Regardless, invisible monsters were a source of fear among adventurers because they weren't easy to handle. They secretly approached, then everything was over by the time you realized they were there.

It looked like Lushera had avoided death without even realizing it, but this wasn't the time to be patting herself on the back. She had a rough idea of the shape of this creature, based on the few blood-coated fangs and the distance between footprints after it entered the soft foliage of the nest.

It was four legged, probably about the size of a medium-sized dog, based on

the bite mark on Lushera's hand.

This thing was standing beside the egg, watching Lushera, or at least, she guessed as much.

She kept her eyes locked on the traces of blood floating in midair and slowly backed away. What did this invisible beast think of their standoff?

The bloodied, transparent fangs sunk into one of the pieces of shell and lifted it up. Lushera didn't even have time to gasp. Before she could even think, the creature chomped onto the shell, shattering it to pieces and gobbling it down.

This invisible thing ate the piece of dragon shell like it was a cracker. Oddly, the shell also turned invisible as it was eaten.

It was a dragon's power that mutated normal monsters into variants... This likely had something to do with the dragon aura permeating the mountain, but flaked off scales, claws, or excrement had an even greater influence. Variants grew stronger by consuming those things.

The three fragments of shell were now two.

No! thought Lushera, anger and agitation growing inside her.

There was no life left in that fragment, but it was precious to Kaphal. Lushera knew the fear of being separated from someone you cared for. Kaphal wasn't done with saying her farewell, and yet her connection to her daughter was being taken away.

Lushera didn't want to watch that tragedy unfold. She didn't want to see Kaphal sad. That was enough to make her desperate, to make her forget to think about her own safety.

"You can't do that!" she yelled, facing the creature down instead of running.

She'd fought several variants that Kaphal brought for her. Well, "fought" might be a strong word. She basically just ran around, using magic to hold the monster at bay until Kaphal stepped in and killed it. This was the first time that Lushera felt the intent to attack. Her blood burned with fire, flowing to the very tips of all her capillaries.

Her clenched fist slammed into the invisible monster. She felt flesh deform,

bone break and shatter. There was such a feeling of living flesh it was horrifying.

“Gyaaah!” The invisible creature went flying with a shriek. There was a dragging sound as it got back to its feet. Or, seemed to, anyway.

Lushera gathered up the two remaining pieces of shell. Except, the moment she did, she was attacked from a direction she wasn’t expecting an attack to come from at all.

“Ack!”

There wasn’t even enough time to blink between it. Burning pain shot through both her thighs and Lushera’s voice cracked in a high-pitched scream. There were gaping wounds in her legs, leaking like a tomato that split after sucking in too much water as it grew.

The blood traced through the air, leaving a momentary red trail. What looked like blood-covered claws moved away from her, one set to the left and one set to the right.

There’s more than one?!

There were more creatures she couldn’t see. There were two sets of blood-soaked forelimbs, meaning, there were two more of the monsters.

They circled Lushera, observing her. There was barely any sound from their footsteps or their breathing. These monsters knew how to conceal themselves.

They made wounds that were deep, but bled little. They were swift as wind (though maybe that was an exaggeration). Their lack of a visible form was a noticeable trait. They persistently targeted their prey’s legs, preventing it from moving.

And...

There are three of them! Shit! They’re a type of wind beast!

Lushera knew so much about monsters it surprised even her. She’d already determined what she was facing based on the fact that they were invisible, and the other clues she learned.

Wind beasts were strange monsters—always born in sets of three that worked together throughout their entire lives.

They tended to attack while invisible and had a specialized coagulant poison that kept their prey from bleeding out. It was believed that was to prevent their location from being revealed from blood spatter, but no one was certain.

Perhaps they decided this is perfect, there are three eggshell pieces, let's sneak in while the dragon's out and we each get one. Well, Lushera couldn't know if that was on their mind, but it was obvious they waited until Kaphal was gone to enter the nest.

Wind beasts generally weren't aggressive, except when they were hungry, but they would take on any opponent, no matter how powerful, in order to protect their siblings. Obviously, they would also take on weaker opponents for that.

Lushera slowed her breathing so as not to encourage the beasts flanking her to attack.

"Grrrrrrr..." Only the one injured by Lushera's punch made any sound of dislike.

Her swing had definitely caused damage. It was reasonable to assume Lushera had also been exposed to the dragon aura, just like the variants that lived here, and she had even eaten those variants, causing changes in her body. She only just realized that was probably why she was able to use magic now.

She didn't know if she could win against enemies she couldn't see. The one thing she did know was what she should do now.

"Fireball!"

She flung the spell at one of the beasts penning her in, trying to take the initiative. The ball of fire leapt from her fingertip, but the wind beast jumped, dodging. It missed its mark but crashed into the ground and exploded.

"Hisssssssss!"

The wind beast was struck by the blast and fell, letting out a sound like a slithering snake. There was smoke, perhaps its fur was burned, but then it was on its feet and rushing forward as fast as lightning towards Lushera.

"Ah!"

Their coordination was incredible. When one went to attack, the other two

responded in kind. Lushera could just about tell where they were thanks to the traces of blood stuck to them, but she was too slow to deal with an enemy whose movements were this hard to see.

She dropped to the ground, curled up so she was protecting the eggshell pieces, and they tore into her back. They even easily tore through the fur she wore like a cloak (which was abnormally tough since it was a variant pelt). Obviously, her ragged shirt underneath served no purpose, and burning pain shot across her back.

“Aargh, you!” Lushera held onto the eggshell with one arm while she swung the other, trying to push them away. By the time she did though, the three wind beasts had already retreated and reformed a triangle with her in the center.

That’s right... This is how they hunt... What should I do?!

Lushera knew how to handle these monsters. You divided them and dealt with them separately, breaking up their coordination, or you focused attacks on one to reduce their numbers so you gained the advantage in numbers. But that was when you had all your tricks still at your disposal, or if you had an ally to stand with you, or if you had a magic item that could be used for combat.

It didn’t matter how powerful you were or what you were fighting against, it was normal to avoid a fight where you were one against many. You couldn’t win unless you had an overwhelming advantage in sheer power.

All Lushera had at the moment was the ability to use a few fire spells and physical abilities higher than the average person. But she also had wounds on both her legs. Her strengthened body could thankfully still move, but even this slight reduction in speed could spell death when facing greater numbers of foes that were also swift and durable.

Kaphal, please notice this!

“Lightning Barrage!” Lushera swept her arm up and pointed to the sky.

A bullet of magic launched up, leaving a track of smoke in its wake. Once high in the sky, it exploded with a series of booms that you could feel in the pit of your stomach.

But that’s all the fire spell did. All Lushera could do was hope Kaphal noticed

it, figured out what Lushera was trying to say, and came back.

The problem was that casting that spell spurred her enemies on to attack as they instinctively responded to the motion. And since the spell wasn't an attack against them, it just left her wide open.

"Ah!"

One launched itself into her from the side with so much force her pelvis crunched beneath the blow. She went flying and, unable to gain control of her body, she landed face down on the ground, dropping the eggshell pieces she was holding.

She felt the weight of a beast pressing down on her back, holding her there, its hot breath on the back of her neck. She reached up, desperate to struggle back against her looming death, and grabbed the thing's coarse fur. With her other hand, she pushed against the ground, flipping herself over and slamming the animal to the ground as she did.

"Arp!" The invisible beast let out a yelp.

Now freed, Lushera reached for the eggshells she'd dropped, but something pinned her hand to the ground.

"Agh! Ah, ah!"

One of the other wind beasts had attacked without delay. One claw on their front legs was long and scythe-like, and it now pierced through Lushera's hand.

Another pain shot into her immediately after, making the pain in her hand feel like nothing. The other two wind beasts had leapt onto Lushera's back with their claws unsheathed.

"Gaaah!"

She coughed up blood. Being stabbed in the back, it made her feel like memories from not that long ago were going to come back to the surface. Burning hatred, the feeling of helplessness, and something close, familiar.

She couldn't reach out her hand anymore.

She might have been able to cast a spell, but any spell powerful enough to blast all three of the wind beasts off her wouldn't leave her unscathed either.

Worst of all, it would also destroy the egg, the thing she was supposed to be protecting. And that moment of hesitation when she contemplated that dilemma, stripped her of her final opportunity to fight back.

Three jaws of death approached her neck at the same time, and—

“Groooooaaaar!”

The air trembled, the ground shook. A roar so loud it could split eardrums echoed across the mountain.

Lushera felt the wind beasts jump and freeze as they held her down.

Wind howled, growing louder. The claws piercing into Lushera were pulled out, and the weight on her back disappeared.

The three wind beasts raced off at high speed. Or tried to.

“Roaaar!”

It seemed like the sky turned red. The ground beneath her belly shook so violently it nearly tossed her up, and a blast of air swept around her. She could hear burning, snapping trees being tossed around.

It sounded like Kaphal dove down from above and wiped out a section of the mountain trees with her fire breath. Lushera didn't know if the wind beasts escaped or if they died in the attack.

“Ka...phal...” whispered Lushera, the taste of blood in her mouth.

Wind rushed across her, from the beating of Kaphal's wings, and a massive foot appeared in front of her.

“Nnnnn...” said Kaphal sadly as she brought her snout close.

Lushera's heart suddenly started pounding, heat coursing through her veins as something shining filled her body. Kaphal was healing her with magic.

Lushera stood, though her body still ached with the vestiges of pain. Her ragged shirt, nearly no better than a scrap at this point, was stained with her blood. The blood would come out if she cleaned the shirt, but she really should just throw it away.

“Kaphal...thank you, for saving me,” she said.

Kaphal looked down at her, the sun behind her almost as if she carried it on her massive shoulders.

Lushera faced her and pointed to the shell fragments that had fallen to the ground beside her. "I'm sorry. There were three pieces before, but now..."

"Urrr..." Kaphal let out a small cry and looked at Lushera. She brought her snout close and licked Lushera's face clean, more tenderly than usual. Lushera could feel her deep gratitude.



Then, Kaphal picked up the shell fragments. She looked at them with love for a while, and perhaps hesitation, as she stroked them with the pad of her finger.

The change was both strange and dramatic, as a hairline fracture shot through the shell.

“Kaphal?” asked Lushera.

The spindly crack eroded the shell, visibly progressing until it had extended across every inch. Something rang within the world, like the clear tone of a bell, and the eggshell shattered, emitting the sound of life. It turned to powder, flowing into the wind, sparkling as it melted away.

“Ah?!”

“Aaaaaoooooooooh! Aaaaaooooooooh!!” Kaphal howled, cried as she watched the light go.

Lushera already knew that dragons could shed tears, just like humans. They were like crystalized drops of mana, pearl-like orbs running across bright red scales before dripping off Kaphal’s pointed chin.

“What? Why...?”

“Aaaaaoooh!”

Farewell. That word flitted through Lushera’s mind. This was a ceremony of parting, though she didn’t know if this was a dragon custom, or just Kaphal’s way of saying goodbye.

She was sacrificing her own emotions, that’s what it seemed like. Or maybe she was coming to terms with the real Lushera’s death.

And then it was over. All over. There was no more shell, not even any remaining slivers of light to be seen.

Kaphal hung her head. It looked like her mind was somewhere else, or maybe, she was so sad she couldn’t even move.

“Kaphal...” said Lushera, unable to say anything more, unable to even reach out and touch her.

In the end, Lushera only half understood what happened there that day. It

would be much longer before she would fully comprehend it.

One change that Lushera could see from the following day was that from then on, Kaphal only ever hunted variants, making that the only game Lushera ate.

Lushera had tried to protect something important to Kaphal. From then on, Lushera meant something different to Kaphal.



IT rained a lot in the mountains.

“It’s really coming down...” said Lushera.

The downpour thudded against the stones and trees.

Kaphal’s nest drained water off well, and they weren’t near a cliff that might collapse, giving Lushera the impression Kaphal had taken precautions after losing her egg in the landslide caused by past heavy rains. The only problem was that there wasn’t anything to keep the rain off.

Kaphal stood there, her wings spread wide, using them as a roof for Lushera. Kaphal herself didn’t seem to care at all about the rain or wind, but she probably understood it was dangerous for a dragon hatchling to have the weather rob it of its body heat. She stood stock still, protecting Lushera, like she did every time it rained.

“Don’t you get tired standing like that?” asked Lushera. “It’d be torture to a human, to have to stand there still like that in the rain.”

“Rr?”

“If only we had a roof, you wouldn’t have to stand like that, and I wouldn’t get wet.” Lushera looked up at Kaphal as she talked. With her shirt no longer wearable, she now wore the pelt she’d used like a cloak before, just split into two pieces and wrapped around her.

It was actually difficult to store anything anyway, since the nest was open to the elements, with little protection from the wind and rain.

So, Kaphal lost her egg to a landslide caused by severe rains. She doesn’t look like she has any desire to live in a cave or something. Guess my only option is to build a hut around here somewhere.

Fall had come and temperatures were steadily decreasing, making Lushera painfully aware of how much she needed some sort of dwelling. Except Lushera didn't know anything about building a hut. The only thing she really could do was ask Kaphal for help, though it was hard to communicate with her. She had no clue how to go about conveying this to her.

Lushera came up with an idea. She picked up a stick from the mound that made up the nest, then drew a picture in the mud.

"Look, have you ever seen anything like this?" she said. "Humans, we live in these, we call them 'houses.' We can endure the rain if we have a house, we can even ward off the cold of winter."

Lushera drew a picture of rain and a house in the mud, though it wasn't a very good drawing. Kaphal peered at it, her wings still spread as a roof.

Is she going to understand? I think she at least understands that I'm trying to tell her something, but whether or not she gets what...

Lushera pointed to the drawing and used hand gestures to make her point.

Kaphal cocked her head to the side for a moment, then howled, "Roooooaah! Graaah!"

And the ground moved. The sticks making up the nest snapped as they were swept aside and the stone beneath rose up in a mound.

It looked similar to an illustration Lushera felt like she'd seen in a book before of houses in desert regions made of hardened clay. Just this one wasn't made of clay. It was a house made entirely out of hollowed out stone.

It had one room inside, with no door at the entrance and only holes for windows.

"I-I-If you could do this, why didn't you do it sooner?!" asked Lushera.

"Rr?"

A house of stone had sprung into existence in the middle of the nest. It was likely made using a spell that altered the earth's surface. This sort of magic fell within the field of elemental magic, which was made up of spells that could produce effects resembling natural phenomena by manipulating the four prime

elements: fire, water, earth, and wind. A dragon using such a spell would find something like this easy to do.

Is it possible that this unnatural mound we're on was made by Kaphal's magic as well?

Lushera was only now just realizing it, but the nest was on a flattened mound on the side of the mountain. It was an unnatural place for such a thing, and a little too convenient for Kaphal. None other than her must have made this advantageous terrain for the nest.

Lushera quickly stepped into the "house" to check it out.

There was no furniture and no fireplace, just a room without a door and some windows, but it was plenty to keep the wind and rain off. It was a hundred times better than a bed of sticks open to the elements.

And then the house shook as Kaphal shoved the tip of her snout in the doorway.

"Nnnnnnn..."

"Oh, don't sound so sad..."

Kaphal's breath puffed into the house. She was trying to get as physically close to Lushera as she could since she missed her after she closed herself off in the small stone building.

"Oh! Hmm, well if that's the case, we don't have to do this... It doesn't have to be hung up on human size, so, if you can..." said Lushera, leaping out the window to avoid the door and Kaphal's nose that was blocking it. She got her stick and drew on the ground again, this time a big house with a dragon and a small human inside.

"Nn!"

This time the entire mountain moved. Stone rose up from the edges of the nest, passing over Kaphal's head and joining in an arch above, filling in to cover three sides. If you ignored the fact that it was made of stone and absolutely massive, it actually looked a lot like the kind of igloos kids made when it snowed.

This wasn't making something out of nothing. In the end, it was really just reforming the shape of the land. The ground around them was cut back for the same amount that was needed to form the roof, forming a large ditch around the stone dome almost resembling a moat around a castle.

"Woah! Amazing!" Lushera looked up at the ceiling which was so high her head spun when she did, her mouth gaping open in astonishment.

Humans did often use magic to some degree when building large structures, primarily for the frame, but there was no way they could make something on this great a scale, something this extreme in such a short time.

"So... If you could do this all along but didn't, that means you never even considered the option of making a house?"

"Rr?"

Lushera looked at Kaphal with, as you might have expected, a small amount of exasperation.

Kaphal had stood there with her wings spread to protect Lushera, meaning rain was an intrinsic threat to a mother dragon, to the hatchling she protected. Living in a cave would be a convenience since she wouldn't have to spread her wings like that, but it was nothing more than that. The standards of a dragon differed from humans.

It was all good in the end though, since Kaphal had understood. She immediately curled up beneath the stone roof, and Lushera sat in her usual spot, leaning against Kaphal's neck.

"The wind still gets in with how big it is, but...eh...it's fine."

Winter would come eventually, but it was warm next to a dragon.

Can I get through winter with this?

Having this house meant she could store preserved foods without any issue, and it would be fine if it snowed. She could easily make a fire if she was cold, with how huge this stone dome was, and she had all sorts of firewood already. She was already pretty proud of how good she'd gotten at fire magic.

Just as she was starting to relax, she rethought things.

Wait a second. Is it really okay to relax in this situation? What if I have family somewhere waiting for me to come back?

It was something she'd thought all along, but it'd gotten pushed to a corner of her mind.

Some of the things Kaphal did were dangerous simply because she did them in a dragon-like way, but she was very thoughtful as she raised Lushera. There were hard times, but Lushera was happy with her life with Kaphal.

And that's how she nearly forgot, forgot her blotted out memories, forgot that there was a period where she lived her life as something else, before she was Kaphal's daughter. Even forgot the possibility that there was someone out there waiting for her to come home.

I feel like I had to get back home alive. I want to find out what the reason for that was. If I look into things and I was alone, then that's fine. Then I can just live in the mountains.

The downpour didn't stop for a long time. Lushera fell asleep to the boisterous yet calming sound.



“OKAY, so, I'm not saying I want to leave the mountains, I just...want to go to the city for a bit. Do you understand?”

Lushera had drawn several images in the moist ground after the rain stopped.

There was one of a person going down the mountain. One of a person going into town. One of a person coming back up the mountain.

Lushera wanted to go to human civilization. She wanted to piece together her fragmented memories and learn who she used to be. She wanted to have closure for this thing she felt she needed to do, but left behind.

She intentionally put in the drawing of her coming back up the mountain because she had a feeling Kaphal would worry she'd go and never return. Whenever Lushera went too far from the nest, Kaphal would immediately swoop down and bring her back. Part of that was because it was dangerous to leave the nest, but Lushera got the impression that wasn't the only reason.

Kaphal looked at Lushera's drawings. After a while, she used a claw with surprising dexterity to draw an image in the ground that looked much more lifelike than Lushera's.

It was of a bear-like monster attacking a small human, Lushera.

She was saying Lushera still couldn't manage it.

"Urgh, I guess..."

How many times had Kaphal brought her "learning materials" to fight against? Lushera felt like those times had improved significantly from when she just ran around in circles, but Kaphal seemed to think it still wasn't enough to go down the mountain.

"Okay, then what about this?" said Lushera. She rubbed out the pictures of her going down and up the mountain with a foot, then drew a picture of a tiny human riding on a dragon's back through the sky.

It would be easy to go and come back if Kaphal helped. Or so Lushera thought.

Kaphal quickly rubbed out the second half of the row of pictures with the edge of her hand, then drew a dragon surrounded by humans in armor.

"Oh..."

Dragons were powerful, including Kaphal, of course. But that didn't mean they were invincible or impossible to defeat. Weren't there several ballads about human warriors defeating wicked dragons, after all? Long ago, dragons and the humanoid races warred for control of the world, a clash that spanned races.

A dragon being defeated was interesting news that spread, but it wasn't a world-shattering incident.

Thinking about it, Kaphal was a tribeless dragon. There were plenty of fearful regions controlled by dragon clans of tens, even hundreds, of dragons. No one set foot in those areas, no matter how great a hero they were.

But what about Kaphal, who lived alone? If people decided she was dangerous because she went down the mountain near civilization, then all the

skilled dragon slayers of the world would be summoned here to eliminate her.

Lushera did think Kaphal was being a bit too anxious about it, seeing as no one had tried to do anything to the dragon of Mount Kugus these past seventy years, but Kaphal must have her own thoughts on the situation. Lushera was the one asking for the favor anyway, she wasn't in a position to demand anything of Kaphal.

"Okay..." she said.

"Nnn..." Kaphal said with deep sorrow. She tenderly nuzzled Lushera, as if apologizing for an unresolvable situation.

"Okay, which means, this!" said Lushera, then she drew a new picture.

This one was of her defeating a monster.

"Rrrrrr!"

"Oof!"

Kaphal let out a happy hum in her throat and licked Lushera up and down. She was almost certainly happy that Lushera guessed what Kaphal had on her mind and encouraged it.

"Ah-ha! Well... I am human so I don't know how far I can go, but I'll do my best," she said.

Kaphal's lessons were crude and dangerous, but they did improve Lushera's skills. If this was something she needed in order to leave for civilization, then she could at least try a bit harder. And then she could just enjoy her happy stay here in the mountains in the meantime.

"Uwar," said Kaphal before spreading her wings and launching herself to the sky.

"Huh?"

She circled the mountain a couple of times, then plummeted to the ground with enough force to make the mountain shake. She rose back up, something in her claws as she appeared from between the trees.

"Hissssss!"

“Baaaaah!”

Lushera took one look at the sheep hanging from Kaphal’s claws, poison dripping from its mouth and four snakes sprouting from its head, and turned on her heel and ran.



THE leaves of the trees finally began to fall, the sound of winter’s footsteps approaching from behind.

“Graaaah!”

A monster that looked like a fanged, pitch-black mop faced Lushera, its feet firmly planted on the ground littered with brightly colored leaves. Its black fur glittered rainbow for a brief instant, like water with oil slicked on top, then lightning burst from its body towards Lushera like a loose javelin.

“Ah!”

Lushera crouched low and ran.

It’s the same feeling as casting a spell! Circulate the mana, make it part of your body! This is what it feels like to accelerate!

The lightning burst, blackening the ground, but Lushera was no longer there.

She ran, zigzagging. The monster rushed to intercept her with a wild swing of its arm. It was too slow. Lushera slipped past.

Lightning burst, claws and fangs flew.

Lushera could anticipate when and from where the attacks would come. Just running around was perfect practice for that, but Lushera wasn’t just running now. She could manage more.

“Right, now, increase power...”

Flames swirled within her.

She caught the beast’s fur and pulled it into a grapple while skidding to a stop. She planted her feet with such force she left deep marks in the ground, then slammed the heel of her palm into the creature’s head.

“Hiyaaaaa!”

“Gagyah!”

The beast let out what was clearly not a normal scream and staggered. It stood like that for a brief moment, but then it slowly leaned back and crashed to the ground hard enough to make the earth shudder.

“I-I...I did it!” Lushera’s chest heaved as she looked down at the monster’s body with a feeling of disbelief.

It had been injured when Kaphal snatched it to bring it here, meaning it was slower than usual, but that didn’t change the fact that Lushera won against one of the much-feared variants that thrived on Mount Kugus.

“Rrrrrr... Uwar...”

“Agh, no, stop, gah!”

Kaphal, who had been watching the fight, brought her face close and licked Lushera with greater vigor than ever before. It was so much that Lushera was actually concerned Kaphal might accidentally swallow her out of sheer, uncontrollable joy.

“Oh...my wounds are healed. Even humans say wounds heal if you lick them, but I guess it’s actually true for dragons,” said Lushera, noticing the pain receding from her body. Kaphal would use magic when Lushera was injured during training, but minor wounds could be healed just with her licking. It was likely because their bodies, as well as their bodily fluids, and even their aura, were all made up of densely packed energy.

“Uwar.”

“Time out!” Lushera rushed to try and stop Kaphal who had happily spread her wings and was about to take off. “I’m tired, can we just call it good for today? Take a break? Please?!”

Kaphal was clearly so overjoyed that she was about to go get Lushera’s next lesson, but she apparently understood Lushera’s attempt to stop her and folded up her wings.

Good... With how things were going, she’d get swept away and go get the most powerful monster on the mountain...

Lushera's wounds might be healed, but her mind was exhausted from the stress of being in a fight where one wrong snap decision could mean death. She wanted to stop there for the day.

Kaphal was bringing variants and making Lushera fight them much more often now, ever since the day Lushera fought the wind beasts over the eggshell. Kaphal would of course step in if Lushera was ever in danger during these training sessions, just like before, but she always made Lushera make the killing blow. It was like she was telling Lushera she needed to remember how to fight, how to kill.

That training did lead to Lushera's win today, but that did make her wonder about Kaphal's teaching methods from before. It was like she was telling Lushera it was fine so long as she could run away and hide. Well...that was just Lushera's vague impression, anyway.

Lushera let out a sigh of relief when she saw Kaphal was going to let the training stop there for the day, then she went to check on a tall oven by the side of the house. This was also something Kaphal had made when Lushera asked.

Thick white smoke rose from the oven and an odd scent tickled her nose as she went closer. There was a mound of wood burning inside.

"Ah, things are starting to look good after the fight! I just threw it all in there, but it's turning out!"

"Nn?"

"Haha, this'll improve the flavor, and make it keep longer. It's the knowledge of humanity!"

There was a joint of monster meat skewered on a thick stick and propped up in the oven. Or in this case, the smoker.

The kindling she was using for the fire came from the trees in the area, which she hit to break, then punched into small pieces. This wood, transformed by a dragon's power, had a pleasant and exotic aroma.

The smoke coming from the wood caressed the meat, turning it a vibrant brown that looked like polished wood.

“While I’m at it, might as well harvest these, huh?” she said, placing the smoked meat back in the smoker and checking what was spread out on the ground.

There were several furs on the ground, on top of which were pieces of fruit Lushera had picked then sliced up with her knife.

“Nice, they’re all dried out.”

The moisture was already gone from the fruit after spending several days out in the sun, leaving it wrinkled and pruned.

I was completely figuring things out as I went since I’d never dried fruit before, but...going through winter on just meat would be rough.

She picked up one of the pieces of fruit, which had shrunk more than she’d expected, and bit into it.

“Mm, not bad considering I’m winging it!”

It had an interesting texture, chewy and bouncy, and a thick, concentrated sweetness.

Lushera was working hard on making preserved goods. She was smoking the meat Kaphal brought and drying the bountiful fruit of the region. She was figuring it all out through trial and error, but it was turning out all right anyway.

Winter was on its way, and she needed to build up her food stores. She couldn’t have stored food in the open-air nest, but she could store it in the house Kaphal made for them.

If I just had to deal with the cold I could get by with magic or Kaphal’s help, but I really wish I had stuff that stored well, like flour or rice. Would’ve been nice to go to town and buy some. Selling these furs would buy me more bread than I could eat, after all.

She looked at the monster furs used as rugs, which seemed a bit of a waste, and calculated their value. They were from powerful variants, and top-class in terms of quality. She could probably sell them at a high rate to some rich collector, and they were also the best material for defensive adventuring equipment. One fur would buy her everything she needed for winter, if she

could only get to town. It could probably even buy her a house.

But Kaphal said she couldn't go. Lushera couldn't go down the mountain alone, and Kaphal couldn't go into civilization. There was nothing Lushera could do about it, she couldn't go, meaning she had to get whatever she needed on the mountain, if she could, and prepare for winter.

"I don't know how much Kaphal knows about human biology... She did try to make me eat raw meat in the beginning, which makes me a bit uneasy in that area..."

Dragons were incredibly powerful. Even if they lived only by their instincts, they could still trample over heaven and earth and rejoice in life. But Lushera was human. Lately, she might be becoming something a little bit removed from human, but she was still basically human. She would always need a certain amount of preparation to live in the harsh wilds alongside a dragon.

"Nn," said Kaphal, stretching her neck out and coming closer while Lushera fell into thought.

Air whooshed as she sniffed the dried fruit in Lushera's hand.

"Hm? You want to try some?"

"Nn."

"Uh... I feel like they're too small to fill a dragon up, but I guess there's no harm if you want to taste some. Here you go!" said Lushera, thinking that maybe dragons were the same as humans in that they sometimes just wanted to try something new.

Lushera scooped up so much dried fruit she could barely hold it in both hands and tossed it into Kaphal's mouth between her teeth. She chewed it for a moment then swallowed it down, bumped her head against Lushera with as much force as a headbutt. "Uwar! Rrrrr..."

"I-Is it that good?"

Compared to Kaphal's size, the amount Lushera fed her was the smallest of morsels, but Kaphal still nuzzled Lushera with a level of excitement she didn't often see, then licked Lushera with a hint of fruity smell lingering on her breath.

“Oh yeah, it’s like a present,” said Lushera, realizing while she was in a daze and being pushed down.

Of course she would be happy to receive a gift from the small creature she took care of like her own child. It may be a small gift, but Lushera worked hard on it.

“Huh... So, you’re happy?” She thought about how maybe this was paying back Kaphal, even if only slightly, for the debt she owed her for saving her life. “All right, how about we try this too?”

Lushera cut off a piece of the meat propped up in the oven and tasted it. The difference between the pale interior and the shiny exterior made her think of a glittering jewel. She bit into the meat, its rich flavor locked inside, and a smokey, woody taste spread through her mouth.

“Here, you try some too.”

“Krarrrrr...”

Lushera tossed a somewhat large chunk of chopped off meat and Kaphal caught it neatly in her mouth. She must not be used to eating smoked food because she chewed it with a funny expression on her face before swallowing it and rubbing her cheek against Lushera.

That reminded Lushera that, at some point, Kaphal wasn’t just giving her prey from Mount Kugus to Lushera, she was eating some herself too. Variants seemed to have more energy packed in them than other food of a similar size, making them filling food even for a dragon like Kaphal.

“Maybe I’ll smoke the monster I just beat later,” Lushera said. “I could clean its fur and turn it into a bed, maybe? Think I’d sleep well on that, it’s nice and fluffy.”

Kaphal had already brought Lushera more than twenty monsters for her lessons, and she’d brought even more once you counted the hunts she just brought for food. Each time she brought something, she skinned it and gave that to Lushera as a gift, meaning she had more pelts than she could possibly use. They were folded up and stacked in a corner of the house. Lushera would never freeze in winter if she bundled herself up in those.

Well...I think I'll manage, thought Lushera, looking up at the huge creature beside her and feeling optimistic. "Winter...is definitely coming," she murmured quietly.

It was deep into fall. At some point, the wind started to bring with it the faint scent of icicles hanging from eaves.

Kaphal was curled up inside the house, and Lushera sat leaning against her warm neck. Even there, she could hear the wood popping in the smoking oven. The warmth of time flowing peacefully spread through Lushera's back.

It's so quiet... I'm having a hard time accepting there are times when I don't have to do anything, but...I also feel like, with this kind of life, you could easily end up dead if you don't rest when you have time to.

She didn't really remember what her life was like before this, but she had the feeling it was very busy, like she was rushing about so much she didn't even have enough time to sleep.

That meant she wasn't very used to the idea of "resting," but she did get the sense that peaceful times like these were good.

"Nn," said Kaphal.

"Mm," replied Lushera as Kaphal moved her face closer.

Kaphal spent more time in the nest, unmoving. About half the reason for that was likely so that she could watch over Lushera, but Lushera also got the impression it was to avoid using more energy than she needed to. Even when perfectly still, a dragon's huge frame used far more energy than a human's body, and that difference was even more exaggerated when they were active.

A human could work to save up money, but all the food you got on the mountain was obtained then and there. Stocking up more than you needed just meant it would rot. That was likely why Kaphal avoided wasting the energy she had now, in order to use it efficiently when she was hungry.

At the edge of the room was a slightly raised area for storage and, on it, a row of pot-shaped stones that Kaphal made with magic. Lushera planned to store the dried fruit and smoked meat in those, but it wouldn't be enough for a dragon. It was obvious once you considered how much a dragon ate that Kaphal

would need to continue hunting through winter.

“Oh yeah. Kaphal, don’t move,” said Lushera.

“Nn?”

Looking at the storage area made Lushera remember, and she went over to pull out something she’d hidden between the pots. She’d picked out the hard shells of nuts, particularly colorful bits of monster fur, nicely shaped bones, and strung them together with matching monster fur.

It would be quite a long necklace for a human to wear, and had a sort of tribal, primitive style. Lushera took that, then climbed up on Kaphal’s head using the crags as hand and foot holds, where she hung her creation on Kaphal’s right horn. She wrapped it three times around the thicker base of the horn and tied it tight with a vine to keep it from coming off.

“I know anything I can give a dragon isn’t all that much, but...I imagine it’s hard for dragons to make something as small as this with their hands. What do you think? It’s not annoying, is it? Do dragons ever decorate their horns?”

Lushera believed that Kaphal was the peak of living beauty just by being a dragon. There was nothing lacking, there was nothing she needed. She didn’t need decorations or touch ups in any way. But that was sad in a way.

“I made this, planning for it to be my first present to you, but...I guess the food ended up being the first thing, huh?”

Kaphal seemed confused as she touched the decoration. She stroked it several times with the pad of her finger, as if seeing what it felt like, and then she bumped her snout into Lushera. “Rrrrrroooooow... Grarrr...”

“Ah, ah!”

“Grwar...”

“Haha, you seem happy! I’m glad. Just don’t break it.”

Lushera fell over onto the bed of furs, and Kaphal kept nuzzling her, then licking her.



EVERYTHING was white. Looking out on the surroundings was looking out over an unbroken sheet of winter. White, more white, silver, and even more white. And the wind stung with cold.

“Woah, it’s really piled up.”

Winter was here, and snow coated the region. The snow had fallen all through the night until it lay caked on the mountain, turning the sad, leafless trees into a silvery world of winter.

Their dome-shaped house looked like a real igloo at this point. Just one step outside and Lushera was walking in a thick blanket of snow.

“This can be training too...” Lushera said.

“Nn?”

“Dragons don’t care about snow at all, but humans have thin skin on their feet, so we normally get frostbite from it!”

Lushera took a deep breath and calmed herself. She’d been barefoot from her first day living here on the mountain. Since she’d become a little girl, too, her feet were small and looked quite tender and fragile. Even small rocks and sticks were an annoyance in the beginning, making just walking an ordeal. But she got used to it at some point. Now she had to get used to walking in snow, and she already knew how to do it.

Feel the mana circulating... No, that’s not right. It’ll be less strain if I envision a burning flame keeping my body temperature up.

She conjured an image of power flowing through her body, of Kaphal’s powerful fire breath rushing through her body.

And then she took a gentle step out.

“Yeah! This’ll do it!”

She did feel the cold when her foot plunged into the snow, but it wasn’t a stinging cold, there was no feeling that it would threaten her life.

She walked around what you could call the front yard of the house, leaving bare footprints in the snow. It was high enough to reach her ankles. She turned back and saw her footprints on the sheet of pure white, and felt an odd

cheerfulness bubble up inside her, making her want to do something a bit pointless.

“Nn? Nn?” said Kaphal as Lushera rolled a snowball around, growing it larger and larger. She poked her head out of the house to see what Lushera was doing.

“This is a human custom. I bet dragons would have a hard time making snowballs and rolling them around,” she said.

She stacked three large snowballs on top of each other to form the base of a snowman.

“Then do this, and a bit of this...”

She then took her knife and tried cutting off parts of the snow, carving it. The neck stretched up like a spire, with the tip a bit fatter and a rough approximation of horns and a big mouth. Lushera prioritized the overall shape of the body, then carved out a set of folded wings, feeling good about how much it looked like the real thing. Lastly, she piled up some snow to make a long, thin, whiplike structure.

“Look, it’s you, Kaphal!”

“Uwar!”

It was done, a small and a bit crude snow sculpture of Kaphal, about the same height as Lushera. Kaphal swung her head back and forth, carefully inspecting it from every angle.

“Hm?” said Lushera.

After a while, Kaphal slowly emerged from the house and thrust her hands into the snow in an area Lushera hadn’t touched.

“Woah!” cried Lushera as the snow exploded.

Or, that’s what she thought at first. Just like when Kaphal used magic to mound up stone and make their house, she was now using magic to manipulate the snow into a mound.

“Graaar. Urarar...”

Kaphal used her beefy claws to slice away at the snow while making a sound in her throat that was akin to a human humming. Her work was surprisingly delicate.

From that nearly ten-foot-tall mound of snow, the figure of a slender girl slowly emerged.

“Rar!”

“Oh... It’s a snow sculpture of me. Except it’s bigger than the Kaphal!”

There stood a girl made of snow, twice the size of the snow dragon, but with all the details down to the pelt she wore. The sculpting was fine and lifelike. It looked like dragon’s accurately saw things, whereas humans had a tendency to simplify what they saw. More impressive than that though was how a human couldn’t possibly match the dexterity of a dragon’s massive claws.

“Huh... I guess snow can be peaceful too...” said Lushera. She was perfectly fine even if she tumbled in the snow with only the light protection of a fur wrapped haphazardly around her.

She launched herself onto the snow and looked up to see tiny snowflakes still floating down here and there. She had a feeling that she had few good memories involving snow, but this? This was peaceful.

Lushera rolled around in the snow, for no real reason, and then Kaphal laid on her side and rolled in the same way. The area around their house was a bit small for a huge dragon to roll around in, meaning several poor trees ended up flattened in the process.

“Ha!” Lushera sat up while scooping as much snow into her hands as she could, then flung it at Kaphal.

Kaphal looked at Lushera, her eyes wide. Lushera immediately rubbed her face against Kaphal to show she wasn’t unhappy or trying to attack her.

When she did that, Kaphal swept her tail across the ground, creating a huge wave of snow as payback.

“Ack!”

The white haze swallowed Lushera up, sending her tumbling backwards, but

she managed to control her fall. She leapt back up and scooped more snow, quickly formed it into a ball, and launched it at Kaphal.

It hit her and shattered on the side of her face, while she was still laying on her side.

“Uwar?”

“Hehehe, this is what we call a snowball fight!”

Lushera packed together snowball after snowball and threw them at Kaphal. Kaphal stood and thrust her hands into the snow and what she pulled out was a snowball about five feet in diameter, probably pulled together from the surrounding snow using magic.

“Uwar!”

“I’m sorry, please stop! Time out! That’ll kill me! I’ll die! You don’t think this is training, do you?!”

Lushera pulled back, but Kaphal flung the huge snowball towards her with glee.

“Aaaagh!”

Wind howled as the snowball whipped through the air and took a tree out.



THE snow eventually came more fiercely. Mount Kugus received more precipitation as rain in summer than it did as snow in winter, but when it snowed, it really did snow.

“It’s a blizzard out there,” said Lushera, the wind and snow roaring. She had a good view of the white wind ravaging everything through the wide-open door of the house.

But it’s still warm in here.

Lushera was curled up in furs, leaning against Kaphal’s neck, staring absentmindedly out at the blizzard.

Even Kaphal didn’t want to make Lushera fight against monsters she brought up in this weather. The only thing that happened was that time crept on.

“Rar?”

“I’m okay. I’m not cold,” said Lushera, stroking Kaphal’s face as she looked at her with concern.

It was quiet there, and warm. Time flowed peacefully on.

The wind screamed in white.

Lushera’s memories as a human were wiped out when she was given a name as a dragon’s daughter, but she had the vague feeling she didn’t have any good memories of snow or snowy mountains.

They feel like...cold memories...

Snow, it was white. And that woman, she was white as well.

A voice from the past, *“An amateur can’t climb a mountain like this in a season like this. Are you trying to get yourself killed?”*

Long hair, oddly colored, mottled white and flaxen, dancing in the air. It wasn’t white hairs mixing in, it was like milk poured into coffee, white seeping into the strands.

Clothes, white clothes melting into the snow. White skin. And she was tall, taller even than XXXX. She seemed a bit older, too.

Even the blade of the sword in her hand was white, but stained with frightful red.

“You’re lucky. Normally the monsters’d get you before you died from the cold. Looks like luck was on your side when it had us meet. Don’t worry. I can guarantee you won’t die at least, might as well, since we’ve met now.”

That quiet voice, hard to tell if it was kind or severe, it—

“Huh...?” Lushera’s head snapped up. She’d dozed off at some point. “It was like...I was about to remember something...”

A rough fragment of memory. Her heart raced. That was the encounter that changed XXXX’s world. A powerful longing was burned into Lushera’s heart, bringing an unexplained sorrow...

“Rarrrr...?”

“It’s okay, it’s nothing,” said Lushera, letting out one big, uneasy breath, then she relaxed her muscles.

There was this feeling that she knew she had to get back. She had that feeling before she was picked up by Kaphal when she was on the verge of death. For some reason, that was something Lushera did remember.



AROUND that same time, a sad-sounding wind blew through the streets of Kugut’hulm, its trees bare.

On the main street a decent way away from the Guild was a brand new artsy-looking building with a sign that said McGregor Adventuring Support Services.

Gemmel was in that office. “...That’s insane.”

On one side of the big desk was Gemmel, a rather large man, glaring at the person on the other side, a young man in a suit. His hair was perfectly slicked back, his arms and legs crossed as he sat back in his leather chair. “You think that’s too expensive?” he asked.

The man in a suit remained unruffled by Gemmel’s rough glare, his displeased manner still in place.

“I already told you that’s four times what we used to pay when we had a manager!” Gemmel smacked the desk.

This company, McGregor Adventuring Support Services, opened recently in town and provided services ranging from handling paperwork to gathering information. In other words, they were managers for adventurers.

Apparently, they had to work hard in the beginning because this sort of work wasn’t common in this region, but they got approval to cooperate with the Guild and were finally starting to see requests coming in in dribs and drabs.

It would be a stretch to say they had a solid foundation, and yet they were still this full of themselves. They had this gaudy office on the main street, and their representative, this man, had a serious attitude. On top of it all, Gemmel came here to give them work and they gave him a price that was nothing short of robbery.

He didn't like any part of it.

Lately, he was always annoyed. Jobs never went how he expected, the party's funds did nothing but shrink, there were still almost no jobs requesting them specifically, they were basically living paycheck to paycheck on non-specified monster elimination requests. It was a far cry from their previous magnificent lifestyle.

The Guild recently issued Gemmel a warning for taking a bad attitude with the people who put in the requests, and they even banned him from taking certain jobs which really rubbed him the wrong way. He didn't see any reason to be all deferent to requesters who paid peanuts, but apparently the Guild thought otherwise.

The Seven-Sided Die was on the path from being a badly behaved party that got the job done, to just being a badly behaved party.

Gemmel wasn't actually thinking he needed a manager to resolve this situation. He just got even more annoyed by the fact that he had to do all the tedious little jobs when he was already frustrated, so annoyed he couldn't take it anymore. Even their home base (the rented house they'd probably have to leave soon to find a cheaper place) was a mess, and he wanted something done about it.

That's why he came in search of a manager, but the ones here were far too arrogant.

"You want us to evaluate jobs. You want us to find you direct clients. Basically, you want a top-class manager," said the man in a suit, Ivar McGregor, wagging his finger condescendingly at Gemmel. "And I asked for an appropriate amount to give you that. Sigh, the manager profession hasn't been fully established in this country yet, but that doesn't mean I can just cave to you. Go somewhere else if you want to haggle, we don't do cheap jobs. And you want your manager to clean for you? Are you dreaming? Get the hell out of my sight!"

Gemmel would've drawn his sword then if he'd brought it. It was a miracle he didn't send Ivar flying with a punch.

"You're damn full of yourself for a talentless lackey parasite that sucks money offa adventurers! Everything's gonna come crashing down on you with that

attitude! Like I'd even hire you as a cleaner!" roared Gemmel.

He intentionally slammed the door loudly as he left the office.



IVAR sighed once the uninvited guest left.

"You must be tired after that, sir," said a young employee sitting in the corner of the office, having watched the whole exchange with bated breath. They still looked shaken.

"You think something like that would tire me out? There'll always be people like that, thugs full of themselves because they have physical strength. Adventurers. But...it was Gemmel's party that one manager worked with, right?"

"Yes."

"Only spoke with him two or three times, but he seemed like the real deal. Pff, can't believe he sold his own work that cheaply. It makes people think we're not worth anything either."

Ivar was thinking of the manager Gemmel had employed previously. He believed Gemmel had such a low opinion of managers because that man was the only manager he'd ever known.

Adventuring managers played a minor role in most countries around the world, and this country was no different. That was the sort of place Ivar had brought the idea of adventuring managers into, but this other manager had been working in the industry in this town before even Ivar had established himself. He remembered speaking to the man a few times.

"Was he from Martgarz?" asked the younger employee.

"Thought so. Heard he got his adventuring qualification over there so he could be a manager. Even though Martgarz is huge, the Guild there's weak 'cause adventuring work is all overseen by the government. Which is why the country ended up with the manager profession, they handle what a Guild normally would..."

Feeling annoyed, Ivar used a knife to trim a cigar and continued, "People who

sell themselves short without knowing their own value are useless. At the end of it all. But, you know, timing was just bad for him. If this were a time where adventuring managers had rights, or...”

Ivar lifted a kindling pot—a small, pot-shaped magic item that set fire to anything put inside—and lit the tip of his cigar. He took a drag on the cigar, then breathed out the smoke.

“Dammit. Only the ones we’d actually miss die too soon. What the hell was his name?” asked Ivar.

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s weird... Forgetting like this, it’s not normal...” He made an itching gesture with his hand, since he couldn’t very well scratch his head and mess up his perfectly slicked back hair. Remembering names and faces was a part of his job he was particularly good at.

And yet, that name, he knew he’d said it before, but it was wiped entirely clean from his memory.

Chapter 4: Return of the Dragon's Child

THE Blue Flag was in a tight spot.

They were an adventuring party of four people. They'd lost one of their undershadow cloaks, a magic item that hid the wearer. They only had three left.

They'd also burnt through all their magic stones they used to power the cloaks. They only had enough for one person to use their cloak to make it back down to the mountain's base.

They were about three quarters of the way up Mount Kugus, an area teeming with monsters. In other words, things were bad, and they couldn't do anything about it.

"How's the compass?"

"Still no good. It's spinning like crazy."

"This is why I said we shouldn't use a compass that operates off mana!"

"Theoretically it should have been fine, even on Mount Kugus. You all agreed in the beginning when I said that! And it's an expensive compass, it shouldn't go wild like this!"

Winter was over. Even the most stubborn mounds of snow had melted, and life filled the mountain.

The adventurers were hiding in a thicket, checking the last of their equipment.

"Be quiet. We die if a monster hears us."

"...And if the dragon hears us?"

"We die horribly," said the leader of the Blue Flag with a cold analysis of the situation. Her name was Emerald. She wore a white robe and white pointed hat, the standard style for a white witch.

"I really think we should take the risk and fire off a signal," said the middle-

aged, bearded man as he pulled the launching tube for the signal flare out of his bag. He was Bram, a rogue.

“If we do that, the dragon will definitely find us before anyone else does.”

“A-A-And people might not notice the signal...”

“If we’re going to do it, we should do it at night when the dragon’s more likely to be asleep. And the light will be more visible from a distance, too.”

“Are we...even going to survive until nightfall?”

“And even if someone does notice our signal, is anyone really going to climb up Mount Kugus to save us?” said the dwarf in armor resembling a mass of stone. He was Gadon.

There was also Rufus in colorful armor that looked like something you might see on stage. He was a bard, more skilled with song than sword. He normally didn’t take things seriously enough, but even he sobered up when they found themselves in a tight spot where their lives were on the line.

This is bad. Everyone’s letting their emotions get the better of them. At this rate, the next monster we meet is going to be our last, thought Emerald, sensing their destruction approaching.

Every member of the Blue Flag was a Rank Four Adventurer, which meant they were seasoned adventurers who could be trusted with any regular job. They’d seen one or two life-or-death situations on their road to rank four, but what applied to a normal situation was no longer relevant once you stepped into monster territory. They were flustered now, already broken before their next fight. It was only a matter of time before they died.

Luckily for them though, their bad luck hadn’t yet run out.

“Who’s there?!” demanded a voice.

“Eeek! Help me! I don’t taste nice!” shrieked Rufus. The adventurers readied themselves for a fight, though fear left them nearly unable to stand.

And what they saw wasn’t a mountain monster. It was a girl, about ten years old and wearing some sort of pelt.

“A...little girl?”

“Wh-Why is there a little girl here...?”

Her red, flame-like hair fell to below her waist, looking almost like some sort of mane. She was wearing fur, cut into two pieces, one wrapped around her top and fastened in place with a belt, the other worn like a skirt on her lower half.

She was slender and pale, but nothing about her felt weak. Her white skin actually brought to mind polished steel. Neither her arms nor legs were covered despite being in the mountains, and she was barefoot as well. But it was odd, there were no scrapes or scratches to be seen anywhere.

Her features were cute and innocent, but there was something odd about her shining brown eyes. The pupils were like a cat's in the sun. Emerald remained on guard, especially considering their situation meant this couldn't be just a normal girl.

The thing she wondered the most about was the aura the girl exuded.

The mountain was so filled with the dragon aura that it was hard to sense things around them, which was why they didn't notice this girl until she was already close to them, but...she emitted so much power it stirred up the dragon aura, and even made Emerald feel sick, like when she got motion sickness in a carriage.

“Adventurers?” asked the mysterious girl, looking at them in surprise. But that expression lasted only a moment before turning into something more severe. “This mountain is dangerous! I don't know what Kaphal would do to you if she found you! You need to get down the mountain immediately!”

“Kaphal?”

“...The red dragon that lives here. She's the queen of the mountain,” the girl explained.

The members of the Blue Flag exchanged glances.

A dragon lived on Mount Kugus. They already knew that before coming here, so they weren't surprised to hear as much at this point. Just, who was this little girl? How did she come to know a dragon's name? That wasn't a name people would normally hear.

“Who are you?” asked Emerald.

“I’m...” The odd girl paused, struggling for words. “I’m Lushera. The mountain queen’s adopted daughter.”

“Daughter...of a dragon?”

The four adventurers were dumbstruck, having too hard a time understanding. This girl, Lushera, may have answered the question frankly, but it only explained a fraction of the mystery surrounding her.

“This doesn’t happen often, but Kaphal’s away from the mountain hunting,” said Lushera. “But I don’t know what she’ll do to intruders when she comes back. I don’t know why you came to the mountain, but you should leave while you still can.”

“We want to...but we’re lost,” said Gadon.

“Ah. I thought that might be the case.” Lushera shook her head in exasperation. Then turned away from the adventurers and started walking. “Follow me. I’ll lead you part of the way.”



LUSHERA descended the mountain, guiding the four adventurers. This was her first time coming this low since Kaphal had taken her in, but she had a general grasp of the lay of the land since she always looked down on it from above.

The easiest place to find was where the river flowed—all they had to do was walk along that. A normal person would have to find other routes around cliffs and such, which might cause them to lose the river, but the people she was helping were adventurers. They had no problems traveling the route once they knew it.

“I thought entry to the mountain was forbidden,” said Lushera.

“Only the area close to the dragon’s nest is forbidden right now,” said the woman in white. “Everything else is fine. This is a recent change, though.”

“Hm. I guess there’s nothing wrong with that as long as people know there’s a dragon living here before they come.” Lushera swung her knife haphazardly,

cutting branches away to clear the bare minimum of a path for the adventurers behind her.

She'd been certain Mount Kugus was a dangerous region filled with monsters, completely off limits to adventurers, but it seemed that restriction was lifted recently. And then, as you might've expected, the adventurers that came in found themselves stuck in a terrible situation.

"Hey there, Missy, so, who are you? I know you said you're the dragon's adopted daughter, but..." asked the slender man wearing equipment that looked like the sort a bard would use. He looked like he couldn't keep his curiosity in check.

Bards who worked as adventurers were users of a kind of magic—melody magic—that used specialized bardic songs to support their allies. They often gathered and recited stories like a regular minstrel as well (particularly ones that exaggerated the exploits of their own party). His curiosity might be a side effect of his profession.

"It means exactly what it sounds like. I nearly died on the mountain, and she took me in," said Lushera.

"Why would a dragon do that?"

Lushera stopped in her tracks. That was a question she'd had as well, though she'd put it aside for now. "...I don't know," she said. "Maybe she just felt like it. Maybe there's more to it."

It was the summer of last year that Lushera nearly died on Mount Kugus and Kaphal picked her up. It wouldn't be much longer before they'd lived together for a year.

Lushera trusted completely in Kaphal at this point. That trust was primarily because she was certain Kaphal would protect her, in more than one sense, but it didn't mean she knew everything Kaphal was thinking. Humans and dragons likely thought differently, and they couldn't even talk with each other, after all.

Why did Kaphal take her in? Even she couldn't say she understood.

"But that's—" started Rufus, still pushing.

“Quiet. We shouldn’t be talking more than we have to,” said Lushera sharply, cutting him off.

Kaphal might be out, but her aura still blanketed the mountain making it difficult to sense others nearby. Even with that, though, there were things you could pick out. The whisper of grass, the rustle of the trees, the insect and bird cries, were different from normal.

“...What’s that?” asked one of the adventurers. They’d finally heard it as well. The brush being disturbed, the sound of earth beneath feet, twigs snapping, coming closer, growing louder.

“Groaaaaar!”

A powerful roar echoed across the mountain. It appeared, a huge bear with gray fur swiping aside the budding foliage. It was so big it would reach nearly ten feet tall if it stood on its hind legs. Its eyes blazed fiercely as its hard teeth and claws glinted with the sharpness of blades.

There were gashes on its face and belly, fresh blood staining its fur, but it didn’t seem weakened in the slightest.

The adventurers stepped back as they drew their weapons.

“Those wounds! I-It’s the same one from before!”

“It attacked us! We had to run, that’s how we got lost and used up all our mana stones and items!”

Unlike the frightened, retreating adventurers, Lushera took a step forward and said, “Go back to your den. There’s enough meat around here for you to eat tomorrow. I don’t have to kill you.”

“Groaaaaar! Graaah!”

“Tsk...” She clicked her tongue. “You’re wounded and rampaging. You’re not going to behave until you die, are you?”

A beast became more desperate as it was wounded. Lushera also knew that these bear monsters in particular became more violent the more injured they were, cutting short their own life as they pulled on their deepest wells of strength. Once in an aggravated state like this, it would attack anything that

moved, without discrimination.

Lushera only had one means of stopping that.

The bear monster swung its burly forelegs up, its jaw gaping as it turned every vicious weapon at its disposal towards Lushera's small body.

And it was fast, faster than expected for something that large.

"Watch—!"

But Lushera stepped past its attack, leapt to its shoulders, and attacked. That one kick was enough to tear its head from its neck, sending it flying.

"...Out?"

The head fell to the ground and rolled. The body slowly leaned, then crashed to the ground with a thud.

"Well...I guess that actually works in our favor. Leaving bait here means we won't run into other monsters for a while," said Lushera, looking down at the body. She turned back to the adventurers to see them frozen, looks of shock plastered on their faces. "What's wrong?"

"O-One hit..."

"That wasn't even one of the stronger monsters on the mountain," Lushera stated.

There were a lot of variants on Mount Kugus as the monsters absorbed the dragon's power and underwent abnormal mutations, but there were also normal monsters there. The bear monster she just defeated was one of those normal monsters, and not much to worry about once you considered the average level of what lived on the mountain.

"Th-That might be the case, but that was a berserker bear! Estimated threat level of five, meaning you'd want a party of Rank Five Adventurers to take it down!"

"There's four of us and we couldn't do anything but run..."

"Oh, so that was a berserker bear?" said Lushera, cocking her head.

"What?"

“Well, it’s just...” said Lushera. She felt like she’d done something wrong with how overly shocked the adventurers seemed.

Lushera did remember something about berserker bears, either something she heard or read in a monster compendium, and the characteristics she remembered from that did match this bear monster she’d just killed. It’s just that berserker bears were supposed to be these terrifyingly powerful monsters. She never imagined the weak bears here could possibly be the same thing. Apparently, her standards had gone quite out of whack after her training on only variants.

“So, why’d you decide to come up Mount Kugus if you can’t even beat a normal monster, let alone a variant?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“W-We weren’t planning on fighting! Look!” said the bard. He pulled out a cloak with a faint rainbow glitter and wrapped it around himself, where he disappeared into thin air like smoke.

“Woah!” cried Lushera.

Then the bard took the cloak back off and reappeared.

“That’s incredible,” said Lushera. “That’s a pretty rare item, isn’t it?”

“The request was just to wear these, sneak up the mountain, and gather medicinal herbs,” he explained.

“I remember now, Rufus. You went on about how they’re lending every member of the party one of these cloaks and we’ll make a fortune doing it...” griped the dwarf.

“And it was going great until you farted right in front of that thing!”

“I told you, it’s a biological function, I can’t control it!”

“Quiet,” cut in the white witch, reprimanding the dwarf warrior and bard as they started bickering.

The warrior had shreds of rainbow fabric still around his neck. Seeing that was when it all made sense to Lushera. They cleverly used those to sneak deep into the mountain and found themselves in trouble once they lost one.

“Do you have an item you were going to use for storing what you found?”

asked Lushera.

“I do...” said the white witch, holding out a large satchel. It was a magic item connected to a pocket dimension that could hold more than it looked like it could. With these sorts of items though, the price skyrocketed without limit based on the capacity. Considering who was carrying it, Lushera guessed this one could probably hold about three times its external appearance might imply.

“All right, here you go,” she said as she pulled off the bear’s limbs and gave them to the white witch. “Take them as a treat, if you want. These bears’ paws are delicious.”

“Th-Thanks.”

“Make sure you close them in the bag properly. There’re some monsters who might chase after you if the scent of blood gets out.”

The woman drew back a little but took the limbs and placed them in the bag.



LUSHERA left the adventurers when they’d made it a little more than halfway down the mountain. She decided that was the furthest point she could still get back to the nest before sunset. A lot of variants were only active at night, and they were often powerful. Kaphal was always in the nest at night, and she never let Lushera out of the nest after dark with how powerful they were.

It was still too dangerous for Lushera to walk around at night, even after she had become stronger. She didn’t know what would happen to the adventurers if they didn’t make it back in time, but...well, that wasn’t her responsibility.

“You’ll get to town if you just follow the river down. I can’t say it’ll be safe from here on out, but it should be a little safer after what happened earlier. With luck,” she said.

“Thank you, you saved us. We won’t be the adventurers who died because of a fart,” said the dwarf as he shook her hand in his large, boulder-like hand.

“I wish we could do something for you as a thank you...” said the white witch.

“A thank you? Well...I can still use my knife, I don’t need any equipment for the mountain, and food is— Oh!” said Lushera as she thought of what she

should ask of people, having not seen any in such a long time. It wasn't food she should look for, it was information. "Have you heard anything this past year about...someone who's waiting for someone who went missing on Mount Kugus?" she asked quietly.

Her heart beat with a cold thud. The four adventurers thought, and then answered.

"...Don't think I have."

"This past year? Hmm..."

They all looked a bit confused, coming up with nothing as they scoured the depths of their memory.

Lushera was a little relieved. That slightly reduced the possibility that someone was in agony as they waited for her return, or at least she wanted to believe it was less likely.

"Thank you," she said. "Okay, be careful."

"No, thank you."

"We owe you a debt. I hope we meet again, though I'm not sure we will."

"It'd be a bit hard for you to come visit, wouldn't it?" said Lushera as she waved and left the adventurers while praying for their safe return.



LUSHERA made it back to the nest before nightfall, and not long after, Kaphal's outline appeared in the darkening sky.

"Welcome back, Kaphal."

She landed with a huge beat of her wings, her expression quickly changing as she suddenly started sniffing around Lushera.

"Grar... Rarrrrr..."

Her huge head moved back and forth and side to side with such force she nearly slammed into Lushera.

"Grrrrr..."

Lushera felt anger coming from Kaphal, anger towards some hated enemy, as well as annoyance at herself for her carelessness. She seemed to have noticed that Lushera met with other humans. It also looked like intruders on the mountain weren't something she could let slide easily.

"Oh, um, I met some people...but it's okay. They didn't do anything to me, and I don't think they were destroying the mountain or anything," said Lushera, flapping her arms about and trying to make her case.

Those adventurers were harmless, they were put in danger and forced to run about by just one measly monster. None of what Kaphal was worried about happened. Or so Lushera thought, anyway.

Kaphal was still as she watched Lushera, but, after long last, she held her hands over the ground. Glowing mana gathered in her loosely cupped hands, but then it stopped.

In Kaphal's hands stood a woman, shimmering like a heat mirage.

"Who are you?!" asked Lushera, but she quickly realized the woman wasn't a living being. She was a mass of mana so great she might just burst and, if you ignored her size, she gave off the same aura Kaphal did.

There was something about her though, something hard to put in words... It was like she had no outline, no clear silhouette, kind of like if someone took scorching sands and temporarily packed them into the shape of a human.

She had an uncanny beauty, and looked like a human woman in her thirties. Her hair was long and thick, and flaming red just like Lushera's. Her bright red dress was reminiscent of flickering flames but made of some unidentifiable material.

Her skin was the same white as Kaphal's horns, her body was slender, not a single imperfection in her form. Amongst her dignified features, her clear brown eyes left the most powerful impression, their pupils' slit like a cat in a bright place.

The overall impression was, in short, what Lushera might look like as an adult.



“Is this an illusion you made with magic?” asked Lushera.

There were a variety of spells that created illusions. Some manipulated light to make a form for its illusion, while others interfered with what the target perceived in order to make them see something that wasn’t really there.

Lushera didn’t know what principle Kaphal used, but she had obviously used some spell to create an illusion.

It was while Lushera was contemplating this that the woman spoke.

“Lushera.”

“You can speak?!”

The illusion’s voice was gentle and kind as she said Lushera’s name, like a softly burning campfire.

“Human came?” she asked.

“W-Wait, wait, that can wait. You can speak like a *human*?!”

This unexpected turn of events threw Lushera for a loop, and both the red illusion and the giant red dragon smiled. “Surprised. Haha! Lushera surprised!” said the woman like she’d pulled a fast one on Lushera.



AFTER talking for about twenty minutes and piecing together what the woman said in faltering human language, Lushera learned that Kaphal had gone to visit a dragon she knew.

“Which means you weren’t out hunting. You went to learn how to cast this spell from another dragon...” said Lushera.

It was said dragons could turn into humans. Kaphal had gone to learn that, but even though she was a dragon, it wasn’t the kind of magic you could learn in one day, meaning Kaphal couldn’t turn into a human just yet. All she could do was form an illusory other self which she controlled like a puppet.

“Magic make Kaphal human. Now, only make fake body. Kaphal no go in yet.”

“So that’s how it works.”

“Kaphal speak human language. Need speak. Lushera no understand dragon language.”

Lushera was sitting while leaning against the dragon Kaphal as she talked with the human illusion of Kaphal. It was a weird feeling, like Kaphal had been split in two. Actually, it was just weird enough *speaking* with Kaphal.

Up until this point they’d communicated through tone of voice, gestures, even drawings, and it was plenty... Or rather, they’d made do with that. If Lushera were being honest though, being able to speak with each other was obviously much better.

“Useful. Now. Lushera, what happened?” asked Kaphal.

Dragon facial expressions were difficult for a human to read, but Lushera could easily understand Kaphal’s expressions now that she had a human form. It was blatant worry, a mother concerned for her own child.

“Some adventurers came. They came to find healing herbs. They were lost, so I showed them the way down,” answered Lushera, trying to say it with simple words and sentences.

“Lushera okay? Safe? No hurt?” Kaphal patted Lushera all over with her human hands. It was an odd sensation, like being touched by a cloud.

I thought she wouldn’t like adventurers coming into the mountain, but she was just worried about me? I thought she’d ask me why I let them go alive...

That amount of concern seemed overprotective. It was a bit embarrassing.

“I’m okay. The adventurers were really weak. They couldn’t even beat a normal monster; they’d never be able to beat a variant.”

“Oh. Good.” Kaphal let out a relieved sigh. Her human form moved and pulled Lushera into a hug. Lushera felt like she couldn’t lean into the gesture, it was like being hugged by a stuffed animal.

“You’ve been studying human language too?” asked Lushera.

“Little. And listen Lushera’s words, remember.”

Kaphal said that so casually it surprised Lushera, and made her feel a little bad.

I don't understand Draconic at all. I haven't even tried learning it...

Draconic was a difficult language to decipher. Lushera had already given up on learning it once she decided there was no way she could without any hints on how to. Kaphal on the other hand had spent this time working hard to learn Lushera's language, which made Lushera feel bad because it was like she forced Kaphal to do her own share of the work.

"What wrong?" asked Kaphal.

"Nothing. Just...thank you for learning human language." Lushera decided just to thank Kaphal because telling her what she was really feeling wouldn't accomplish anything. It was all for Lushera that Kaphal went to the lengths of learning human speech and finding a method for actually using it.

"Kaphal, can I ask about the time when I came to the mountain? Why can't I remember...?" asked Lushera since she actually had this rare opportunity to.

Kaphal looked down. "It very hard. Kaphal...no good...human language. Make mistake, maybe, so, no can say."

"Oh."

"Wait little. Kaphal get better." Maybe it was complicated. Maybe there was something she needed to tell Lushera, meaning she didn't want to talk about it with broken communication like this. "Human language, no convenient. Hard say all. Need good human language."

"Yeah..."

As if to express herself without words, Kaphal's human form hugged Lushera with heart-rending love, and her dragon form wrapped her neck around them.

Lushera knew that Kaphal cared deeply for her, but in some ways, that just wasn't quite enough.



SOMETIMES the world crumbles easily around you, sometimes a chill wind bites even when you're in a warm bed.

"Intruders again? And while Kaphal's out again..." said Lushera, as she one day discovered adventurers entering the area she traveled through.

The Blue Flag, the party from before, said it was still against the rules to enter the area closest to the dragon's nest, but it sounded like the exact boundary line was a bit vague. It was hard enough to enter the area for investigations with how dangerous it was, making it difficult to get a full grasp of what was going on there, and possibly also making it difficult to define exactly where the boundary should be.

And yet Lushera couldn't help thinking how sloppy these adventurers were considering they built a fire, a smoking one at that, that was in plain view from the nest.

"Really, now? Powerful monsters are often smart. It's almost like you're asking to be found..." she sighed.

She ran down the slope, slipping between trees until she came out by the fire.

No one was there.

What? This fire isn't for cooking? A signal fire then?

There was a small bonfire set up in the clearing, smoke puffing vigorously from it. Looking more closely, Lushera realized this amount of smoke couldn't possibly be produced just by burning some sticks, making her think they'd added herbs of some sort to create a signal fire. But a signal fire for what?

"Are you Lushera?" came a voice.

"Ah!"

Suddenly there was a man standing by the fire, his form translucent and pale like a ghost. But this wasn't a spirit who'd gotten the wrong time for their haunting. There was a small box-like object with a glass lens fixed to it hidden among the grass, and it looked like the ghostly figure of the man was being projected from it.

"An illusion spell? No, a magic item?" asked Lushera.

The man had on armor that made Lushera think of a mountain range forged from steel. He was likely an adventurer.

"Sorry for inviting you to meet like this, but I wanted to talk to you, no matter what I needed to do," he said.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Timm. I’m the leader of an adventuring party known as the Golden Helm. I’m also a mentor for the party you helped out the other day, or maybe...more of a friend.”

The voice she heard seemed sent from a separate location but lined up with the pale illusion as it spoke. He was using magic items to remotely send his image and voice. It’s quite possible he prepared this method of long-distance communication because it would be dangerous to set a signal fire and wait there if something came that wasn’t Lushera.

“The adventuring party I helped... The Blue Flag?” asked Lushera.

“That’s them. I came to return the favor as a show of thanks. I’m not sure if you’ll consider this a favor though, but I did come to give you important information.” He raised the face guard on his helmet, revealing a grim expression. His frown lines deepened even further, his gallant brows furrowed. “Danger comes for the queen of the mountain. If you, as her adopted daughter, really do care for her, then listen calmly to what I have to say.”



THE Golden Helm was a three-member adventuring party. Their leader was a fighter, Timm. He wore full plate armor as imposing as the mountains and gleaming with a bluish sheen, and carried on his back a sword with a rectangular blade so big a giant might wield it. For some reason, his helmet was gilded, but nothing else.

The second member was a rogue, Weyne. He wore a suit, a mask over his eyes, a black top hat, and a black cloak. It was the sort of “phantom thief” attire that didn’t seem to suit hiking through the mountains and, despite what he was wearing, the impression he gave was less refined and more flippant or light-hearted.

The only lady in the party was the magic user, Viola. She had on a pair of glasses that almost looked like they were made from the cut off bottoms of glass bottles and a robe that you could cook up if you boiled bad fashion down with sugar into a jam. Over that she wore a deep purple cloak that had the faintest hints of witchy style. There were several instruments and tools of some

unknown purpose hanging from the belt around her waist.

Timm stamped out the signal fire and brought Lushera over to a crevice in the rocks they were hiding in, where they did introductions, then he got to the reason he came.

“Do you know this mountain is on the border of two countries?” he asked.

“Uh...” Lushera pulled up a map in her mind. *Yeah, my knowledge hasn't disappeared, not like my memories of events.*

Lushera lost almost all her memories about events that had happened in her past or people she met when Kaphal gave her her name. Anything that wasn't a personal event though, what you could generally call, “knowledge,” was largely intact, however.

“There's Martgarz in the north, and Setrayu in the south,” said Lushera.

“So, you do know?”

“I wasn't born on the mountain. I know some things about the world outside it.”

Timm nodded and his expression grew even darker. “Well then, did you know that Martgarz is planning to eliminate the red dragon, who you call Kaphal, so they can travel over the mountain and attack Setrayu?”

It took Lushera a second to process that revelation. It felt like time had stopped and that moment stretched on into infinity, her odd but peaceful life shaken.

“I didn't...”

“It's only come up recently.”

Martgarz had been at war with the Guffarr Union to the east for a long time. Setrayu to the south was an ally of the Union, providing support and acting as a lifeline for them. They weren't directly involved with the war, more like a third party simply allowing goods and people to traverse their territory, but the war had fallen into a stalemate simply because Setrayu was there.

Setrayu remained an annoyance to Martgarz, one they could immediately wipe out considering the difference in their military forces. They were even

located next to each other, on a map. It was Mount Kugus and the monsters that roamed there that kept them from attacking Setrayu.

“Why is this happening now all of a sudden?” asked Lushera.

It was a simple question, but Timm’s expression, severe at the best of times, hardened even further, like he’d found a living maggot in his lunch. “I wanted to ask you ’bout that. Anything happen in the mountains?”

“Huh?”

“There’re usually powerful variants in the area where a dragon lives. They eat the dragon’s fallen off scales, claws, even droppings, or absorb the dragon’s aura, making them mutate into powerful monsters. Nobody could travel over the mountain ’cause of all the variants on it. A small group could maybe sneak in, but an army would meet a bad end if they tried.”

And then it all made sense to Lushera.

“There aren’t as many of them...” she said quietly.

The gears fit together. Or actually, it was more like someone had loosened a screw on gears that already fit, and now they were falling off one by one.

She understood.

“Kaphal hunted them, to feed them to me!” she murmured, both taken aback and sad.

“Ah! Timm, if you don’t mind me taking over,” said the woman.

“Uh, sure.”

The magic user stepped forward, taking a notepad and pencil out for some purpose as she did. “It is normal for dragons living alone to decrease their range of activity while rearing their offspring,” she said. “This is of course to protect their children. This behavior becomes even more pronounced the more children they have, or the weaker those children are. In even more uncommon instances, there are times when the dragon will hunt variants nearby if they have an extraordinarily weak child and feed said variants to the offspring.”

It kept coming, like having an entire textbook thrown into your brain. Her explanation gushed forth like a waterfall.

“There are three primary reasons for this!” she continued in a chipper tone. “First, the ideal feed for weak offspring is a variant, a monster that has absorbed the dragon’s own power. Second, the variants will try to consume the offspring in order to obtain even greater strength! Meaning, in short, hunting them will reduce the overall threat to the offspring by reducing the number of variants nearby. Third, the dragon simply cannot leave the nest for long periods for hunting. If the mother dragon has significant difficulty traveling a distance in order to feed herself, she may also feed on variants.

“While these all may seem like rather sensible reasons, reducing variant numbers will actually backfire on the dragon in the long run, as variants serve as a useful barrier between the dragon and the outside.”

There was a reason for it all. A reason why Lushera got so much stronger so quickly. Even a reason why she could live such a happy life with Kaphal. How much had Kaphal sacrificed for that peace? The more Lushera learned, the stronger this feeling was in her gut, a feeling that seemed something like determination.

“In reality, the red dragon of Mount Kugus didn’t hunt on her mountain, she traveled far afield to hunt and then returned, except she had recently begun staying on the mountain. The Guild obtained information that supported the theory that the dragon was with egg, and I had even considered the possibility that a weak hatchling had been born and she was acting to protect it.”

“Lately...she started going far away...” said Lushera.

“That is likely because the threat to the offspring has decreased along with the reduction in the number of the variants. Though, when I refer to offspring here, I am of course referring to you.”

An additional reason for the fact that Kaphal was going further afield, for the fact that she *could* go further afield, was because Lushera had become sufficiently strong after feeding on the variants.

Even Lushera had been able to walk further from the nest lately. She’d assumed she wasn’t running into variants because she became used to the mountain and was skillfully sneaking through the terrain. When she did run into monsters and fight them, it was essentially only weak ones, which she chalked

up to luck.

She was wrong. There was a better explanation for why Kaphal let her walk around.

“You’re such a monster maniac,” said Timm.

“Heehee, thank you!” said Viola.

“That wasn’t a compliment. You need to think about how the person listening to you feels.”

“Huh?”

Timm jabbed Viola to silence her.

“And, the reason why adventurers are allowed on the mountain now, is that the same?” asked Lushera.

“The Setrayu Adventurers Guild reduced the mountains’ danger level and lifted the ban in response to the fact there are fewer variants here now. Might be easier for you to understand this way: they made it so adventurers can go up the mountain without a special reason, and we’re allowed to accept exploration and gathering requests here now as well.

“Good medicinal herbs grow on the mountain ’cause of the dragon’s aura, and you can make a lot of money if you can take down a variant and sell its parts off. It’s been a good deal for us adventurers,” said Timm with a wry smile. “Our party actually took out three variants that wandered down to the foothills. We were happy about the good money that brought in, but we can’t even do that now. Martgarz is on the move.”



KAPHAL’S nest was seeing a first. There were three uninvited guests.

“Grrrrrrr...”

“Kaphal, please listen! These people are not dangerous!” said Lushera, putting herself between her and them, desperately trying to get her to listen though her eyes were locked on the adventurers, and she hadn’t stopped growling as if she might attack at any moment.

“Great mountain queen! I bring news which I wish to speak with you about! Please listen, there is a threat approaching!” said Timm in a raised voice, but Kaphal’s fangs remained bared.

Lushera decided that was primarily because Kaphal just didn’t understand.

“I’m sorry, Kaphal isn’t good with human language. I think she heard it for the first time when she took me in. She only recently became able to speak at all,” explained Lushera.

“How fascinating,” said Viola. “Dragons living in flights often teach their young human languages with the assumption they will be either fighting humans or negotiating with them at times, but it seems not at all unnatural that a dragon living alone wouldn’t know the language.”

“Give it a rest for now,” said Weyne, jabbing Viola with his elbow because her glasses were gleaming with excitement despite the situation as she observed Kaphal, and he couldn’t stand by and let her.

Kaphal and Timm stared at each other, frozen.

Any normal person’s courage might fail them if they found themselves being stared down by a dragon, with the worst cases leading to outright death when they were overwhelmed by the dragon’s aura. Timm, though, was the height of poise, taking not even a step back.

“Lushera, could’ya do me a favor?” he asked. “Take the sword from my back and toss it away over there.”

“What? Uh, okay.” Lushera took the massive, rectangular, single-edged sword from Timm’s back—it was so huge she honestly didn’t even know how he swung it—and threw it outside the nest. It spun through the air and chopped down the first tree it encountered before burying itself in the second.

Timm remained unmoving, even after losing his weapon. Kaphal moved first.

Light gathered in front of Timm, and a human form came together out of flame-like shadows.

“Oooh! Rather than transforming herself, we see here the step leading up to that, a puppet illusion! We’ve known this exists but have had no opportunity to

witness it!” exclaimed Viola.

“I told you to give it a rest!” barked Weyne as he grappled her and clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Why humans come here?” asked Kaphal, her expression fierce and her caution apparent, even though she had decided to listen.

Lushera made eye contact with Timm, then stepped forward to speak instead of him. “Kaphal, the country in the north... Do you understand ‘north’? There’s a human country to the north?”

“Yes. Very big country.”

“That country is going to try and kill you, Kaphal! These people came to tell us!”

According to Timm, Martgarz sent notices to both the Guild in Martgarz and the one in Setrayu to reiterate their claim over Mount Kugus. If you interpreted that international political language for someone normal, you would essentially say the Guild was told to treat the mountains as contested territory.

The Adventurers Guild couldn’t generally wade into politically charged situations, as they were supposed to be politically neutral. They chased out the adventurers who were after the mountains’ riches, shut down any avenue Setrayu’s Guild had for investigating the situation, and, well, what might follow that?

The groundwork was already in place. It was only a matter of time.

“Can trust humans?” Kaphal asked Lushera.

In all honesty, Lushera had only heard about the situation from Timm. There was always the possibility he was lying for some purpose or other. Timm did seem like an honest man, but Lushera couldn’t make promises based on her general impressions of him.

“I am telling you the truth. I swear it on my life and my honor.” But Timm still remained unmoved, even without his weapon.

“Kaphal,” said Lushera, “I want to go down the mountain. I have to find out if what he’s saying is true. If it is...I have to find a way to stop it.”

“How stop?”

“I have an idea,” said Timm with a hint of anxiety in his tone, the first sign of unease this whole time. “Setrayu also wants to stop Martgarz. We would gladly ally ourselves with the red dragon of Mount Kugus.”

“I think she might understand better if you say it in a simpler way...” said Lushera.

“R-Right. In short, you work with the king of Setrayu and fight.”

Kaphal looked uncertain. It seemed she understood that. She looked at Lushera as if to ask if this was all really okay. “I know,” said Lushera. “It’s okay. It depends on what the king thinks.”

Lushera had a feeling she knew how terrifying and despicable men of power could be. She also knew the danger of trusting a country, joining forces with them, and, most of all, fighting for them. They couldn’t start anything if she didn’t first leave the mountain and figure out what was going on. They couldn’t even think about if they should work with this country, if they should fight with them.

“Right now, I have to go down to the city and get information,” said Lushera.

“Kaphal go too,” said Kaphal without missing a beat.

“I...had a feeling you’d say that.”

This wasn’t so she could confirm the situation with her own eyes and ears. It was because she was worried about Lushera going to town on her own. Yes, even at a time like this, she was more concerned for Lushera than herself.

Kaphal, did you know this would happen when you fed me the variants that protected you? You put me before your own safety. I never realized you thought about my needs that much!

When Lushera thought about it, she remembered Kaphal had only fed her the bare minimum of variants in the beginning. She was still thinking about protecting herself back then. That changed at some point though. Somewhere along the way, she decided to abandon everything for herself and focus entirely on raising Lushera.

Did Lushera feel regret? Not quite. Mostly she felt irritated at herself for not realizing how much Kaphal cared for her.



EVEN now, Lushera had barely spent any time away from the nest. The furthest she'd ever gone was when she was showing the Blue Flag the way. Going down with the Golden Helm though, she was surprised to find they ran into basically no monsters.

"...There really aren't any variants around. This is my first time in this area, but it's completely fine..." she said.

"You've never been this far?" asked Timm.

"It was too dangerous. I've been training for a really long time so I can be strong enough to go down the mountain. And then, at some point..."

Lushera was with the three members of the Golden Helm as well as the fragment of Kaphal. Kaphal's main body was back in the nest.

Every once in a while, they caught sight of a normal monster, not a variant, but a single glare from Kaphal's human form was enough to send them scurrying even if she was only a portion of her full self with a fragment of the power.

The mountain had become far safer than Lushera imagined.

Just in case, though, they still moved quickly, to keep something from finding them and chasing after them.

Kaphal was perfectly fine, she was just a fragment without a real body, and Lushera had become as powerful as a dragon from her life on the mountain. The three high-class adventurers—more powerful than would be possible for a normal human—weren't fazed by the mountain either, allowing the group to descend faster than a horse could run.

Being able to move fast was the safest way to be.

If the woman with the glasses is right, Kaphal wasn't even thinking about me leaving the mountain in the beginning, she was just trying to make me stronger.

She realized once she thought about it now that she'd become powerful

enough at a pretty early stage to at least run away from variants, but Kaphal still brought her variants for lessons, made her fight them, and then eat them, in order to get stronger. Perhaps she thought she needed to make sure Lushera could actually fight since she had taken on an enemy she couldn't beat in order to protect the eggshell, and she needed to make Lushera stronger even if it put herself in danger.

I guess Kaphal was trying to make me strong enough to be able to fight a variant, and I am now. So then, why was she so worried upon meeting mere humans? Kaphal has to know that humans are way weaker than any variant...

Dragons and humans had different ways of thinking, but even taking that into consideration, Lushera was still at a loss for why Kaphal was so worried.

"Humans, no go close Lushera," said Kaphal at one point.

"O-Oh, sorry," said Timm, putting another step of distance between him and Lushera when Kaphal glared at him. "It seems you are loved..."

"Uh, I guess..." said Lushera, not sure if this deserved a wry smile or not.

Lushera got the impression that Kaphal was on guard for humans interacting with Lushera, but that seemed odd when you really thought about it. Lushera was still a human in the end. These were her people.

"Anyway," said Timm, "We're heading towards Kugut'hulm. That's—"

"The town closest to the mountain. That's the obvious destination, if we're heading this way," said Lushera. Timm looked at her with a somewhat surprised expression, so she added, "Like I said, I wasn't raised in the mountains. I know about things outside it. It actually...hasn't even been a year since I almost died on the mountain and Kaphal took me in."

"Oh, you became this powerful in such a short amount of time?" said Viola, her glasses starting to gleam like usual. "The strengthening effects of absorbing dragon aura have already been confirmed, but I'm surprised to hear a regular diet of variants results in such a significant change. Haha! It seems living with a dragon— Mmf!"

"Seriously!" cried Weyne as he pinned her arms and clamped her mouth shut.

“Hm? A year? Why did you go to Mount Kugus back then?” asked Timm.

“I was wondering the same,” said Weyne. “The restriction only came off recently, so Lushera was taken in when coming here was still a no-go.”

It was an obvious question. She’d been wondering the same thing herself.

Everyone came to a stop. It was like the heavy, cold mystery tangled up in their feet, slowing them down.

“Well...I don’t actually remember anything from before I nearly died. Why would I come to the mountain when it wasn’t allowed and I couldn’t even fight...? I feel like there was a reason...” said Lushera.

The answer should have been in her head somewhere, but she couldn’t find it no matter how hard she tried. Searching her memories felt like groping her way through a pitch-black room.

“Lushera,” said Kaphal with concern in her voice as she wrapped her arms around Lushera from behind. “Lushera, hurt?”

“No...it doesn’t hurt...?” Lushera still didn’t understand what Kaphal was worried about.



THEY reached the base of Mount Kugus.

At the very bottom of the foothills was the city of Kugut’hulm, situated as if it had run aground on the raised edges of the mountain.

The group walked along a path that wasn’t quite a path, going down the mountain and entering town from a raised area in the east where the town’s streets passed up a ridge.

“Wow...” said Lushera.

The river flowing down from the mountain had been widened by human hands, extended to the east and west in order to create a canal, forming a crossroads in the water. Kugut’hulm was the city holding that crossroads in an embrace.

The sun was starting to lower in the sky, the waters glittering like jewels

carving out the city. Rows of buildings with glossy roof tiles hugged the river's banks, while a city wall encircled the town to keep monsters at bay.

"Kugut'hulm, the City of Water. Well, you could call most cities in this country a 'city of water,'" said Timm with pride when he noticed Lushera's reaction.

It wasn't just that she was moved by the beauty of the place. She was shaken by the odd sensation that she'd seen this place before.

"I feel like...I know this place... I've been to this city before..." she said.

She saw it, these sights, the sights you could see from here.

XXXX wasn't alone at the time.

"It's a good town. I never liked the sea, but I like rivers and canals. Best of all, I hear there's a dragon living nearby. Doesn't your heart race when you happen to look out the window of this room and see a mountain where a dragon lives?"

She had said that, that much was certain, with an innocent and childlike smile.

"Don't think we can really do trips easily out of this city, but...it's not bad, is it? A place like this..."

She turned towards him.

"Who...? Who is that? Who did I see this with?" said Lushera.

It was a fragment of memory, but she couldn't see the next part, whatever should've come after. She felt like forcing herself to remember would set her brain on fire.

"Lushera..." murmured Kaphal with concern.

"This city's our party's base of operations," said Timm. "It's a good place."

The sound of his voice jolted Lushera out of it, the memories that gripped her mind like fog disappearing. Like a dream forgotten when you wake in the morning.

"Adventurers by nature are like rootless plants, no connection to any country or city," said Timm. "It doesn't matter how many of this country's knights and nobles go down in battle, makes no difference to us. But I don't like the idea of the fires of war swallowing a place I've gotten to know. And I don't like the idea

of the people I know ending up killed by some soldier somewhere... That’s why I’m doing what I can now.”

He lifted his gilded helmet and gazed out over the town; his expression set grimly.

What he can do now? That meant seeking help from the dragon of Mount Kugus, from Kaphal.

“And I also can’t stand by as something happens to you two, either. We as people should help others when they’re in trouble, and, in the same way, be helped. If we don’t, we will encounter misfortune at some point. Don’t you think?”

The armored man showed his white teeth with a smile.



IT was pure chance.

His adventuring license was hidden deep in a box, he was never supposed to see it again. But he was just looking around for something, and that’s when Gemmel happened to find it.

=====

Name: XXXX

LV: 40 | HP: 852/852 | MP: 2398/2398 | STA: 716/716

Strength: 58 | Magic: 75 | Speed: 60

Dexterity: 19 | Endurance: 52 | Resistance: 93

=====

The members of the Seven-Sided Die were in shock as they stared at the license in their Guild-assigned lodging (they left their rented home because it was putting too much pressure on their finances).

Even calling these numbers superhuman would feel sarcastic. These stats far surpassed anything you could possibly call human.

“They’re...still going up?”

“And not just his ability scores, his level too...”

“Yeah, but...40?”

Level was a numerical representation of how much combat experience a person had, but that part of the stats was the one that made the least sense.

Level only expressed a person’s total experience, meaning, theoretically, someone could still gain levels even if they just ran around frantically when faced with a powerful enemy, or even if they just landed the finishing blow on a powerful opponent who was on the verge of death anyway.

A high level was something to boast about, but gaining levels didn’t automatically mean anything was changing. Even though it was one of the stats, adventurers themselves didn’t place much weight on it.

That only applied so long as the number was within the realms of normalcy, though.

It became harder to gain levels the higher you went. Your “average” (human) adventurer would probably be level 20 something by the time they retired in their thirties when their body started to weaken, assuming they worked steadily. That was generally seen as normal.

Making the 30-level milestone required a certain amount of heroic-level work.

Gemmel’s level was 22, and that was honestly quite good considering he was still young, and his career hadn’t been going for too long yet. He had a good chance of reaching level 30 by retirement if things continued, and he was thinking that’d make a good selling point for whatever business he got into in the next phase of his life.

That was the rate at which levels generally increased. Jumping from 3 to 30 in such a short time was evidence that “he” achieved heroic-like feats. He would have had to defeat dozens of quite powerful monsters, perhaps even monsters like the variants living on Mount Kugus...

“I’m gonna get rid of this thing!” Gemmel snatched up the adventuring license and shot to his feet.

“Huh?! But you’re the one who said we shouldn’t—”

“I’m gonna talk to a seller I know. He can tell me who’s good at getting rid of this kind of thing!”

That’s all Gemmel said before he rushed out of the room.

He hated the feel of the adventuring license in his hand, it was uncomfortably cold.

“Outta my way!” he shouted.

“Ah!”

Even the people strolling the streets aggravated him. He bulldozed down the busy road, swatting people aside.

But then he suddenly ran face first into something, like a pillar of stone.

“Agh!”

He crashed into some human form that felt so incredibly solid. He took damage, considering how fast he was walking, bounced backward, and landed splayed on his rear.

“Ow, that hurt, you ass! Watch where you’re goin’!”

“I think you’re the one who needs to watch where they’re going, Gemmel. And your mouth, considering you ran into a little child.”

“What?!” Gemmel’s eyes opened wide in shock as he sat there on the ground.

About half of his surprise came from the fact that he was being criticized by Timm, the leader of the Golden Helm, the top party in town. Not even Gemmel stood a chance against him.

The other half of his surprise came from the fact that the person he ran into, who sent him flying back, was a tiny girl not even half his height. The red-headed girl was wrapped tightly in a coat so long on her, the hem dragged on the ground.

Gemmel was a big man and he was sure he’d hit her with significant force, but she looked unconcerned. She looked about as disturbed as if a light breeze was brushing her cheek.

“I’m sorry. Oh, you dropped something,” she said with a cute smile as she

picked up XXXX's adventuring license with composure and returned it to Gemmel.

It was upside down when she gave it back to him. He flipped it over out of reflex and glanced at it. The blood drained from his face.

=====

Name: Lushera

LV: 40 | HP: 852/852 | MP: 2398/2398 | STA: 716/716

Strength: 58 | Magic: 75 | Speed: 60

Dexterity: 19 | Endurance: 52 | Resistance: 93

=====

The name that had been smudged out was now clear as day.

Chapter 5: Human City, Human World

***DID** I screw up? Should I have made sure it was face up when I gave it back to him?*

Lushera looked down at the large man on the ground, trying to figure out how to get out of the situation. He dropped an adventuring license, so he was most likely an adventurer, and his boulder-like muscles on display implied he worked out.

Despite his size and the decent pace he was going when he ran into her, it was him that got knocked back, and she didn't even stumble. Any passerby watching the situation closely might find that confusing.

In reality, his collision into her was on the weak side when you compared it to tackles and advances from the variants she fought on the mountain, so it hadn't ruffled her at all, but she was well aware that this was strange if you considered it from any normal perspective.

She'd borrowed a coat to hide her wild-child style of nothing but a pelt wrapped around her and had the hood pulled down deep over her face to keep her curious catlike eyes from standing out. This was all to avoid attracting attention and causing a fuss. She didn't want this accident to ruin that effort.

"Who...are you?" asked the man.

"Uh, ah, she's, um..." started Timm.

"My name's Lushera. I was about to talk to Timm about a possible job," said Lushera, making up some random explanation. "We should hurry."

"Right..."

Lushera took Timm's hand and urged him on while the large man was still staring blankly. The best option would be if he didn't think too much into this event and forgot it.

What the...? My stomach feels like there's pressure on it...like it hurts...

Lushera didn't think she took damage from the collision, but it left a strange sensation in her abdomen.

"Grrrrr..." Kaphal must not have been able to forgive the man for running into Lushera, because she was making a sound like bellows being worked while glaring past the crowd.

"Who was that? Someone you know?" asked Lushera.

"His name's Gemmel," said Timm. "He's the kind of adventurer who's skilled, but...has everything else wrong with them. In the end, adventuring is a business. You need manners, planning, and patience the further up you climb, but he's got none of that." Timm seemed saddened by that. "He had a good period for a while, but there's no sight of it these days. I could help him if he only just asked..."

"Huh..."

"You're too nice, Timm," said Weyne. "Better not to have anything to do with a piece of shit like him!"

Unlike Timm, who was making an attempt at consideration for Gemmel, Weyne's insults were blatant. He didn't want to involve himself with the man.

Lushera's heart pounded, a hot pulse pounding like her heart leapt into her head.

"All right, I'll hire you."

She heard an unpleasant voice in her mind, sticky and slimy like old oil.

"You're gonna take care of all the stupid little jobs. You better not slack off. Huh? The pay? I don't give a crap if you think it's low. I can get a lackey like you anywhere."

Condescending, certain of his own superiority, and in control.

Sucking up to people above him, oppressing his subordinates and those lower than him like some evil deity...that was the kind of man this voice belonged to.

"That voice...was it the guy from just now...? I can't...I can't remember..." she mumbled. She did remember, she felt like the memory was there, but just as she found herself upon it, it would disappear like seafoam drifting through her

fingers.

“We’re there. This is the Adventurers Guild,” said Timm.

They’d reached the Guild before Lushera even realized it since she was searching for her memories as she walked.

The Adventurers Guild branch in Kugut’hulm for some reason or another was in a building that used to be a church. It was a large building, a clock put into the tower that used to house the bell.

And, this too, Lushera was sure she’d seen before.



COLORFUL light streamed through the stained-glass skylight into the church, refurbished into a lobby. In the area sectioned off by the counter, there was the sound of several cheerful explosions happening at once.

“Agh, the magic aptitude scales!”

“And all the elemonitors too?!”

“That was a brand-new dragon aura detectoooooor!”

The office burst into a frenzy, causing a buzz amongst the adventurers in the lobby as well.

While that was going on, Timm went to talk to one of the workers at the counter. “Pretty lively in here today,” he said.

“Oh, Timm! We don’t know what’s happening, but everything’s going crazy at once...” said the worker.

“Huh... W-Well, days like that just happen sometimes...” he said, avoiding the topic with a strained expression before looking at Lushera and whispering, “Hey, do a better job hiding yourself... Someone’ll figure you out, there are a lot of sharp folk in here.”

“I’ll try...”

One thing that wasn’t necessary during her training on the mountain was the ability to conceal her aura. There was already dragon aura swirling throughout the mountain, Kaphal’s aura, and it was hard to detect anyone else’s within

that. She didn't encounter any problems so long as she concealed the sound of her walking and her scent, but that wasn't enough now that she was out of the mountains.

Lushera stepped quietly back, moving somewhere that couldn't be seen from the counter.

There was a bulletin board type space at the side of the counter with notices for the adventurers to see as they went in and out. Lushera stood in front of that and learned something important, even though she wasn't paying that close attention to the notices.

The most prominent notice was one with big red letters about the message from Martgarz, and it stated that Mount Kugus would soon be off limits again. Lushera hadn't exactly doubted what Timm said, but this confirmed it.

"Oh, Timm, we have a whole stack of job requests asking for your party," said the worker. She was a middle-aged woman who seemed to be the Golden Helm's project manager.

"Ah... Sorry, we won't be able to work for a few days. Give the urgent ones to anyone you think can handle them and say I recommended them."

"All right. If you didn't come in today to check for jobs, then what brings you here?"

"There's something I need looking into, if you can do a bit of digging for me... Does the Guild have, uh, any idea where I could go to get a Draconic interpreter?"

"A what?"

"I can't say why, but I need one. As soon as possible."

Both the project manager he was talking to and everyone around who wasn't even listening closely to the conversation froze in shock.

The Adventurers Guild regularly had need of translation or interpreting services, and they both employed people with those skills directly and contracted with independent workers as well so they could work with any adventurer belonging to the Guild that requested the services. The party had

left the mountain and made a beeline for the Guild in order to find themselves a Draconic interpreter.

Timm might have had the good idea of mediating an alliance between the Setrayuan government and Kaphal, but they'd run into a problem with Kaphal not being fluent in their human language. They wouldn't even be able to tell her their intentions, let alone negotiate like this.

"Draconic isn't like Elven. I'm not even sure there's an interpreter in the entire country," said the project manager.

"Could you check with the Guild headquarters?" asked Timm.

"I don't mind asking, but we may have to contact the Guilds in other countries as well..."

"Hmm, which would mean contacting them, getting them to look into it, then getting someone here, which could take about a month, assuming the other Guild can even find someone. No, I don't think that's gonna work."

With the situation what it was, Timm couldn't tell others what his reasons were, but Martgarz had already started their move. If they were looking at something that far out, it would be better for them to find the next best solution.

It was just as Lushera was thinking that, that someone spoke up.

"Um, actually...I think I've heard something about a Draconic interpreter," said a younger worker as she raised her hand hesitantly.

"Really?! You have?" said Timm.

"I'm sorry, I don't actually know the interpreter personally, but...the manager for the Seven-Sided Die once said he knew someone who could talk to dragons."

"The Seven-Sided Die? And we just ran into their leader..." said Weyne.

"They were using a manager?" asked Timm.

Lushera guessed based on their reactions that the Gemmel person who ran into her earlier belonged to this Seven-Sided Die.

“Why would an adventuring party have a manager?” asked Viola with a frown. She must not be familiar with the idea.

“They handle paperwork that needs to go to the Guild, gather info, have meetings with requesters, do all sorts of things,” said Timm. “Kind of like a private administrator. They get adventuring licenses so they can do their work and they belong to parties, but they work behind the scenes. They don’t really go adventuring. I hear it’s pretty common on the other side of the mountains.”

“Pretty sure I heard someone set up a manager shop in town recently,” added Weyne.

Hm? This isn’t...common knowledge? Then why do I know it? Lushera was aware of everything they spoke about.

“Unfortunately, the Seven-Sided Die’s manager was attacked during a job last summer and passed away,” said the young worker.

“Oh...”

“But perhaps Gemmel knows something...” she said as if it was extremely difficult to get the words out.

Her words hid both hope and unease, the implication being that it was actually her job to confirm this sort of thing, but she would like to limit her interaction with Gemmel as much as possible and was therefore very much hoping they would go talk to Gemmel themselves. This Gemmel person wasn’t very liked, it seemed.

“All righty, guess we’ll just have to go ask then,” said Timm casually.

“Th-Thank you, I apologize for the inconvenience,” she said.

“No worries,” he said, and she gave a low bow. “So, what’s this manager’s name?”

That was of course something Timm needed to ask, but it for some reason caused a shadow to pass over the young worker’s face.

“To be honest...I don’t know.”

“What?”

“We’ve just been calling him, ‘he,’ or ‘the manager.’ This...manager who knew about someone who can speak with dragons was in fact an adventurer belonging to the Guild. But when he was killed by a monster last year...everyone forgot his name.”

Both Timm and Lushera were dumbstruck. It was like they found themselves plunged into a labyrinth when they thought they were going out for a stroll.

All the other administrators nearby nodded meekly as if they were all already aware of this.

“Just forgetting his name would be one thing, but all paperwork with his name on it has disappeared from the Guild. This wasn’t just someone misplacing them either, they vanished. If there were documents bound with cord, only the one with his name on it was taken out. And...everything with his name on it going missing means we’ve lost essentially all records of him. We know basically nothing about him now.”

No normal spell could do something like this.

But no one knew why this happened, if this was by someone’s design, and, if it was, what their goal was in doing this.

It was a somewhat disturbing situation.

“At any rate...looking into curious stories isn’t going to get us anywhere,” said Timm, bringing the conversation to a close. Curiosity was important for an adventurer, but so was the wisdom to know when thinking about something would do you no good, making it best to set something aside and focus on your primary objective.

“All right, let’s have the Guild look for an interpreter for us, and while they do that, we’ll see how much we can get out of Gemmel,” said Lushera.

“It’d be nice if the government could produce an interpreter, but we’re not even sure if they have one,” said Timm.

It seemed this was going to be a difficult task. Timm’s expression was less severe now, more pained.



THEY left the Guild, and Timm parted ways with the party for the time being.

“I’m gonna go have a chat with Gemmel. While I do that, the rest of you get something proper for Lushera to wear around town,” he said.

“Consider it done,” said Weyne, and Timm’s armored figure walked off.

Lushera, with her tightly wrapped, borrowed coat and hood over her usual pelts, was quite taken aback by the way they talked. “Is...there something wrong with this outfit?” she asked.

“You weren’t really thinking of going with that wild-child fur skirt look forever, were you?” said Weyne.

“Because just covering it with a coat is too dangerous in case it blows around and someone notices?”

It was a good point.

Lushera could likely draw every eye on the street just by taking off her coat. She was actually still barefoot too, which a very observant person might notice. She was perfectly content walking barefoot over anything, from stones to nails, but it stood out and she couldn’t deny it made her look shabby.

“Shall our first stop be going to sell these?” said Viola, pointing to the imbued bag on her back with its greater than it first looks capacity. Imbuement was the process of creating magic items through a specific magical creation process.

There had been a huge stack of furs in Lushera and Kaphal’s house, the result of Kaphal skinning every single monster she finished off and giving the pelt to Lushera as a gift. They stuffed several of those into the carrier bag. Even one variant pelt was quite an asset, and the highest class of material for equipment.

“No arguments here,” said Weyne.

“Honestly, I’m scared to carry around something that requires so much care in how I deal with it. I’d like to find somewhere to drop it off. By the way...what about this knife that was shoved in here with the furs?” asked Viola as she thrust her hand into the bag and pulled out a knife. It was well used, its wooden sheath and handle gleaming from being cleaned so many times after getting dirty.

That was the knife Lushera had on her belt when Kaphal picked her up in the mountains. It most likely wasn't something made for combat, and also didn't seem special, like a magic item. It'd served Lushera well for a variety of tasks, from cutting branches out of the way to chopping up fruit and meat.

This was the only thing Lushera brought from the mountain other than the variant furs. The loop for holding the knife on her belt had broken, so she just put it in the bag with the furs.

She drew it from its sheath, revealing blatant knicks in the silvery blade that reflected light in all directions.

"It's pretty worn down," said Weyne.

"I don't think it's your everyday knife though," said Lushera. "This knife saved me during my day-to-day life in the mountains. I'd like to get it sharpened or reworked. I can't remember how I got it, but I bet this knife had memories for me before."

"Then you should keep it," said Viola.

"It wouldn't go for much if I tried to sell it anyway..." said Lushera.

As Lushera went to put the knife back in its sheath, Weyne's eyes locked onto it. Not the knife itself, but the sheath. "Hold on a sec," he said.

"What?"

"The symbol burnt into the sheath, that's old man Duahk's crest, isn't it?" Weyne pointed to the burnt, blackened motif on the sheath.

Lushera hadn't had any idea what the drawing was of, let alone what it meant, but Weyne recognized it. "Old man Duahk?" she asked.

"He's a dwarven blacksmith working here in town. The dwarves that make armor and weapons are the ones who get all the attention, but Duahk crafts tools for everyday use."

"So...I bought this here in town before I went to Mount Kugus?"

She had vaguely recognized the sights of Kugut'hulm. She'd been here before, at least visited it. It didn't seem that odd that she might buy a knife in town.

“Maybe if we took this knife to Duahk’s place, he’d know something, something about me,” said Lushera.

“Lushera,” said Kaphal as she gently laid her hand over Lushera’s. She didn’t talk much, partly because she wasn’t good with human language, but she was always there with Lushera, watching over her. “No push yourself,” she said, reaching her hand out now.

“Huh? I know. But, I’m not...”

There was a plaintive tone in Kaphal’s voice, like her worry for Lushera came from the deepest part of her heart. From Lushera’s perspective though, there was nothing that needed that level of concern.

“We gonna go then? The shop’s just over there,” said Weyne.

“That close?!” said Lushera.

“He makes everyday items, but still sells mostly to adventurers, so he’s got his shop set up near the Guild.”

The shop in question was about a twenty second walk from where they were. It was sandwiched between a weapon shop and an adventuring supplies store, its façade made of stone and steel in a way that made it look like a stronghold. Everything about it felt dwarven. There was a sign out front that said, “Need sharpening? Come on in!”

“He’s probably sold hundreds of knives, though,” said Lushera. “I’m not sure he’ll know anything even if we do show him.”

“Yeah, well, no harm in trying,” said Weyne.



“I remember this one.”

“Seriously?!”

The interior of the shop looked less like a stronghold and more like a stone cave filled with rows of hatchets and knives, each one of them with a hefty price tag. The price ranges were exactly where you could justify spending when you decided to splurge and get something of good quality. And the quality was actually greater than the price implied.

Dwarves had a reputation for being good with metal working and making high-quality weapons, and of course those skills could be put to use in the creation of everyday tools. Even though these were just everyday items, a knife breaking could mean death for an adventurer. These seemed low prices to pay once you considered that.

They'd found Duahk right at the back of the store at his grindstone with a foot pedal, and now he stroked his unkempt beard while he inspected the knife.

Both male and female dwarves were shorter than humans, had sturdily built bodies with boulder-like muscles, and the ability to see in the dark. That was said to be an adaptation to life underground. They dug deep mineshafts which they turned into underground cities, living their life forging a variety of metals. They also tended to like their alcohol.

Duahk, with his stout, stony build, gently stroked the blade with his fat finger and grimaced. "I'm not so obsessed that I remember every knife I've ever sold," he said, "But I do remember this one. Look: the blade glimmers like a star even despite being worn down. The edge of the temper is still neat. Making this knife was nothing short of a miracle. I even thought 'bout selling it to some noble."

"D-Do you remember who you sold it to?!" asked Lushera.

"It was that, uh, manager or whatever from the Seven-Sided Die, I think. Someone like that."

"Huh?"

All three of them gasped at the same time.

The manager for the Seven-Sided Die? That was the person who knew something about a Draconic interpreter, the person who was killed by a monster last summer, the mystery person whose name was wiped from the world. Timm was going to see Gemmel at this very moment to get more information on this very person.

"He came in and said, 'Do you have a knife that can take care of jobs on Mount Kugus?'" said Duahk. "I thought he was some arrogant youngster, so I showed him this knife. That was the last I heard of him. Maybe he really did go up the mountain. Where'd you get this knife anyway?"

It was all coming together like puzzle pieces.

“And the Guild said...” started Viola.

“They said he died last summer, right? That’s the same time Kaphal took me in,” said Lushera.

“We should have asked the Guild about the circumstances surrounding the manager’s death. Though, we can go do that now.”

“Hey, you lot, you gonna talk in a way I can understand what’s going on too?” said Duahk with a glower as the rest started talking to each other in front of him.

“Long story short, I think I was the person who bought this knife,” said Lushera. Duahk’s eyes grew round.

“What’dya say? I know at the very least I sold this knife to a grown man.”

“I was one, before,” she said.

“...You sure you’re all right up in the head, little one?” said Duahk as he knocked on his own stone-like head.

Even Lushera wasn’t surprised that someone would think there was something wrong with her head with that explanation. She didn’t even know what had happened to her, so what else could she expect?

“Um, I’m really sorry. Once we know more, I’ll make sure to tell you the whole story!” she said. “This knife really was effective, even on the abnormally tough plants of Mount Kugus. It really helped!”

“Huh? Oh...good... I s’pose?”

The group pattered out of the shop, leaving Duahk alone with his lack of understanding.



“WHAT?! Lushera’s the manager?!”

“We’re not positive yet. The only clue we got is that knife from old man Duahk.”

Timm had returned from going to talk to Gemmel, coming back to rejoin the

party as they came out of the Guild with the information they got there. He was understandably surprised to hear that Lushera could be the very manager they were looking for.

“Timm, you learn anything on your end?” asked Weyne.

“Gemmel said he had no interest in the manager’s personal business and never asked him about it, so he doesn’t know anything. It sounded like they didn’t talk outside of Gemmel telling him what to do. So, obviously, he doesn’t know anything about someone who can speak Draconic.”

“Pretty cold of a party leader not to know anything about their party member,” said Weyne with an exaggerated shrug that said he couldn’t believe it.

An adventuring party was in it together. Things might be different for a temporary party that was only formed to accomplish a specific task, but it was rare for any party that had been together for a while to know nothing about each other.

“Guess it’s ’cause the manager wasn’t someone that fought with them, watching their backs. He was in the background,” said Timm. “The other party members seemed to treat him only as a semi-member of the party too.”

“What about how the manager-maybe-Lushera died? The Guild records say the Seven-Sided Die had a job last summer to take out a double-headed skyshark, and that’s when he died. They never found the body though, so it’s just down to a report from the party,” said Weyne.

“Gemmel gave me the same story...” Timm glowered. “Dammit, it’s all coming together now. And they went up Mount Kugus before the restriction was lifted.”

“They knew the sudden death of a party member would end up with an investigation, and they’d get caught for going in the restricted zone, so they took on some random job and said he died there.”

Gemmel’s party likely really did take and complete a job for taking out a double-headed skyshark, but Lushera and the rest of them were now guessing that the death of the manager during *that* job was a complete lie. That was

consistent with the clues they had.

“But...isn’t that weird?” said Lushera. “I was originally...if that manager was originally me...then I couldn’t fight at all. I just supported from the background. Why’d I go somewhere dangerous like Mount Kugus?”

“Well...I don’t really know. It is weird,” said Timm.

“If I was the manager for a party talking about going up Mount Kugus, I would stop them no matter what. And I would absolutely never...myself...”

A bell chimed, blotting out what Lushera said.

It was the signal to raise the drawbridge over the canal for a passing boat, informing pedestrians they shouldn’t cross.

The bell rang, just like that one time.

The sound of water rippling as the boat passed.

“Ah?!”

Lushera was struck with a force that made her head feel like it was about to explode. She clamped her hands to her head.

He had to do it, *for her*.

“XXXX, *what are you thinking about?*”

Lushera heard a voice. The curtain rustled, outside was the city of water. She looked at it. She looked so thin from behind.

Her hair, once flaxen dappled with white, was now completely white, as if bleached.

“I think you’ve done enough to pay me back at this point. Don’t worry about me. Go wherever you want, live however you want. Decide how you want to die,” she said forcefully.

XXXX nodded, knowing she was likely just putting on a brave face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Timm.

“...I don’t know. It’s like I’m about to remember...” said Lushera, shaking her head.

The roughened memories were like hot stones. Whenever she tried to pick them up and put them in order, the heat forced her to drop them again.

“Well, even if we don’t know why you went to the mountain, we know for sure you nearly died there, right?” said Weyne, summing up the story that had been close to getting lost.

Lushera did have questions about why she went up the mountain, but there was no debating the fact that she did, and that part made sense if she was in fact this manager who had supposedly died.

“Which means we’ll figure everything out if Lushera’s memories come back,” said Weyne.

“You’re right. Is there something we can do about that?” asked Timm.

“I wouldn’t even know...” said Lushera, then she looked at Kaphal. Everyone else’s eyes followed.

Kaphal looked like she was focusing intently on the conversation to understand despite her difficulties with the language. She must have guessed what their gazes meant, because she gently wrapped her arms around Lushera’s shoulders and said, “No. No good.”

“Kaphal...” said Lushera.

“Painful. Hard. No good.” She shook her head, her expression pained.

What she said was, as usual, fragmented, without a detailed explanation. This made sense considering her inexperience with the language, but Lushera was suddenly struck with the suspicion that she was trying her best not to say anything, though she didn’t know if Kaphal had a reason for doing that.

“Having my memories back could help me protect the mountain,” said Lushera. “Is there any way to get them back?”

Kaphal thought for a moment before answering. “Give Lushera name back, give Lushera memories back. But no good. Everything give back. Power go away, too.”

“Absolutely not! No, no, no!” This time, Lushera was the one shaking her head.

Kaphal had given her variants, which were almost like Kaphal had taken a piece of herself and given it to Lushera. The variants acted as bodyguards for Kaphal, and, with their numbers reduced, Lushera had decided she needed to supplement that protection, though she didn't know if she made a decent substitute. Insisting on getting her memories back to the point that she lost her power would be getting her priorities backwards.

But if that's the case, is it my name that caused my memories to disappear? A dragon gave me a name, and that made me her daughter. Does that mean...I'm turning into something not human...?

Lushera wasn't actually opposed to this—it didn't make her uncomfortable in any way—but it did remind her of the true power of a dragon.

"Is there any other way to get my memories back?" she asked.

"...No know. Maybe some trigger somewhere," said Kaphal.

Lushera believed Kaphal when she said she didn't know, but Kaphal did seem to think it would be bad if Lushera did get her memories back.

Lushera was curious about her own past, even more so now that her past might be the key to stopping the impending danger. Kaphal must know that as well.

"Either way," interjected Timm, "we were planning on searching for a Draconic interpreter. Let's look into this manager, who might be you, and test out things to see if we can't get you to remember."

"Okay..." Lushera nodded.

In the end, they still had to do the same thing.

"Hey, we'll manage something. We're gonna work together," said Timm.

"I'm sorry for putting this on you, it's sort of a personal matter," said Lushera.

"Don't worry about it. At the end of the day, we are kind of influential adventurers in this town. We can't just leave things be if we suspect there's been a cover up involving the death of a Guild member."

"And if Lushera really is this manager, that lends credibility to the talk that you know someone who can speak draconic, doesn't it? I'm starting to see a

glimmer of hope,” said Viola.

“Viola’s right, you don’t seem like the kind to brag for no reason. I think we can get something out of following this story up,” said Weyne.

“Thank you, everyone...” Lushera smiled vaguely. She didn’t know what kind of person she was before she lost her memories, but, just like Weyne said, she had a feeling she could trust the old her.

“Anyway, there could be someone other than that project manager who heard the manager talk about this Draconic interpreter. Finding someone like that’ll be the quickest way,” said Weyne.

“I’m going to go back to Gemmel and grill him on what happened on Mount Kugus,” said Timm.

“Can you really get him to talk? You’re kind of a dumb— I mean...You’re just too nice.”

“What are you getting at, Weyne?”

“I mean, if I go, that jerk’ll just run away, so...it may be best just to hope you can handle it.” Weyne shrugged and sighed. He didn’t look like he had high hopes. “We’ll go sell those variant furs for some cash first. There’s something I want to ask the pervert anyway.”

“The...*pervert*?” repeated Lushera, fairly certain she heard that particular disquieting word.



AS you might expect, there were usually a lot of shops targeting adventurers near the Adventurers Guild. That tendency was even stronger in large cities like Kugut’hulm because the city became a hub for the adventurers who operated out of the smaller towns and villages nearby.

Adamant Sewing was one such shop that specialized in custom orders and repairs of non-metallic armor. They were in the workshop, its walls and ceiling covered with colorful threads, sashes, worked leather, and rolls of cloth.

“Eeeeeeeek! R-Really?! Y-You’re really letting me cut this?! Sew it?! Dye it?! Really?!”

The workshop's owner, Midum, took one look at the huge amount and variety of furs laid out on the short worktop and let out a shriek, squirming with joy.

Midum looked like a young girl no older than Lushera, but she was a fully grown dwarven woman. Dwarven women grew until about their early to mid-teens and then stopped there.

Dwarves didn't just vigorously hammer metal. They brought a high level of skill to any type of crafting. Midum was a tailor who used the highest-quality materials to provide the highest-class of armor to the highest-ranking adventurers for fights against the highest-powered monsters out there.

Variant pelts were the greatest of those high-quality materials to Midum. This lady dwarf, with her hair up and apron on, shook with overwhelming emotions as she looked at the pile of furs.

"You really did me a solid by bringing these straight to me," she said. "It eliminates the Guild's cut."

"Just give us enough cash for one right now. You can pay us the rest later," said Weyne.

"All righty. But, uh, how did you get so many?" she asked. An obvious question.

Weyne gave Lushera a look. She nodded and said, "I don't mind you telling her. Not explaining the situation might cause her trouble later."

"If you say. Right, so, this is Kaphal, and she's the dragon who lives on Mount Kugus. That's Lushera, her adopted daughter. The mountain's about to see some trouble, so they came down to town hoping to find a solution. These furs are what's left after those two ate the variants," he said, both summarizing the situation and introducing the two of them.

Midum looked at the two mountain women, tears in her eyes. "A-Am I... dreaming? To meet the person who produced such incredible materials..."

"I think you're getting excited over the wrong thing," said Weyne. "But anyway, keep this all to yourself, would you? Things'll be a mess if word gets out."

“Of course. I swear on my honor and these furs,” said Midum with a thump of her flat chest. Then she grinned aggressively and said, “By the way, would you two like any of Mini Mistress Midum’s crafted goods? They’re top class for both form and function. I’d love for some powerful, and beautiful, individuals such as yourselves to wear them. I guarantee these products are such a rare find they’re even suited for a dragon.”

Lushera and Kaphal looked at each other after getting the unexpected sales pitch.

After a long moment, Kaphal gently ran her hands over her body, her flickering-flame-like dress transforming into work clothes that matched Midum’s. “Kaphal body no real body. Kaphal make clothes.”

“Oooh, so that’s how it works,” said Viola.

“Don’t think she can fight with that puppet form anyway,” said Weyne.

“Hmm...” Midum looked disgruntled, perhaps having her own thoughts as a tailor on clothes being instantly created in front of her.

“Um, I’d like something!” piped up Lushera as she raised her hand.

Kaphal’s current body was a fragment, and her real body was a dragon, which didn’t need equipment, but Lushera didn’t have a real body versus fragment body. Besides, they suspected a fight was just over the horizon, so she wanted something that could withstand a violent battle.

When Lushera spoke up, she felt like she saw a suspicious gleam in Midum’s eyes as she said, “Aha! Snagged one! You’ll get something practically free since you brought in these materials! And the money you owe me for the work will cancel out the money I owe you for the other furs, protecting my cash flow! And to have such a stunning little girl wear my work! Oooh, my hands are shaking!”

“You’re letting your true nature leak through,” warned Weyne.

“I think this is a wonderful idea,” said Viola. “Lushera is clearly no normal person. Putting her in an top-class adventuring outfit will help sell the disguise.”

Many adventurers were just ruffians, but there were also the odd and the

extraordinary, the sort of people that didn't fit the description "normal." A particularly discerning person could tell Lushera was no normal person just from the force of her presence alone, but they would accept that she was abnormal if she was in adventuring gear because that sort of thing happened on occasion.

Midum turned to look at Lushera, huffing excitedly as her burning gaze danced across Lushera's body. "Measurements complete!"

"Just by looking?!" asked Lushera.

"Yeah, she can do that...because she's a *pervert*," said Weyne.

"Speaking of measurements, Viola, you've gained 2.4 pounds since I last saw you. Are you maybe eating a bit too much?" said Midum.

"I will murder you!" Viola lunged at Midum and pulled on her pudgy cheeks.

"I'd like my equipment as quickly as possible. How many days do you think it'll take?" asked Lushera.

If the country on the other side of the mountains was coming to attack, they didn't know when it might happen. She needed her new armor to make it in time.

Midum replied to Lushera's unease with a dubious grim. "Hehehe, don't underestimate Mini Mistress Midum. I'm not working on any other jobs right now. I'll close the shop and throw myself into this project. I'll finish it in four, maybe five days at most."

"Can you seriously do it that quick?" asked Weyne, worried she'd botch the job. "You're starting from processing the furs. We brought you some pretty amazing materials, we want you to make armor with quality that matches that, you know?"

She wagged her finger at him arrogantly and said, "That's plenty of time to get the materials into the right shape. I don't do imbuing; I'll only make the framework. Besides, variant furs are practically magic items already, I'm not convinced they need to be imbued."

Midum rolled up her sleeves and didn't look at them again as she pulled out a

pair of tailoring scissors with a special sort of gleam to them and started cutting up the furs. Even an amateur could tell she was fast at what she did.

“So, that’s what I was getting at. She might be a pervert, but she’s good at what she does. Just need to leave her to it,” said Weyne.

“Uh, okay. Thank you,” Lushera said to Midum, accepting both points Weyne made.

“By the way, Midum,” said Weyne, calling to her back while she was hot at work.

“What is it? Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“You’ve been handling variant furs even from when Mount Kugus was off limits, right?”

“I have. I set up shop in this city so I could work with this material.”

“They weren’t all legal goods, were they?”

Midum’s hands stopped.

“You wouldn’t know the distribution paths for goods like that, would you?” he asked.

“...What are you getting at?” she asked in a low voice.

“There’s some idiots who went up the mountain when it was still prohibited. Or so we think. We’re trying to find evidence to support our hunch. We also wanna know what they were after.”

“Guess I owe you one. I can’t exactly introduce you to anyone, since it’s the world that works in the shadows. And I’ve also got people’s trust in me. But I don’t mind if you ask a question or two.”

There were two reasons why they’d come to Midum’s shop. The first was to sell off their variant furs, getting money Lushera could use now. The other reason was to see if they could find any traces of the path the various goods sold from the mountain went into the dark. If Gemmel really had gone into the mountain, then the rest of their guesses might be on the mark.

The Guild had banned entry into the mountain until just recently, but not

everyone was going to stay out of the treasure trove of natural resources right in front of their faces just because of regulations, or even risk to life. And, so long as explorers existed, there were going to be merchants to deal with the loot from those that didn't walk the approved path.

Midum was one of the merchants with a foot in that world. She probably wasn't the only one either, many of the craftspeople of the town were likely the same.

"Sure thing, thanks," said Weyne. "You know a party called the Seven-Sided Die?"

"Seven-Sided Die? I'd remember someone I worked with before, but I don't think I've ever got an order from a party called that."

"Really? Hm, all right. Well, anyway, we think they went up Mount Kugus around late summer last year. Anything they got up there couldn't've been sold through proper channels. It would've flowed into the dark. We want to check that out, find out if there was something, and what they sold."

"Guess there's nothing to it but for me to figure it out for you," said Midum. She was quite the expert if she could take on something like this with such a casual attitude.

"And just make Lushera something appropriate. She stands out in this outfit. It's not good for walking around town," said Weyne, pointing to Lushera who was still wearing unworked furs instead of clothing.

Midum shrugged. "You want normal clothes? My shop doesn't stock the sort of stuff you can wear on a normal day."

"Guess that's true."

"Let's go shopping for some ready-made clothing," suggested Viola. "We can just throw Lushera in a dressing room and I'll pick some things out for her to try on."

"If you don't mind, Viola," said Lushera. "Sorry for troubling you with this too..." She decided to go along with what they suggested and accept Viola's offer of help.

“It’s not a problem at all! I’m more than happy to help... *slurp.*”

“Slurp...?”

Viola licked her lips, her glasses gleaming.



THE production of clothes had long been done in factories using magic equipment, allowing the modern person to purchase clothing at relatively low cost.

“Um, Viola,” said Lushera.

“Yes?”

Obviously, handmade custom order clothing still existed as a higher-priced product, but the concept of a clothing “size” allowed for premade clothing. Clothes shops that focused on selling large volumes carried everything from outerwear for warding off the cold to socks, and the customers chose whatever they liked from the large selection and bought that.

“...What is this?” asked Lushera.

“Panties.”

There was one such clothing store in Kugut’hulm. In the back of the store was the women’s dressing room, a somewhat spacious room similar to a locker room.

There, Lushera was staring at the clothing Viola had brought her. More accurately, she was staring at the pure white panties with their incredibly small amount of fabric.

Or maybe it was just Lushera’s impression that there wasn’t much coverage from this article of clothing. Maybe this was generally what women’s undergarments looked like, and she was a child. This must be the perfect size for a body this small. Perhaps.

“Are you sure you really didn’t grow up on the mountain?” asked Viola.
“Normal civilized people generally wear underwear.”

“Uuuh, well, I’m pretty sure I was a man before... I don’t think I have

experience with this.” Lushera gestured at the panties.

“Even if that’s true, you’re a girl now.”

“Yeah...”

There was no arguing with that.

Lushera was buck naked, having taken off her furs and the coat, and stepped into the leg holes of the thin, unreliable-looking panties. They hugged her form perfectly, tickling her in ways she’d never experienced.

“Feels kind of oddly...close...” she said.

“Do you want to try drawers too? They cover more area, which could be against religious doctrine, but they shouldn’t feel as tight as the panties.”

“Please don’t talk like you’re part of a no-underwear cult,” Lushera said.

“You can’t try on underwear before buying it, but I’ve bought all sorts so don’t worry about that.”

Viola handed Lushera some underwear that looked like somewhat baggy but short pants. The drawers were white and delicate with flowers embroidered on them, with a small red bow on the front as ornamentation.

Lushera pulled off her panties to try on the drawers, but they were too big. She tried them on anyway. They felt weird, like she was wearing a pair of thin pants that laid directly against her skin. She’d have to wear pants or a long skirt with them or the ends would definitely peak out.

Next, Viola handed her the upper half of her underwear set. Thankfully, this wasn’t too different from a shirt for men, but, actually, it felt a bit...loose.

When she looked closer, she noticed there was excess...space around the chest area. The thin fabric was divided with stitching just under the chest to form a kind of pouch. It added a bit of an illusion even to Lushera, who didn’t need that extra space.

These are cutesy, childlike underwear, and yet...it somehow seems worse than if I was just naked...?

She felt an undefined embarrassment tickling at her. If this was the

alternative, she would feel way more comfortable living her life wrapped in furs.

“What do you think about this sort of clothing?” asked Viola. “This is the kind of thing that girls generally wear in this region.”

Lushera took her eyes off Viola for just a second and she left the fitting room to get clothes. First up was a plain white dress that looked like it could double as loungewear.

Over it went a simple cut of cloth with a hole cut out for the head, then a narrow sash tied it at Lushera’s waist. This overdress had a checkered pattern, primarily in red. Viola then made her put on a pair of sturdy leather shoes that she must have bought somewhere else, ending Lushera’s life as a barefoot wild child.

Viola’s glasses glinted as she looked at Lushera, who was dressed before she really even understood what was happening.

“Nice! Very nice! There was a wildness and even a certain sort of innocence to your fur clothing, but *this*! Nothing can bring out such tenderness as girlish normal clothing like this! Nothing would suit you better!”

Viola spoke with even more vigor than before since Weyne couldn’t come in the women’s only area to hold her back.

“I was concerned putting you in red would be too much, since your hair is red too, but I just had to. It feels like this is the color of our soul, if you know what I mean. But anyway, what do you think, Mom?” Viola asked Kaphal.

“Umm...” Kaphal didn’t know anything about clothing, so she just stood by, watching Viola work. She stared hard at Lushera in her new clothes, her eyes wide. “Lushera, amazing. Look different human, but look Lushera.”

She touched Lushera gently, stroking her now brushed and tamed hair. It made Lushera uncomfortable.

“And what does the lady herself think?” asked Viola.

“It’s lighter than the furs, which is good, but...it flaps around my feet, which makes me uncomfortable...” said Lushera.

“Take a look in the mirror!” Viola urged.

Lushera thought that was silly, she could just look down to see what sort of clothing she was wearing, but Viola dragged her to the mirror, and she couldn’t help but gasp.

There, reflected back at her was a beautiful young girl framed in stunning red. Viola wasn’t exaggerating. The girl was gorgeous, like delicate crystals.

“I’m...cute,” she murmured without thinking, overwhelmed. Then she came back to herself.

Viola was smiling self-satisfactorily, her glasses gleaming.

“N-No, I-I didn’t mean that!” panicked Lushera.

“You are cute, aren’t you? What’s wrong with that?” she asked.

“Only crazy people call themselves cute...” Lushera fidgeted.

“What’s cute is cute. You have to acknowledge reality.”

What’s cute is cute. That was likely true. But Lushera was in unfamiliar territory when it came to thinking that about herself. Her heart was pounding like never before.

“Cute...?” asked Kaphal as she cocked her head to the side.

“Yes. ‘Cute’ is when something looks so lovely you want to squeeze it in your arms and cuddle it. Well, there are several different uses and definitions for this word, but that’s—”

“Lushera, cute!”

“Gah!”

Kaphal came crashing into Lushera chestfirst and tightly wrapped her arms around her. She must have thought Viola was on to something when she mentioned squeezing and cuddling Lushera, because that’s exactly what she did.

“Cute, cute, cute!” she said.

“Uh, I think, I think that’s enough...”

Kaphal dove headfirst into enjoying Lushera's cuteness, but then suddenly froze, like waking from her frenzy.

Lushera wondered what was going on, then realized that while Kaphal was still holding her, she was staring at the folded furs Lushera had taken off.

"Hate furs?" she asked.

"No, I don't hate them!" Lushera shook her head vigorously.

That's right, Kaphal gave me those, and I wore them for so long... It must not feel good to see me throw them aside the minute I get to town.

It was thanks to those furs Kaphal gave her that Lushera didn't freeze, that she could hold on to a modicum of self-respect by avoiding living au naturel in the mountains.

"See, everyone in town dresses like this," said Lushera. "People...well, humans, they have to change what they wear depending on the location. You can't just wrap furs around yourself when you're around other humans... But it's fine if it's in the mountains."

"Hm..."

Lushera was trying to explain, but Kaphal still looked upset.

Is that not what she's upset about?

Kaphal's hands almost seemed to cling to Lushera as she held her.

"I think it's about time we went and showed you off to the others!" said Viola. "I knew my glasses didn't deceive me! I've perfected the girl of peerless beauty who will turn heads even in everyday clothing!"

"What happened to not wanting me to stand out?!"

Lushera pulled back, but Viola dragged her out of the fitting room.

They went into the main store lined with rows of the kind of shelves you might find in a general store, but, instead of small goods, they were filled with stacks of premade clothing. There were a few other customers in the store.

A woman turned at the sound of Viola's voice and gasped when she saw Lushera. An employee passing by to restock the shelves glanced at Lushera,

then stopped and stared at her. A mother and daughter pair, who seemed uncertain of what to buy, immediately grabbed the same clothes Lushera had on.

Girl of peerless beauty... Girl of peerless BEAUTY?!

Lushera was so embarrassed she felt like flames would burst from her cheeks.

It was like she'd made some mistake or done something indecent. Lushera had opened a door to a whole new world of embarrassment that didn't involve those sorts of things.

"You lot seem pretty worked up."

"Oh, Timm," said Lushera to the armored man. Lushera thought he'd gone to chase down Gemmel, but he was standing in the corner of the store talking with Weyne, who was waiting for the women to finish shopping.

Timm gave a modest but charming smile when he saw Lushera. "And you're looking cute in that, wasn't expecting you to come out like that."

Lushera sagged, rather than looking happy at the compliment.

"Uh...did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"It's just...when you react calmly like that, it makes what you say seem more like a fact, which means my escape's been cut off..." groaned Lushera.

"Escape? Escape from what?"

"Uh...anyway, what about this Gemmel person? Did you hear the story from him?" she said, trying hard to distance herself from her embarrassment by focusing on the main problem so she could forget her clothes.

"I couldn't find him. Looks like the whole party went out."

"Did they run away? If our guess is correct and the Seven-Sided Die really did break the regulation to enter the mountain, then they might be thinking the truth'll come out..."

"Think it's a bit too early for them to make that decision," said Weyne. "Timm just asked them about this manager, they couldn't've guessed all the rest."

"And we don't have anything more than a theory," said Timm. "I'll try them

again tomorrow.”

Lushera felt like something smelled fishy here, though Timm didn't. But, at the end of the day, it was just a whiff. All they could do for now was wait.

“I know you probably want to hurry on all this, but let's take a break for the rest of the day,” suggested Timm. “Gotta admit, I'm beat after going up Mount Kugus and coming back in one day.”

“Same here,” said Weyne. “If the two of you are for it, we can show you round to our humble abode. There's plenty of space for you to crash for the night at least.”

“If you don't mind!” said Lushera, accepting Weyne's offer without a moment's hesitation.

Her heart was soaring at the idea of being able to sleep in a civilized bed.



THE day was not yet over, however.

“Oh, Timm! There's a message for you from the royal court,” said someone, a Guild employee rushing out of the building as their group went to pass by.

“They already replied?” he asked.

“They're waiting for you to call them back... And they asked to have all three of you present, so whenever is suitable for you,” said the employee.

“All right, we'll go now, if you don't mind setting up for us.”

“Consider it done.”

The employee walked quickly back inside. Timm turned to Lushera with a jokingly apologetic tone. “So, uh...guess you heard that. Sorry, looks like we won't be getting back home for a bit longer.”

“Was that about us?” asked Lushera.

“I told the royal court about you. They just got back to me.”

The reason Lushera and Kaphal came to town was because Timm had suggested they work together with the royal court. Lushera still had absolutely no concrete plan on what to do, but it looked like Timm had been working on

that already.

“That’s incredible... Becoming a top-class adventurer means you can contact the court directly,” said Lushera.

“Well, we’re a bit of a special case,” said Weyne.

“You don’t get an invitation like that without connections,” said Timm. “I’m the one who came to get you, so I’ll take responsibility for making the introductions.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. All I can do is set the table for the talks. The rest is on you and...how the court handles it.”

Timm was humble, but Lushera was so grateful she could do nothing but respect him. The first step to negotiating was knowing what the other side was thinking. That was hard enough in a normal situation, but even more so when the other side was nobles and royalty, the sort of people who lived above them in a different world.

“If you don’t mind waiting a bit,” said Timm.

“Not at all. But, are you sure you don’t need me there?” asked Lushera.

“They’ve got their way of doing things.”

“All right. I’ll wait then.”

A Guild worker led the three members of the party into the back of the building.

This building had equipment necessary for long-distance messaging spells, allowing people to speak with other people in far-off places. A normal person could go to a message office and pay a fee to use that as well, but it wasn’t uncommon for local lords or Adventurers Guild branches to have a dedicated message room. The Guild in a city as big as this was bound to have a message room.

Lushera then found herself unoccupied.

She sat with Kaphal on some chairs in the corner. Every person who passed by

looked at them. Lushera had felt like people were looking at her while they'd been out walking around, but it was even more apparent when they were sitting still like this.

There was no doubting Kaphal was a stunning woman based on society's beauty standards. Lushera... She had vaguely suspected she might also be beautiful, and this was driving home how accurate that assumption was. It made sense they would draw people's attention.

O-Oh, yeah! If I'm that manager, then the Guild workers should know something about me...

Fed up with people's stares and unable to sit still any longer, Lushera just sort of got up and started asking people questions. And it just happened to be around the time when that young party liaison was getting off work, the one who'd told them the rumor about someone who can speak Draconic.

"Excuse me," said Lushera.

"Yes?" The project manager stopped and crouched down so she was at the same eye level as Lushera.

"Sorry to go back to what we were talking about before, but I was wondering if I could ask you about the manager that used to work for the Seven-Sided Die," Lushera said.

"He was diligent. He quickly turned in any applications or reports for the jobs they took on. They were very thoroughly done, making it easy for me to compile. And before the party ever left town, he always made sure to contact the requester and explain—"

"Um... I was wondering, not about work things, but about...other things..."

"Oh, I see..."

But just as the young woman was about to say something, the middle-aged liaison, who Lushera guessed was the Golden Helm's liaison, stepped in. "I'm sorry, Miss. We do sometimes provide some information on adventurers so that requesters can select the appropriate adventurers, but we generally don't give private information on adventurers out to those not affiliated with the Guild."

“Of course...”

The woman gave a gentle, slightly troubled smile, but seemed firm about this. It looked like they wouldn't bend the rules even for a child. The Guild was always staunch about its protection of private information since there were many adventurers with secrets that would be no joke if they got out. The workers had given a certain amount of information to the Golden Helm because the party had gained their trust, and they were members of the Guild, but they weren't going to do that when dealing with Lushera.

“Well, if that's the case, could I ask for what you could tell me? Like, what sort of things did he accomplish...?” Lushera asked.

“Ah, that much should be fine,” said the younger worker with a look of relief once the older one indicated approval. “Since he was a manager, at the end of the day, he was in a background role. He didn't fight, or, he usually didn't. Umm...personally, I thought of him as the pillar holding up the Seven-Sided Die.

“As a matter of course, the Guild always provides all information adventurers might need, but he would supplement that whenever the information we had was lacking. He was very good at analyzing information, was deeply knowledgeable about the profession of adventuring, so much so that he surprised even me. I believe the four members of the Seven-Sided Die were able to fight as well as five, even six people because he would gather the information in advance and prepare for whatever the situation was.

“He was also active in all sales activities. He regularly went around to the people who submit requests to investigate and take on their jobs. Regardless of all else, adventurers receive direct requests through a good reputation as it spreads and through the connections of the people they'd done jobs for in the past, so I think that was another thing that supported the party from the background.

“Requesters had a positive opinion of him as well. Though, in general, requesters are no experts on monsters. Sometimes they don't know the source of their problems, or even if their problems were truly fixed. The manager would explain what he knew to them, sometimes revealing hidden problems that weren't originally included in the job request. I was honestly a little

suspicious of adventuring managers to begin with, but I was convinced after seeing what he did.”

“Um, excuse me, but...all that, makes me a little uncomfortable...” said Lushera.

“Why would that make you uncomfortable?”

The liaison didn’t stop with the compliments, obviously not suspecting that the man himself (or what they thought the man was now) was right in front of her, and the compliments were making Lushera’s cheeks burn. She was practically singing his praises.

“That really amazing?” said Kaphal, who had been listening to the whole thing.

Kaphal?

Kaphal wasn’t trying to take a jab at the manager if it turned out that what he did really wasn’t incredible, she honestly seemed to want to know what people thought of him.

The young Guild worker seemed a bit taken aback by Kaphal’s faltering speech, but still said, “Y-Yes, it is. It’s not something just anyone can do. He was outstanding at what he did.”

“He...needed?”

“The Adventuring Guild needs all the adventurers in the Guild,” said the older worker flatly, the sort of thing you would say as a representative of the Guild. But then her expression softened into a smile, something fonder with a hint of regret, and a reverence she might show when looking at something grand.

“That...is of course the company line,” she said. “I personally do believe he was irreplaceable. I have been working here for more than thirty years, and yet learned so much from him, someone so much younger. The world lost a good person with his death.”

“And he and I might have been in different positions,” said the younger worker, “But I wanted to be like him. His passing was so unfortunate.”

“I see... Thank you, for everything,” said Lushera.

“It was nothing.”

Lushera finally couldn't bear the storm of compliments being thrown at her anymore, so she cut the conversation off and thanked them. Her cheeks would burn out if that kept up.

“It feels really weird to watch someone grieve and praise you right in front of your eyes...” she said with a sigh. Her heart was racing.

Regardless, she'd learned that this manager, AKA her (theoretically) was liked and respected by the people he worked with. And where did that leave her?

“...Kaphal?”

That's when she noticed Kaphal beside her, looking glumly down at the ground.



WHILE she was waiting for the three party members to come back, Lushera asked around for rumors about the manager of the Seven-Sided Die or what Martgarz was up to. She didn't learn anything more than she heard from the Guild workers on that first line of inquiry. But the second one, about Martgarz, resulted in far more suspicious stories than she'd expected.

The adventurers were aware of the notice Martgarz sent to the Guild, but the notice to the Guilds in both countries had even been printed in newspapers, meaning lots of people were learning about it.

It sounded like, in the beginning, the city had buzzed with general criticism you'd voice about someone else's problem. The entire attitude of the city changed when there was a rumor that several big-time merchants had evacuated the city.

Moving a lot of people meant the need to procure enough food and daily necessities for them to live. Catching information of purchases on that scale meant you could get a feel for when the military of another country was on the move.

Meaning, the merchants caught wind of just that sort of information through their web, indicating a danger was at hand. Instead of going to the border to

find safety for themselves, they fled south.

It wasn't clear how certain they were about their predictions that Martgarz was going to invade, but what was essentially the celebrities of Kugut'hulm had taken a clear action, and that changed how people saw the situation.

Martgarz was really going to come over the mountains and try to swallow up Kugut'hulm and all of Setrayu.

The city started to buzz. If nothing changed, the citizens' fears would become reality. But only if nothing changed.



THE setting sun dyed the city of Kugut'hulm with its colors.

They were in a plaza at a crossroads with a fountain in the center, the space practically turned into a park. Carriages and other traffic moved along the street, while benches and stalls lined the edges, with people making themselves comfortable wherever they liked.

"Oooh, Lushera used to be something amazing," said Viola, her glasses glinting with appreciation after Lushera told them what she heard from the Guild workers.

"It doesn't feel real though. I don't remember a thing..." Lushera felt uncomfortable as she remembered the overly extreme praise. "I'm not even sure they're really talking about me. I don't think I'm that amazing."

"You lost your memories of events and people, but you still have your knowledge, right?"

"I don't know if I have all of it, but probably."

"Then, tomorrow let's go to the library and you can test your knowledge. If you really do have an expert-level knowledge of the specialized job of adventuring, then that would be supporting evidence that you really are this missing manager."

"I suppose."

Lushera did have the vague impression she knew a lot about various things, but she didn't have a full understanding of what information was actually in her

head. She couldn't even remember what she studied or for what purpose, after all.

Anyway, what Viola said settled her plans for the next day.

"What happened on your end?" asked Lushera.

"We just explained the situation, but they seemed quite interested," said Viola. "The court knows Martgarz is on the move, so they would obviously be interested if they could work with the dragon of Mount Kugus."

"Then the first step is looking good. Thank you."

Lushera's mind did some firm calculations. If the court was desperate, Lushera would be able to sell an ally relationship all the easier. That lessened the risk that she and Kaphal would simply become tools of authority.

"Don't worry about it. Timm said this before, but we're not doing this just for the two of you, we're doing this for everyone." Viola cackled as if to say this wasn't something to feel indebted to them for.

But if I didn't exist, they wouldn't have to worry in the first place...

It was pointless to tell Lushera not to worry about it. This was a problem because the number of variants in the mountains decreased, and that happened because Kaphal gave them to Lushera as food to make her stronger.

This was Kaphal's decision, so it wasn't quite that Lushera felt responsible for the situation, but she had learned of Kaphal's love, a love that meant she didn't mind risking herself for Lushera. She couldn't stand by after that. It was hard to put a name to the feelings Lushera felt for Kaphal, but she felt like it could be called love... She knew she cared for Kaphal, maybe she cared for her even more than before. It was only natural to want to do something for the people you cared about, even more so when there was a chance they were going to encounter some tragedy. It was normal to want to save them.

It was also hard to overlook the fact that the reduction in variants put an entire country in danger. Being part of the cause didn't mean she was responsible, but she knew she couldn't sleep well at night knowing she'd caused a war. Viola said what they were doing was for everyone, but Lushera felt she had to find a solution to this problem.

“Anyway, just take it easy around here for the rest of the day,” said Viola. “We’ve done so much in the few hours since we came down from the mountain. Right now, I think we should have something to eat, and enough to make up for the lunch we missed.”

“Yeah...” said Lushera, her hunger suddenly gnawing at her like she just remembered it.

Before the party went back home, they decided to take some time to bolster themselves with food. Timm went to a store that offered takeaway boxes of huge portions of food, while Weyne bought some barbecued skewers from a stall. It looked like the three of them could eat enough for seven.

They said they’d buy food for Lushera as well, but she politely declined the offer since she already knew what she wanted to eat.

“This money?” asked Kaphal as she pinched a shiny silver coin between her fingers and examined it with her brown, catlike eyes.

Dragons had an instinctual love of treasure. They stole and hoarded the metal coins that people made even if they had no use for them, and Kaphal was as excited about this silver coin as if it were her first time seeing one.

“Now that I think about it, you don’t have any treasure, Kaphal,” said Lushera.

“For home, raise children. Lushera Kaphal’s only treasure,” she said.

“Oh... Right.”

“Oooh, how interesting,” said Viola. “Does that mean a mother dragon’s maternal instincts overpower the instinctual craving for treasure during the child rearing period?”

Kaphal had said what she did like it was utterly normal and uninteresting, which made Lushera both happy and embarrassed. Viola, though, was intrigued, her glasses glinting.

“...Um, you know what money is, right?” asked Lushera.

“Human change money for things. Money no go bad. Easy carry. Have idea of value. Change with people you no know. Money mean no need trust. Money make human society strong.”

Her words were clumsy, but she seemed to have a deep understanding of money.

She knows a lot even though she's not that familiar with human society. Dragons really are smart.

While Lushera was impressed, Viola seemed unconvinced. "Is money really that great? The world is divided into two by it: into those who have money and those who don't. Some people are so obsessed with it they'll even kill another person. At best, you could call it a necessary evil, don't you think?"

"Fools bad. Money no bad," Kaphal said.

"I-I suppose so..."

Something about the way Kaphal said that caught Lushera's interest. It didn't seem that Kaphal's choice of words was coming from a place of particular enlightenment, more that it was coming from an irritation towards these fools she mentioned.

"Lushera. Buy what with money?" she asked as she gave the small silver coin back to Lushera.

"That sandwich over there."

"Uh, that?" asked Viola with a grimace that said she wouldn't eat anything from the portable cooking stall Lushera pointed to on the edge of the fountain square. "Are you sure you're sane? You'd really go out of your way to buy a sandwich that's more leaves than meat?"

"That's what I want. Living in the mountains, I couldn't eat bread or nice vegetables grown by people. It was just meat and fruit. That food might have been really good, but I just missed having a sandwich."

"Aaah." Viola seemed convinced.

What Lushera craved after coming back to civilization was bread and vegetables.

"Kaphal eat too!"

"...You want to eat that?" asked Lushera. "Actually, can you even eat with that body?"

“No problem.”

First of all, human food was too small for dragons. And even if she did eat something, the Kaphal there wasn't Kaphal's real body, it was just a fragment. Lushera hadn't planned to feed Kaphal, but she seemed quite excited by the idea.

“What do you want to eat?” asked Lushera.

“Same, Lushera. Want try.”

“Okay.”

Which meant she didn't *need* to eat, she just wanted to try what Lushera was having.

With money in hand, Lushera went over to the lady at the stall. “Could I have two fish and veggie sandwich specials, please?”

“Hello there, little miss. Is the other one for your mom?” replied the woman with a warm tone.

But that smile struck Lushera from an unexpected direction, sending her mind reeling from surprise. “Uh... Yeah,” she said.

Mom. The woman referred to Kaphal as Lushera's mom.

They really did look like mother and daughter at first glance, with their shared characteristics, so looking at it objectively, yes, it made sense someone would think they were related.

And Kaphal had given Lushera the name of her daughter and raised her. Lushera even knew her place in the relationship: she was the adopted daughter of a dragon. But it was still surprising how shocked she was to have Kaphal referred to as her mom during an everyday kind of conversation, like it was perfectly normal.

What's with...this weird embarrassment...

The lady didn't seem to mind Lushera, who couldn't help looking away, as she started putting the sandwiches together with a pleasant smile. “Such a good girl, ordering for your mom. I'll add in a little extra helping of fish for you.”

“Th-Thank you...”

The woman's hands worked with extraordinary skill as she mounded vegetables and flaked fish onto the bread. She wrapped up the two sandwiches in paper and handed them over, and Lushera took them and stumbled off, the shock still not entirely passed.

“Here, I bought you a sandwich,” she said.

“What human say to Lushera?”

“Oh, uh, nothing bad. Just that...she'd add in extra because I'm good for ordering for my mom...” Lushera rushed to explain, since Kaphal seemed concerned.

“Good human.”

“Y-Yeah, probably.”

“Kaphal go tell her good human.”

“No! It's okay, you don't have to do that!” Now Lushera was panicking about three times more than before as she jumped to stop Kaphal, who was about to walk over to the stall. If Kaphal did that, Lushera was sure her cheeks would catch on fire and not burn out for another three days and nights.

“Got my takeout, uh, what's going on here?” said Timm as he and Weyne both came back with large packages of food.

“A mother's love is going on rampage,” said Viola.

The five of them (four humans and a dragon) took a seat on the edge of the large fountain amongst the bustle of the square, each of them eating their food.

“Let's dive in...” said Lushera, looking at her sandwich again and realizing it actually was quite large.

Or rather, Lushera was smaller since she had become a child. Now that she was actually eating the sandwich, it looked bigger. She opened her mouth as wide as she could and took a bite from the sandwich and the fresh vegetables poking out.

“Mmm... Who knew bread and vegetables could be this good...” she

murmured.

The crisp texture of the vegetables and their slight bitterness were nice. Setrayu had good water, which led to prolific aquaculture farming, meaning you could buy high-quality produce for cheap almost anywhere.

Lushera was also overwhelmed by the soft bread with its wheat flavor.

There were plenty of bitter grasses up in the mountain, but vegetables whose quality had been improved and flavor adjusted for human consumption were a product of civilization. And that extended to bread, of course.

“What do you think, Kaphal?” asked Viola, sitting with her back perfectly straight and hands moving with an unexpected elegance as she wolfed down her mound of food.

“Strange. This first time eat,” said Kaphal, eating the sandwich bite by small bite as if exploring the taste and texture of the sandwich.

“You’ve never had actual cooked food? They say that dragons who live in groups are served by various monsters and live a life similar to human nobles...”

“Oh yeah, there’s the famous Flight of Four Colors. I heard they live something like that,” said Weyne. “I also heard dragons normally live in human form.”

“Kaphal different.”

“Even among the human race, there are some human tribes who live in remote regions with primitive lifestyles. I suppose Kaphal is like that, just for dragons,” said Viola. “I think it’s also quite rare even amongst dragons who live alone to be so absolute with their lifestyle.”

Lushera hadn’t put that much thought into things, but what Viola said was true. Dragons were often seen as more noble, more advanced than humans. But that nobility could take various courses. There were those stories that told of the elegance of the beast of legend living in nature, and there were those stories that told of civilized creatures living the refined life of nobles and sometimes interacting with people.

Kaphal’s lifestyle was the first one. She used her claws and fangs to take out

her prey, tearing into it while it was still alive, to then curl up and sleep beneath the stars. She had probably never experienced cooked food.

“What do you think? Do dragons like sandwiches?” asked Lushera.

“No sure yet. But happy eat same as Lushera.”

“Oh...”

“Why is your face so red?” said Viola as she jabbed Lushera with her elbow. Lushera just kept eating her sandwich.

But when she looked at Kaphal out of the corner of her eye, she couldn’t help feeling as if cold hands had stroked her face.

Kaphal...?

Her eyes were serious, even a little sad, as she looked at her half-eaten sandwich. Lushera didn’t have the heart to ask her if she really was happy.



MOUNT Kugus was currently silent, but there were stories that it concealed fire within its belly. That was why a red dragon took up residence there.

Some people took the hot springs bubbling from various parts of the mountain as evidence to support that theory. Though, unfortunately, Lushera had never seen one of these hot springs while living on the mountain.

These springs were the reason Kugut’hulm had long been a popular destination for bathing. It had become too dangerous to build bathing facilities on the mountain, or to run pipes from the springs to town since Kaphal began living there, but, luckily, there was a hot spring close to the base of the mountain. The water drawn from that spring was still brought to Kugut’hulm.

“Is the temperature okay, Lushera?” asked Viola. “The hot spring water is too hot, so it’s cooled a bit, but we’re the only ones who use the facilities here, so it’s not really maintained. I honestly don’t know how to adjust it.”

“It’s fine. Actually...I probably wouldn’t even burn in boiling water,” said Lushera.

“Hahaha... Yeah, I suppose that’s true. Boiling water wouldn’t leave a mark on

my pearly skin either. I'm sure you'd be perfectly fine with it since you lived in the mountains."

Lushera was enjoying a long soak in a bathtub about three times the size of one in a normal house, while Viola called in through the window from the outside where she was fiddling with the equipment.

This was the Golden Helm's base, an inn. Lushera was in the bath of one of the guest rooms.

"This place is incredible. Is this entire inn your base? I guess I should expect as much from the top party of the city..." said Lushera.

"You say that, but it's just because Weyne's grandmother owns the property. She decided to close the inn because she's getting on in age and running it was getting to be too much on her old bones, so we just decided to use it and moved in. She sometimes makes us food, and we do pay, but no normal guests come and we're flexible when the landlady isn't feeling well."

"...With the way Weyne dresses, I thought he was some sort of fugitive, but I guess this means he's just a normal local man," Lushera mused.

"Ahaha... Weyne's a 'look the part to get the part' kind of person, so he's dressed like that since he was a rookie adventurer. And because of that, he's now in the top party in the city. It's important to look the part. Something that only looks the part in the beginning will eventually become the real thing."

Viola let out a loud laugh and peeked in the window. Well, less of a peek and more like an outright look, but the steam coming from the room immediately fogged up her glasses.

"You're not bathing with Kaphal?" she asked.

"She said she was coming, but I asked her not to."

"Oh? Why?"

"Why? Why wouldn't I?"

Kaphal coming to town with Lushera meant she was with Lushera every second with such vigor she even followed her when she went to use the toilet. Viola had already caught on to Kaphal's behavior pattern because of that.

Kaphal had said she would come with Lushera for the bath, but Lushera told her not to, because it was embarrassing in several ways. But Kaphal looked quite disappointed, making Lushera feel like she'd done something wrong.

All I did was tell her she can't come in the bath with me. Is that really something to be shocked about? For a dragon? I guess when we were in the mountains, she would sometimes lick me clean. Maybe she was just trying to do the version of that that humans do?

Maybe she felt like Lushera was pushing her away. If so, it did make sense why she might be upset, but...was that really what this was about?

"Um, Viola, I feel like Kaphal has been acting strangely since we came to town. Have you noticed anything?" asked Lushera.

"Such as?"

"Like she's worrying about something, or...suddenly upset... I don't know why she would feel that way."

Viola hummed and hawed as she inelegantly used her sleeve to wipe her glasses. They immediately fogged up again. "If you don't know, then I'm not sure anyone can know. You're the one who knows her best, after all."

"I have absolutely no confidence in how much I really understand Kaphal though. I don't understand Draconic, and Kaphal isn't very good with our language yet. All I really know is that Kaphal was sad after losing her egg, so... she just sort of started doting on me instead."

"Sounds like you know plenty to me."

"Don't joke."

"I'm not, I'm serious. You know a lot about her," she said with a soft smile, which shocked Lushera because it made her feel like she was being stubborn.

"I wonder if there really is someone who can interpret Draconic. With their help, I could understand how Kaphal feels..." said Lushera.

"Some things can be understood even without words. Though...that's a little poetic lie. We humans live through our language. We can come to understand so many more things if they're expressed through words. That's just how some

things are.”

Lushera looked up at the ceiling, its tiles blurry through the steam. She’d thought she’d known plenty about Kaphal, but now she was learning there was still so much she didn’t know.

“Lushera!”

“Ah!”

Just then, Kaphal shouted her name and pulled the door to the bathroom open. Her body was nothing more than a puppet created and moved with magic, but now its flaming dress was gone, not a single stitch of clothing covering it.

Her skin was beautiful and white, her youthful, slender body was perfection with its wasteless, functional beauty, with only certain places having extra padding in a way that almost symbolized motherhood.

“Weyne teach Kaphal,” she said. “Kaphal know real human feelings, know ‘naked companionship.’”

“What the hell did he teach you?!” Lushera shouted.

“Kaphal wash Lushera.”

“Wait! Just hold on a second!”

Kaphal, having brought a washcloth with her, pulled Lushera out of the bath and sat her in front of her and scrubbed her body, lather covering her in a matter of seconds.

“It’s looking hot in there,” said Viola.

“That’s something you’d say to a lover!” cried Lushera, enduring the unwanted commentary from outside the window.



THE room Lushera and Kaphal were assigned was really quite simple. One wardrobe, one small table, two chairs.

That wasn’t the problem though.

“One double bed... Right, so we’re supposed to sleep together,” said Lushera.

The thing dominating the compact room was the large, fluffy bed.

“This do what?” asked Kaphal.

“Oh, uh, you lay on it. But, you don’t have to curl up. Human bodies aren’t made for that. And then you pull the blanket over you...”

Even if Kaphal did get her first human body, she didn’t have human knowledge, like how to use human furniture for sleeping. She picked up a pillow and started swinging it around, so Lushera pulled her into bed and laid down beside her.

Ugh, what am I doing?

It was fine. It wasn’t like Lushera was opposed to sharing a bed. They always slept cuddling together in the mountains.

And yet, Lushera couldn’t help wondering if this was really okay. Was there any point, for either Lushera or Kaphal, to keep miming what human parents did with their children?

Lushera felt like she was strung up in midair, unable to calm down.

“This size, Lushera close.”

“Yeah...”

“Sleep together many, but, now, feel different.”

Kaphal pulled Lushera close like a body pillow. Perhaps it was because Kaphal wasn’t yet used to using this spell, because, while this fragment body looked human, it had an unstable feel, like it was a stuffed animal.

“Kaphal small, Lushera big... Much Lushera.”

Lushera couldn’t see Kaphal’s expression since she was pulled into Kaphal’s soft chest.

“Lushera... Lushera hate Kaphal?”

“Huh...?”

Fear. Kaphal’s voice was so hesitant, Lushera could hear the unease.

She was a gigantic dragon. She could crush mountains underfoot, subjugate

the heavens. And she was afraid, voicing words of anxiety.

Something had seemed off about her ever since they came to town. Lushera didn't know why, but she had maybe just found the first clue for helping her unravel that mystery.

"...No, I don't. I love you, Kaphal. I think. But, I'm not actually sure."

That was the unvarnished truth, no attempts to hide anything.

She knew she owed Kaphal her life, that Kaphal had been kind to her, that she had a charming personality. She knew she wanted to be with her, even though they couldn't talk properly with each other.

If you tried to sum up all those emotions into one word, "love" would work, wouldn't it? As embarrassing as it was.

Kaphal seemed to relax when she heard Lushera's answer.

"Why did you ask me that?" asked Lushera.

"Um..." For a long time, Kaphal stared at the dark ceiling, searching for the words. The warm light from a streetlamp or something like that reflected off the water and snuck in through the window. "Sorry. Human language hard."

"Yeah..."

Kaphal hugged Lushera close, using that as a replacement for words.

And then she did something else.

"Ack!"

Before Lushera could stop it, she'd licked her cheek. Lushera jerked away in surprise.

"Bad?" asked Kaphal, and Lushera realized how much that reaction must have hurt her when she saw her looking sad.

"U-Uh, no, it's not bad, it's just... Humans don't lick each other like dragons do. It has a different meaning. Um, i-it's fine if you do it while you're in dragon form."

"Oh..." Kaphal hugged Lushera close again, but a little more restrained this time, and Lushera nuzzled her cheek against Kaphal's, just a little.



AROUND that same time, Gemmel was drinking large quantities of alcohol.

“H-He’s a, a monster... It’s him, it’s him, he got strong in the mountain, turned into a monster and he’s come back... Hick, gah... Come back to...to kill me...”

The already almost empty bottle hung from his limp hand as he tottered through the night streets, weaving between streetlamps.

“He” was alive. He survived a dragon’s mountain, consumed the dragon’s power, became strong, and now he’d come back down to the city.

Gemmel got a different story from Timm about this little girl named Lushera, but it all made sense. He was sure he was right. This Lushera was “him,” the man whose name they all forgot.

Any normal person would think this story was absolutely absurd, but Gemmel wasn’t the type of person to think too deeply about the past. This meant he could—just by chance in this one instance—see through to the truth without being trapped by preconceptions.

Timm said Lushera didn’t remember anything before going into the mountain.

No memory? Doesn’t remember a thing? Then it’s fine, right? But if she does remember...I’m a murderer. No, she’ll kill me—the monster’ll kill me before that matters...

He had the other party members hide for now but didn’t know what the best next step was. He’d tried thinking it through while gripped by terror, and before he realized it, he was drinking.

But drowning himself in booze simplified his already simple thoughts, which eventually led him to a solution.

“Hick! Urgh...thas it. Run. Mm...I’ll live! Ah ha, hahaha!”

They would start by running far away. And that was the end of the plan. Adventurers were, by their very nature, not constrained to any one patch of land. A party as powerful as the Seven-Sided Die could make do anywhere.

“Mr. Gemmel, leader of the Seven-Sided Die, correct?”

It wasn't until the man spoke to him that Gemmel saw them standing right in front of him. There were three men standing on the spinning, rainbow path, each in all black, with two heads and four arms.

"What...? Get lost...I'm drinking..." said Gemmel.

"Is it true that you traveled far across Mount Kugus when it was still restricted?"

Gemmel's head snapped up as he sobered slightly. He realized the path wasn't spinning, it was dark, not rainbow, the man in front of him had only one head and two arms, and there was only one of him. But he was in all black

"What the hell's this 'bout...?" asked Gemmel.

Liquor bottle still in hand, he judged the distance between him and the man in black.

There were some sellers, people generally in the know, that knew the Seven-Sided Die went up the mountain to gather medicinal herbs, since they'd exchanged the goods with those sellers for money. It made sense to assume anyone throwing that fact at him in a place like this was up to something. Maybe it was blackmail. Or perhaps, something more like blackmail. Or, or could it actually be...blackmail.

"No need for concern," said the man in black. "I didn't come here to criticize. In fact, I'm rather impressed. I would like to ask for your help."

"What...?"

The man in black didn't move even when Gemmel took a fighting stance. He spoke calmly. "I need a guide. What do you think? I will of course provide appropriate compensation..."

It was an emotionless invitation cloaked in sincerity, the sort of thing you might expect from a stubborn politician.

Chapter 6: A Search into the Past

THE next day, Lushera went into town to investigate this manager, presumed to be her.



“Seven-Sided Die’s manager? I think I vaguely remember him...”



“Oh, yeah, I have heard of a party like that. What? They’re still active?”



“Oh, yes, he came to my store all the time. He mentioned the name of an adventuring party he was with, but he didn’t seem like an adventurer at all. But I don’t know much else about him.”



“Did that jerk leave his cute little girl and beautiful wife to mourn him? No? You’re not his daughter?”



KUGUT’HULM was a rather large city. It was in a completely different league from a small country village where everyone recognized everyone else, making it difficult to trace back rumors.

Lushera targeted places where adventurers might frequent to start her questioning. Everyone was oddly cooperative with her, but she didn’t learn anything significant.

She didn’t hear anything of substance until nearly noon. The owner-cook for an eatery and bar was out back having a smoke as the establishment was in the process of opening when she started talking to him.

“Yah, I remember ’im. Started when that lot got drunk and went on a rampage. He came in the next day apologizing... Darn good apology it was too.

He came round pretty often after that.”

He was a bald man—though it looked like he was shaving his thinning hair—had a towel around his neck, an apron fastened around his back, and a beard on his face. He ran this pub on the street that went from the Guild to an area where a lot of adventurers lived. That was probably why it seemed so many of his customers were adventurers and why Lushera decided to talk to him, a decision that turned out to be a good one.

“To be honest, they treated ’im like their servant. I wouldn’t’ve put up with that,” said the man.

“Do you know anything about the manager himself?” Lushera asked.

“Like...?”

“Even the tiniest thing. I’m paying for information.” Lushera wasn’t going to let the lead she’d finally found get away. She flipped a silver coin with a ping.

The man’s eyes opened wide. He gripped Lushera’s shoulders, almost hugging her, and shook his head. “That’s all right, girlie. That move’s for adults, not something a little kid should be doing. You shouldn’t be goin’ anywhere near any grown adult who wouldn’t help out a little kid if they didn’t pay out.”

“Actually, it’s a bit of a long story, but I’m older than I look...” she said.

“I can tell what sorta girl you are with just one look at your innocent little face. Besides, you’re still with your momma. Isn’t that right, Mom?”

“Uh...” said Kaphal, a look of shock on her face.

Lushera didn’t get the impression this wasn’t just from suddenly having the conversation turned to her. She looked like she’d realized something.

Is she surprised? Is it really that unexpected?

Setting her own emotions aside for a moment, Lushera was certain Kaphal was raising her with the intention of acting as her mother.

“Ah, well, anyway,” said the man. “That guy, uh, damn...what was his name again? Can’t remember at all. Am I getting old?”

“It’s fine if you don’t know his name.”

“Well, this manager, all started when he came and apologized for what the Seven-Sided Die did. Then they ended up being some of my best customers, they were always comin’ in for food and drink. Not that I’d complain if they didn’t come and just spent the money here.

“Oh yeah, then there was the time they did me a huge favor. You ever heard of medicinal cuisine? It’s food made with healing plants and whatever, it’s good for you. Anyway, some dumbass mixed in some poison plants with my healing produce. Definitely partly my fault for not noticing, but I’m not any sort of expert when it comes to these things, so nothing I could really do about it.”

“What was the poisonous plant called?”

“Don’t know the official name, but I guess adventurers call it zombie pepper.”

“Urgh.” Lushera grimaced. She’d heard of it before.

That plant fended off attackers with its spiciness and poison, but it had a spicy flavor that humans found incredible. Ingesting only a small amount resulted in intense pain, while ingesting a large amount resulted, as you might expect, in death. People called it the zombie pepper because only those already dead could enjoy the plant’s flavors.

It could be differentiated from other medicinal plants by its unusual fragrance, but only if you had expert-level knowledge and experience when it came to foraging for these types of plants. No amateur would be able to pick it out.

Adventurers sometimes used the plant as poison when fighting monsters, meaning they might be able to recognize the painful effects if one of the pub’s clients ate some.

The man let out a weary sigh, as if remembering the time. “Would’ve been one thing if I was the only one laid out by it, but there wasn’t any in the food when I did a practice run cooking it. Not sure if that was good luck or bad luck. Anyway, served it to the customers. It was a disaster. It wasn’t my fault, but folk don’t care ’bout that. I was sure I’d have to shut down, that the best thing to do would be to tie myself to a rock and jump in the canal.

“Then this guy, the manager or whatever, said to leave it to him. So, I hired

'em. Dunno how he talked the Seven-Sided Die into it, but they went and captured this stupidly powerful snake monster and made an antidote with it. I bought it and handed it out to all the people who ate the food. That meant nobody died and my little pub didn't go under.

"I wasn't exactly excited 'bout letting the Seven-Sided Die eat and drink all they wanted for free because of that, but you know, that much I couldn't say no to. The manager would come and try to pay for the food out of his own pocket, but I wouldn't take his money."

"That's..."

"You know, it was the Seven-Sided Die and that, uh...Gemmell guy who put their life on the line to fight the snake, but I don't think they would've helped me if it wasn't for the manager. I owe 'im. He's a hero." The man spoke with admiration.

As Lushera listened to the story, it made sense, it felt like something she would have done. Not to mention the added benefit that helping people led to a good reputation that could bring you your next job.

"Was curious why he suddenly stopped coming round... Did he die?" asked the man.

"Basically..."

"How do you 'basically' die? Ah, whatever. I figured. I stopped hearin' good things about the Seven-Sided Die 'round the same time he stopped coming. Guess they just stopped working for the good of society or the people in it. Without any positive gossip about them making the rounds, they're not going to be gettin' any direct jobs." He let out a large puff of smoke in the form of a sigh.

Whenever an adventuring party took on a job and received payment, it was because they helped someone somewhere, whether in a big way or a small way. The rest was just determined by what direction they took that in.

When the Seven-Sided Die had their manager working for them, he guided that well, miraculously well, but a machine couldn't work with the loss of even one gear.

“Shit, why a young bloke like ‘im got to die before a fossil like me?”

“Thank you for telling me what you know,” said Lushera.

“Don’t mention it. Make sure you live a long life, girly. Don’t make your momma sad.” He dumped the used tobacco from his pipe and stamped it out under his heel, then waved over his back as he went back inside.

“Lushera was amazing human,” said Kaphal.

“Uh, y-yeah, but, I don’t remember it, so it doesn’t seem real...”

Kaphal hugged Lushera from behind and nuzzled against her. The act likely had a meaning similar to a human patting a child on the head.

And then...Kaphal fell completely silent.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lushera.

“Was amazing person,” she murmured. The words weren’t directed at Lushera. It was like she was trying to chase something down, to see it clearly.

“Lushera good person.”

“Hm? Oh...thanks.”

“Good person, many friends.”

“I guess.”

That would normally be a compliment to be proud of, and yet...Kaphal seemed so sad when she said it.



THERE was one building that stood silent amongst the bustle of Kugut’hulm.

Something about the calm magic illumination invited visitors to sleep.

“The library... I vaguely feel like I remember this place, too...” said Lushera as she entered the silent building with its rows of bookshelves.

Apparently, the city administered the library. The cheap carpet swallowed all sound, even the visitors’ footsteps, forcing a stillness throughout.

“There you are, Lushera. And with Kaphal,” said Viola, looking up from the book she was reading while she waited in a chair near the entrance.

The Golden Helm went off that morning to investigate what the Seven-Sided Die was up to after Lushera and Viola agreed on a time to meet back up at the library.

“Did you learn anything?” asked Lushera.

“Unfortunately, we came up completely empty,” said Viola.

“So, you didn’t get to see the Seven-Sided Die after all?”

“Nope. According to Timm, none of their four members have returned to their base since he went to ask them about the manager. Before coming here, we stopped at the Guild to file a report, since something odd is definitely going on. Either they just randomly decided to disappear, or something happened to them... But anyway, the Guild will talk to the Guard, and if they decide this is some sort of incident, there’s a good chance they’ll break the lock and investigate their base.”

It was hard to put words to this. The situation was smelling fishier by the minute, but a step had been taken forward. The problem was that, if they didn’t know where the Seven-Sided Die went, they couldn’t ask them about the manager, and there was no evidence they actually did anything wrong, so the Guard probably couldn’t start an investigation immediately.

Lushera was impatient, but the only choice was to wait for the process to play out.

“I’ll be entering with two guests,” said Viola to the librarian.

“Of course. Welcome back, Ms. Viola.”

She showed her adventuring license and the three of them entered the building.

Only those who lived or worked in the city could enter the library, meaning Lushera and Kaphal wouldn’t be able to get in on their own. They were allowed to enter if they were accompanied by someone with access, though, which was why Viola came along.

Their goal for this visit was to test Lushera’s knowledge, like Viola had suggested. If she really did know a lot, then there was a good chance she used

to frequent the library and she could try asking the library patrons if they knew anything about the manager.

They passed through a forest of bookshelves and into the library proper, where Lushera saw a face she recognized.

“Oh, Lushera?!” cried the woman.

“You’re...Emerald, from the Blue Flag!” said Lushera, spotting the white witch in her neat white clothing, standing and reading a book.

Emerald was the leader of the adventuring party Lushera met on the mountain and helped. She clearly hadn’t expected to see Lushera here, her eyes were wide with shock.

“Yes, yes, that’s me. What brings you here?” she asked.

“It’s complicated. Was everyone in your party okay after we separated?” asked Lushera.

“Yes, thanks to you. We owe you our lives. Thank you so much.” She took off her pointed hat and bowed low.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really.”

“Hi there,” said Viola with a casual wave of her hand.

“Oh, you’re here as well? Did you bring Lushera?”

“Something like that.”

The Golden Helm had told Lushera they came to the mountain because the Blue Flag brought information on Lushera back with them. Looking at it that way made Lushera realize Emerald was essentially the person who connected her to Viola.

“Emerald, are you studying for the rank exam?” asked Viola.

“This is a book on archaic theories surrounding the elemental magic of fire. It’s...not exactly useful. More a hobby,” she said, flipping through a couple of the pages of the heavy tome in her hand to show them. The book explained difficult concepts without breaking them down, clearly meant for someone with specialized knowledge of the subject.

And Lushera understood it.

I have the entire premise of what this talks about in my head, even though a specialist magic user thinks it has no real use, and is only reading it for fun or for their own personal education?

Lushera's memories were vague, but she was fairly certain she'd never been able to use magic until Kaphal took her in. The normal person didn't bother learning information about magic they couldn't use.

"Some people do study for a purpose, but I'd imagine at least half of us do it just for fun," said Emerald. "Us magic-using adventurers read so much during our training, reading just becomes a habit. Not that a warrior couldn't do to read a book or two. The tomes weep at their neglect."

Emerald had a thick novel tucked under her arm as well. This library had a wide range of books, from specialist texts that would be hard to find a specific use for, to books meant entirely for entertainment. Though Emerald read all books for entertainment it seemed, she probably put the specialist texts in the same category as novels.

"This is an incredible library," said Lushera.

"It's because, a long time ago, Kugut'hulm used to be a stopping point for people traveling through the mountains from Martgarz—before the dragon started living there. You could say the library is something of a legacy. It's incredible in so many ways," explained Emerald, not knowing the dragon she mentioned was right in front of her.

Lushera had the feeling she already knew that. Kaphal moved to the mountain about seventy years ago, was that really a "long time ago"? The dispute over Mount Kugus had gone on since around that time, maybe the political sparring was even livelier back then.

During that time, a dragon came and settled on the mountain, forcing both countries to stand about with no method for resolving the political tension. More variants appeared on the mountain, turning it into a dangerous land of monsters that humans couldn't step foot in. Martgarz was still blockading the road over the mountains at that point, and no private merchant was willing to commit suicide and chase the dragon away.

This resulted in the loss of a trade route. The territorial dispute was shelved before it could be resolved and a long time passed, at least, long by human standards. The issue started to heat up again after Martgarz went to war with the large country, the Guffarr Union, and they could use the dispute as fodder for keeping Setrayu in check, since they were supporting the Union. Things were about to boil over at this point.

“Why are you here, Lushera?” asked Emerald.

“I’m investigating the man who used to work as a manager for the Seven-Sided Die. He seemed to know a lot about magic and monsters, so I thought maybe the other people who used the library a lot would know him.”

“Manager for the Seven-Sided Die... Oh, yes! I remember him! Hard to forget since there aren’t many adventuring managers. He was always devouring books. I couldn’t help being impressed that he would come here just to get information for others, since so many adventurers won’t even study, even if their life depends on it.”

“Well, it was just his job. It makes sense he’d read enough for everyone...” Lushera said.

“Why are you being modest for him?” Emerald raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, anyway,” Lushera cleared her throat. “Do you know anything about him? Like, any personal relationships he had?”

“Well... Even though I saw him here quite often, we only talked occasionally... I feel like I remember him mentioning he was in a tight spot money-wise. And, oh yes, he complained a little that there were so few people hiring managers.”

That was the best Emerald could come up with after scouring her memories. They really hadn’t talked about much then.

He had money problems, but couldn’t be picky about his jobs... Is that how he ended up working for a party with a bad reputation? They were the only ones who would hire him? I bet the pay was low.

Lushera learned a little about the manager’s circumstances, but it didn’t seem like important information at the moment. It wasn’t likely to lead to someone who could interpret Draconic.

“I’m sorry, that’s about all I know,” said Emerald.

“No, thank you. It helps,” said Lushera.

It wasn’t what she hoped for, but Lushera would never ever admit that. Instead, she just thanked Emerald, which was enough to make her blush and smile.

The next moment though, Emerald’s expression turned serious. “By the way, Lushera, that woman who looks quite a lot like you, could that be—?”

“Shh...” Lushera brought a finger to her lips, and Emerald nodded several times without another word.

Stories were often told of dragons turning into humans. Kaphal’s fragment body looked so much like Lushera’s mother that it was easy enough to guess what her relationship with Lushera was.

“Wh-Why is she here...?” asked Emerald.

“It’s complicated.”

“Right. I-I just remembered I have a terrible stomachache I really should take care of immediately.”

Emerald scurried away, leaving Kaphal staring after her in puzzlement.

Lushera thought Emerald was a bit too frightened, but then remembered she was the one who told the Blue Flag that she didn’t know what Kaphal would do to intruders on the mountain. She wrote herself a mental note to follow up on that later.



AFTER that, Lushera continued to ask anyone who looked like they came to the library often about the manager, but, while several of them did remember the manager of the Seven-Sided Die, none of them told her anything more than Emerald already had.

Viola did what Viola did best, and just started reading a book. Lushera eventually gave up on her questioning and started to scan the bookshelves for anything that might be related to adventuring.

First, she picked up an illustrated compendium of monsters. It had detailed information for adventurers on how to handle each monster, but Lushera already knew all the information. She nearly yawned reading it.

Kaphal was left with nothing to do, but even she seemed to hear the call of the books, as she started to look around her with interest.

“Book,” she said.

“Yes, that’s a book,” said Lushera.

“Lushera, why humans make books?”

Lushera had to think for a moment to decide how to answer the very fundamental and unexpected question. “People’s lives are short, and it doesn’t take much to kill us. Maybe we want a way to tell others our thoughts, even after we’ve died. And there are a lot of us. There’s no way we could speak with each one and hear what they have to say. That means we need a way to tell lots of people what we think, even if we can’t talk to them.”

Dragons thought differently from people (particularly humans). Lushera tried to guess what aspect Kaphal was asking about so she could answer. Were those feelings really held by the books lining these shelves?

“What books say?” asked Kaphal.

“Hm... All sorts of things. These books are about monsters. Over there are books about geology. They probably have a lot of those since this town has hot springs. Over there are novels. Those are books that tell stories.”

“All sorts.”

“Yeah, there really are all sorts. But actually, this library is on the small side. Libraries are generally built by the country’s government, or maybe local lords. The bigger, more powerful, and more interested in the future a country is, the bigger the libraries are. The library in the capital of Martgarz is absolutely massive and...”

Lushera surprised herself by the words coming out of her own mouth.

The library in the capital of...Martgarz? I know about that?

If you climbed Mount Kugus, you had to come from the north or the south.

Lushera vaguely remembered this city, she likely had a connection with the adventuring party called the Seven-Sided Die, and she had a knife that was bought here. All of that meant that Lushera assumed she'd gone up the mountain from the Setrayu side. But if that was the case, why did she have memories about Martgarz?

Setrayu and Martgarz were physically close, but far in any practical sense since it was impossible to go over the mountain. Add in the fact that Setrayu was supporting an enemy country of Martgarz, and it didn't make any sense why Lushera would have come all the way from Martgarz to here.

"Lushera, what that?" asked Kaphal. She was looking at a mother and daughter sitting in a chair nearby.

"Have you seen my bell?" asked the calico cat. 'No, I haven't,' said the rabbit." The young mother had her little girl in her lap and was reading a children's book to her.

"That's a picture book," said Lushera. "They have lots of pictures with a simple story, so they normally tell stories for children. Parents read them to their young children, then they start reading them on their own once they get a little bigger. They learn how to read through that process."

Lushera gave the kind of answer you might read in an encyclopedia since she felt responsible as a representative of humans to explain. Kaphal stood still, staring at the picture book the whole time, staring at the child happily looking at the pictures, and the mother quietly reading the text aloud with love.

"Want to do," said Kaphal.

"...Do you want to be the one reading, or the one being read to?"

"Want to read," she replied without a moment's hesitation.

"Uhh..."

Kaphal went to the bookshelf. It was a short one, built so that small children could take books and put them back. "Here. Same book." She took out another copy of the same book the mother and daughter were reading, then sat in a chair. "Here."

“You want me to...sit?” Lushera asked with an awkward pause.

Kaphal patted her knee, and Lushera caved to the pressure. She hesitantly lowered herself onto Kaphal’s lap, then Kaphal opened the book. Delicate watercolors depicted a character that was some sort of cat but also some sort of little girl. It was hard to tell.

“‘Have you seen my bell?’ asked the calico cat. ‘No, I haven’t,’ said the rabbit,” said Kaphal, reading the book out loud with a voice as sweet as a lullaby.

She completely memorized it all?! And I’m not even sure she understands it... Dragon memory is crazy!

Kaphal had supposedly never read human language before. She chose the same book as the other mother because, even if she didn’t understand the written words, she could just recite it as she heard it.

“Mommy, that girl’s bigger than me, but her mom’s reading her a book...” said the little girl as she and her mother were passing by, having finished the book and gone to leave.

“You shouldn’t say things like that. Everyone starts learning like that in the beginning,” said her mother, chiding the girl for pointing and questioning what others were doing.

B-But Kaphal’s the one who’s learning here!

Lushera felt like she was going to spontaneously combust out of sheer embarrassment.

“Aw, would you take a look at that,” said Viola with a smile of pure joy when she came back.

“Please...rescue me...” groaned Lushera.

“Rescue you? From what? And how?”

“‘I can’t find the bell you lost, but I can give you a new bell,’ said the white cat. ‘From this day on, this is your home,’” said Kaphal.

Every inch of Lushera felt uncomfortable with this situation.



THE second day in town also ended without any visible progress.

But Lushera hadn't yet lost hope, since she was gaining tidbits of information on the manager. Sometimes, even little bits of information could come together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to form a larger picture. It wasn't bad for the results of this war waged by waiting.

The biggest change it brought was making Lushera realize how uncomfortable she'd been this whole time not knowing who she was.

When she lived on the mountain, she was Kaphal's adopted daughter, nothing more and nothing less. But coming to civilization forced her to acknowledge the fact that she used to live in this world. She was hit with a sense of relief every time the divide between her and this world was filled in just a little, making her realize how disheartened she'd been.



THE sun was lowering in the sky, the voices of people intermingling in the hospitality district of this city famous for its spas. There was an odd sort of isolation that came from listening to those voices while inside a silent, long closed-down inn.

The dining room would once have hosted twenty guests at once, eating together, but now the majority of the tables and chairs stood stacked in the corner, only making the emptiness all the more powerful.

The men were on the rooftop, waging war on a game board as they drank after their baths. Kaphal apparently picked up the game from watching, while Weyne taught her a mixture of lies and truths about human society. She probably avoided the worst of what he might say, since Timm was there as well, but Lushera still felt a burning sense of duty to ask Kaphal later what she learned so that she could do damage control.

While they did that, Lushera was with Viola in the dining room, with Viola very strongly insisting she drink some milk.

"Milk is nice... I feel like I didn't used to like milk, but it's so good after not having it for so long," said Lushera.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” said Viola.

“Why do people drink milk after going in the hot springs?”

“Who knows. It was originally a custom in the eastern countries.”

Even the drops of condensation on the cup felt nice. The chilled milk worked to cool down Lushera’s flushed skin after the bath.

It happened again that day, Kaphal bursting in, interrupting Lushera’s bath to lick her clean. Then she pulled her into a hug and the two soaked in the bath for a while.

“I wonder...what I really am to Kaphal,” said Lushera.

“What?”

“I wonder why she took me in.”

The question struck Lushera out of nowhere, almost like a reaction to Kaphal doting on her earlier.

She’d asked herself the same question several times when she lived in the mountains. She couldn’t ask Kaphal, so she was left with conjecture until now when there was someone whose opinion she could ask. Or at least, someone she could even have a conversation with.

“Kaphal lost her egg in a natural disaster last year, right?” responded Viola. “So, isn’t her wanting something to fill the hole of loneliness a good enough explanation?”

“I feel like that explanation comes from a human-like way of thinking, though,” said Lushera.

“I am far too obsessed with my adventuring work and monster researching hobby to have ever loved or been loved like that yet, but...I imagine if I had an egg that I devoted my entirety to, that I vowed to love forever, and then I lost it...my loneliness would be as great as my love had been.”

“Does the same apply to dragons, though...?”

“I would think they might fall even deeper into despair if it happened. Hued dragons, the dragons like red dragons that have color names, spend about forty

years raising their offspring.”

That made a lot of sense, but Lushera’s emotions were still stirred up. “But why *me*?” she asked. “There are so many other humans in the world.”

Just Lushera and Kaphal in the mountains had been a simple happiness. But there were thousands, tens of thousands of people right here in this city, which made Lushera realize that she and Kaphal weren’t the only ones in the world.

Coming back to human civilization was like waking from a dream for Lushera. She felt like her life in the mountains was so incredibly unnatural and unstable. Just a tiny shake would send it all crashing down.

Viola drank her second glass of milk, a hand on her nearly flat chest. She wasn’t in her hideous robe anymore after getting out of the bath. Her short, blond hair was pulled up, and she was wearing loungewear that showed off a certain amount of skin. The only thing that remained were her glasses, like the bottoms of two glass bottles over her eyes.

“Do you even need a reason?” she questioned. “Other than, ‘you just happened to be there’? Fated meetings don’t need any more drama. Half of what happens in the world is random chance anyway.”

“Random chance...?”

“There’s a good chance that *you* didn’t need to become Lushera. There were probably all sorts of other adoptable children that would’ve fit what Kaphal was looking for. You were just someone who filled the requirements...and also happened to be there. Maybe that’s it. Doesn’t it take pressure off knowing that’s all the reason people need in order to start loving each other? ‘It could have been anyone else,’ and ‘It was me because we happened to meet,’ are both enough for a fateful encounter.”

Viola’s voice was clear and a little rushed.

It wasn’t necessarily a good outlook on life, but those words made Lushera feel more comfortable. It also made her realize why she’d been feeling down: she’d wanted to be convinced there was something special and fated about her relationship with Kaphal. She wanted a reason for why Kaphal was with her.

Essentially, she didn’t want to leave Kaphal. As she became more aware that

their relationship was unnatural—at least from any normal perspective—she became more uneasy. She might have been embarrassed to have Kaphal fuss over her, but she secretly enjoyed being pampered.

But Viola was saying that happenstance was good enough. Even if Kaphal and Lushera only met by chance, that didn't mean they had to part ways.

"Viola...you really are an adult, aren't you?" said Lushera.

"I'm not sure if you're impressed or making fun of me..." She cackled, her glasses glinting as she gently pushed them up her nose.

"Thank you for listening."

"Are you going to go see Kaphal?"

"Yeah. I think we should be together..."

"Heehee... Well, have fun!" Viola beamed, seeming amused as she poured her third glass of milk.

Lushera left her behind in the dining room and went out into the empty hallway. The light from some other inn slipped in from outside. Lushera was suddenly worried about Kaphal, for some reason she didn't know.

She'd looked sad every once in a while ever since they'd come to town, acting like she had taken a step back from Lushera. But then, she was also doting on her, like when she licked her clean, and that made Lushera feel like there was something off about the distance between them.

Their relationship was being shaken. That was probably another reason why Lushera felt so uneasy.

What is Kaphal feeling now that she's come to a human town?



THE next day, and the day after that, Lushera walked the streets, watching as the vortex of unease over the city grew stronger and stronger. Gossip could be heard at every street corner, the court was stockpiling resources for war, nobles were fleeing to other countries, and more, though it was impossible to tell truth from fiction.

It was now commonly accepted that Martgarz was going to attack unless something was done about it. There was also talk that the royal court or the local lords were going to be making an announcement on the subject soon, but, for now, most of the city residents were just watching and waiting, a foreboding tension amongst them like a group of people watching the sky before a storm hit.

There were those fleeing with nothing but the clothes on their backs. There were those making plans to flee. There were those who could do nothing but stay in town and pray nothing happened.

Lushera and the others waited for the court to act. The Golden Helm received another two calls, but it sounded like the court was in complete chaos as they tried to pull together opinions on what to do. This wasn't surprising, it wasn't like they had any experience negotiating with dragons. They also had a lot on their plate dealing with whatever Martgarz was doing, and that was before adding Kaphal into the mix.

Progress was being made, it seemed, but Lushera was also being strangled by a need to hurry things along, like a noose tightening around her neck. She couldn't decide whether or not they really were going to join forces with the court until the court made a move, but time just kept flowing on while she was unable to even ask the other side what they were thinking.

There was one positive point: the Guild was so weak in Martgarz that the country had traditionally lacked significant investigation into monster-infested areas. This meant Martgarz probably couldn't act immediately. That wasn't a certainty though, and, even if they might move slowly, they were going to move eventually.

Regardless, right now, Lushera could only hold back her panic in preparation for the talks while she worked on chasing up information on a Draconic interpreter. In short, her only choice was to keep researching this manager and her presumed past.



IT was the fifth day since Lushera and Kaphal came down the mountain, and Timm took Lushera out to investigate.

“An adventuring manager’s office?” asked Lushera.

“Yeah. There’s one in town. They got approval from the Guild recently. The Guild even pays ’em a fee when they bring in jobs.”

They were heading to a place called McGregor Adventuring Support Services. It was just three of them: Lushera, Timm, and Weyne. Viola and Kaphal were back at the inn. Showing up with a crowd of people, including non-adventurers like Lushera and Kaphal, might raise suspicion. Weyne made the decision, saying they would stand out too much. Kaphal was not happy about being separated from Lushera.

“There’s not too many adventuring managers in town. I asked him if he knew anything ’bout our manager since they’re in the same line of work, and he said they’d met a couple times,” said Weyne.

“Hm,” said Lushera.

Adventuring managers were relatively rare throughout the world, and that held true for Setrayu, which was why the manager’s office wasn’t near the Guild. It was down a little ways on the main street.

Lushera wondered why they bothered opening their office in such a nice location, but there they found the artistic building with slender, white arched metal beams coming together like a spider web leading to a wall of glass.

“My name is Ivar McGregor, I’m the representative of this company. You must be Timm, leader of the Golden Helm. It’s an honor to meet you,” said a young man with a friendly tone. He wore a suit, and his hair was perfectly slicked back.

“Oh, am I famous then?” said Timm.

“How humble. You’re the leader of the top party in the city, I’m sure everyone knows your name. And to think, today you’ve come in to make use of our services...except I have a feeling that’s not the case.”

“You’re on the money. We’re here to follow up ’bout a strange thing, like we talked ’bout earlier.”

They were in a reception room, filled with not much other than a couple of small, decorative plants and lots of glass, drinking tea from oddly shaped cups.

Timm explained to Ivar how they were searching for this manager, as well as some of the odd occurrences surrounding the man.

Ivar listened intently. "I see. I did think there was something odd about the circumstances surrounding that manager. I remember meeting him several times, but I can't remember his name."

"Seems there's a mysterious power at work here. And...we don't know what that is. You wouldn't happen to know anything about him?"

"Just that he was an excellent manager. And that he was operating in this city before I opened this office."

"Oh..."

Ivar seemed like the sort of man who put on a certain mask when dealing with customers, a man whose every word was considered in advance, with a sharp but silvered tongue. And yet even he didn't hesitate to compliment this other manager.

"Why are you searching for him?" he asked.

"His family. They're looking for him," said Timm. He was a terrible liar. A grimace flickered across Weyne's face.

"I see..." said Ivar. He gave Lushera a short, piercing look. Not long enough to be rude, however. Lushera couldn't be sure what Ivar thought about Timm's deception, but she could tell that he was scrutinizing that facet of the story.

"We're also looking for a Draconic interpreter. Heard he might've known one," added Timm.

"A Draconic interpreter...? If you like, I could introduce you to one. Though, I would have to call them in from Martgarz."

"Nope, that's not gonna work. Sorry. Appreciate the offer though."

"If you say."

Their search for an interpreter wasn't making progress since they weren't getting much information on the manager.

Just when Lushera was resigning herself to the fact that this trip resulted in

nothing, Ivar looked like he remembered something.

“Ah, actually, there was one thing,” he said. “If I remember correctly, he was going to see Doctor Reiner.”

“Doctor Reiner?”

“Yes, Doctor Charles Reiner. He retired around the end of last year, but he used to have an office nearby. I’m fairly certain I remember him ending a conversation we had because Reiner’s office would be closing soon, and he had to go.”

“Really? A doctor’d probably have all sorts of records and things,” said Timm.

They’d already confirmed at the Guild that all paperwork mentioning the manager’s name was gone. If there were some papers that didn’t have his name on them though...for example, if there was a stack of papers bundled together, and only the first page had his name on it, then they could potentially get information about him from the rest of the pages.

The other possibility was that the doctor might know far more personal information about the manager than Gemmel did, since it was normal for people to chat about themselves while in the doctor’s office.

“You’ve been a big help,” said Timm.

“Not at all. By the way, you wouldn’t happen to want to try using our managing services for your party, would you?” asked Ivar.

“I’ll think about it. I already know you’re great at what you do.”

“You flatter me. Oh, and...if you plan to flee the city, you should do it sooner rather than later.”

Ivar dropped that bomb like it was the closing to the conversation.

Timm was half standing from his seat when he froze, like he’d been bound in place. There was a moment where his breath silently caught in his chest.

They didn’t know how Ivar was getting his information, but the meaning of what he said was clear: Martgarz is coming to attack.

“And you’re fine?” asked Timm.

“I’m from Martgarz. I have connections there. I’ll manage,” said Ivar.

“Right then. Well. Thanks for the advice.”

“And if you could give my regards to the princess.”

“Don’t call her that. Where’d you even get that kind of information?”

“It’s a trade secret.”

Ivar’s business smile was hard to read, but Timm handled him with the ease of an experienced adventurer. “So...adventuring managers, huh?”

Lushera was listening intently to the conversation while her thoughts were running around the manager profession.

She was like that once, apparently, but this was her first time seeing a manager other than herself. Did Ivar fit the standard mold for managers?

Memories, they seemed about to come back.

“You already got your adventuring license? Dang, hats off to you and your studiousness.”

He was being complimented. Or at least he thought so.

“I’m happy you’d go to those lengths to help me, but...there’s just something I have to say. It’s no walk in the park hanging with someone like me with a crazy life like mine. And when you finally decide you’ve had enough—”

It was gratitude, a rough smile trying to cover embarrassment.

Did he want to return a favor? To be useful? That was definitely part of it. But, that wasn’t it. Not all of it.

He couldn’t fight, but if he was a manager, then he could be with—

“Lushera? We’re headin’ out now,” said Timm, jolting Lushera from her happy yet sorrow-filled memories.

An undying flame burned in her mind, swallowing back the memories as they tried to float free of the ashes.



LUSHERA ended up heading to Adamant Sewing while Timm looked into this

Doctor Reiner. She was contacted last night to say that the equipment she ordered was ready. Though they had been waiting at the inn, Viola wanted to see Lushera in her new outfit, and wanted to show Kaphal, so the two came out of nowhere and rejoined Lushera.

For better or for worse, there were a lot of adventurers who didn't fit into standard categories. There were a lot of misfits and mavericks. Since Lushera had the strength of a dragon now, they could potentially gloss over any feelings people had of her not fitting in by putting her in adventuring clothes. It seemed like a good idea, anyway.

The other factor was that they had no idea when fighting might break out. Lushera wanted as much power as she could get so she could protect Kaphal, as well.

That was why they asked the equipment maker to work with the variant furs they brought from the mountain, just...

"...Urk." Lushera was speechless, her throat spasming in a half-scream.

Weyne and Viola had their heads in their hands.

The pervert was alone in her delight.

Lushera put on the completed "armor," and froze there from pure shock.

Its overall impression resembled the dress that Kaphal's fragment form wore. It was basically a crimson dress with a short skirt.

Beneath bared shoulders, a corset-like bodice squeezed tight against her form, then large ribbons spread from her hips like outstretched dragon wings.

The skirt was made of fairly stiff frills reminiscent of dancing flames, and it was quite short. There was the risk that someone looking at her from the front would be able to see her underwear, so she compensated by wearing a pair of very short shorts (apparently called hot pants) that could in themselves be mistaken for underwear, and with that, she was just about able to maintain her dignity. Her thighs were almost completely bare, bar a narrow ribbon wrapping around them held up by a garter belt.

Her arm guards were like long fingerless gloves, with crimson flower bud-like

elbow protectors attached to detached sleeves that left her upper arm boldly exposed.

On her head, she wore a headdress that was fancy yet had some country-like vibes. That was like a set with the knee-high boots of a similar style, except the boots had metal decorations on the toes that also had the practical function of providing greater defense as well as increasing her attack power with kicks. Lushera could tell the boots, that fit her feet like close gloves, were adventuring boots that could withstand harsh environments and fierce battles.

This armor made for Lushera, when combined with her flaming red hair, made her look like a flower of fire in full bloom. It was childlike, girlish, cute, but also a bit indecent, an item of such rare quality that it showed its creator's skill, and perverted tendencies.

"Ugh... I forgot...forgot to tell her to make a 'normal design,'" bemoaned Weyne.

"I'm such a moron! I know things can end up terribly if you let a human from the far east or a dwarf handle the design!" shouted Viola.

"Making a plain, humdrum style out of the world's greatest materials for the world's most incredible customer would be tantamount to blasphemy against all the world's gods! This! Right here! Is cuuute!" cried Midum.

"It *is* cute, but you've taken it so far there's no defending your choices!" argued Viola.

It was common for adventurers to wear outlandish outfits in order to sell themselves, but this...this was outlandish and distinctive by even those standards, and required whoever was wearing it to abandon a significant amount of their shame just to put it on.

When Lushera looked in the mirror, she did see a cute little girl. But she also saw a little girl that she needed to be concerned for.

"Oh...who's that cute girl in the embarrassing outfit...?" asked Lushera.

"Snap out of it, you need to face reality!" said Viola, clinging to and shaking Lushera's shoulders because she wasn't trying to take in the situation.

“Rude to call it embarrassing. This is avant garde!” declared Midum. Her appearance was pretty close to Lushera’s in age, but her breathing was heavy as she checked the equipment over. “Isn’t it nice? Ohohoho, adventurers wear artistic designs in order to stand out, ooohoho, and this is definitely within the, ehehehe, the realms of that.”

“I might’ve believed you if you didn’t have the creepy smile on your face,” said Lushera.

“But it’s cute, isn’t it?”

Lushera didn’t know what to say to that direct question. That wasn’t the issue here. If they were starting a debate over whether it was cute or not, Lushera would have to concede and agree it was cute.

She watched the face of the girl in the mirror turn red. “C-Cute... I mean, is there a reason the skirt had to be so short? Even the thing I’m wearing under the skirt, it’s so short, I’m exposed. People might see when I’m sitting or climbing something...”

“I don’t see the problem. It’s fine if people see.”

“No, it is not!”

“It’s fine. It’s cute, so you’re forgiven for wearing it and I’m forgiven for making it.”

No normal person would understand the perverted things Midum said, so Lushera decided to turn her arguments to a different aspect. “Being this exposed reduces the equipment’s defensive function,” she said.

“The material was so strong it would close in your body, having a negative effect on the natural flow of mana through the body if I didn’t make some parts exposed. It wouldn’t make much difference to a weakling beginner, but you have enough power to match this equipment.

“I’ve got solid defenses on the torso, lots of vital organs there, and the arms and lower legs, since they have a tendency to get injured. Which means I wanted to make some large openings where I could. Shoulders are good for that, and maybe the lower body. The thighs are a relatively safe place. Men can get away with just getting their guns out, but the mana flow is different in a

little girl.”

“O-Oh...you thought about that much...”

“You can get away with it if it’s clothes just for relaxing in, but it’s not gonna work for someone in the frontlines who has to move a lot.”

Lushera couldn’t string any more words together when Midum threw the logic of its function at her. It was common among the top female adventurers to show a lot of skin on their legs. Apparently, there was a functional reason for that.

“But, maybe, the design could be just a little bit more subdued...?” said Lushera.

“Lushera, cute!” cried Kaphal.

“Cu—? Ack!”

“See! Even Momma Dragon approves!” said Midum with pride, like she was exonerated from all charges just because Kaphal seemed happy.

Dragons normally live naked, they have a different threshold for embarrassment...

Lushera herself didn’t have any objections to the claim that the outfit was cute, but it seemed like a dragon and a pervert couldn’t possibly agree with a human on the other issues.

“I made you several pairs of underwear out of materials I had in stock. Here you go,” said Midum. “I took the scraps of the fur as payment. They look flimsy, but they’re sturdier than steel. You won’t get any holes in them, even from fire or acid.”

“Thank...you...”

The underwear issue from before had been essentially resolved with the drawers as underwear, but they couldn’t be worn with this outfit because of the length.

The underwear Midum gave her now was to be worn with this equipment, and it was, as you might have expected, skintight and offering very little coverage. And yet, they were still terrifying despite the lace-like decorations

and cute ribbons.

“Hey, there you all a— Urgh...” Just then, Timm walked into the workshop, took one look at Lushera, and jerked back like he’d been struck by an ogre’s club.

“He said ‘urgh’! I definitely heard ‘urgh’!” said Lushera.

“It’s fine!” said Timm. “It’s cute, and it suits you.”

“Look me in the eyes and say that again!” she demanded.

The armored man refused to comment on the problems with the outfit.

“Right, with Timm here, we can talk about what you wanted to talk about. Listen close, I’m not gonna repeat myself,” said Midum as she leapt into a low seat and crossed her arms and legs.

Weyne said nothing. He glanced out front to make sure no customers were coming in then closed the door.

“There’s no doubt about it. The Seven-Sided Die went up Kugus Mountain around the time Weyne mentioned. And it wasn’t their first time,” said Midum.

“Not surprising,” said Weyne.

The party had suspected the Seven-Sided Die broke the restriction and went into the mountains, and Midum was able to check the flow of illegal goods, which supported their theory.

“Their goal?” asked Weyne.

“Gold, probably. The medicinal herbs that grow near where a dragon lives fetch a pretty, pretty penny. They made enough to purchase one of Mini Mistress Midum’s items. And it seems they were after the dragon’s egg, too.”

“What?!” Lushera screeched, her voice cracking and her head feeling like it was about to explode from rage “Why?! How?!”

“Caaaalm dooooown. I’m the only one who can yell in my workshop.” Midum calmed Lushera down, but Lushera’s rage didn’t go away.

She knew something about how sad Kaphal was to lose that egg. The egg had already been lost in the landslide, before it could be stolen, but anyone who

tried to steal Kaphal's egg was committing a terrible act deserving of punishment by ten thousand deaths.

Kaphal was silent. She glowered, a growl almost forming in her throat. She didn't yet have the words to express anger in her human form, but if she had been any more experienced with human language, she likely would have been spewing curses.

"The why is simple," said Midum. "Money. Sounds like some Gemmel person went to a potential buyer in advance to ask about how much they'd buy it for. He didn't bring it in the end though, so it sounds like their plan failed. It's not the kind of thing you can just snatch up and walk away with."

No one spoke. They cringed, their eyes darting around like they couldn't bear standing there listening to that.

You couldn't very well say to Kaphal that it was a good thing her egg was destroyed before it could be stolen. They also couldn't really blame Midum for the uncomfortable topic—she was just telling them what she found out and didn't even know what had happened to Kaphal's egg. It still felt like she was treading on a dragon's tail right now, so to speak.

"Anyway, that's about all I found out," said Midum.

"Thanks, it's a big help," said Timm with a bow, since Midum agreed to help despite how extreme their request was.

"It's nothing. You scratch my back, I scratch yours."

At this point, they were basically just confirming their assumption, but it did look like Lushera really was the manager from the Seven-Sided Die.

Which meant, Gemmel guessed that at some point and decided to flee because he was afraid their illegal activities would come to light. Timm couldn't tell anyone where this information they learned today came from, considering its source, but he could probably speak to the Guild or the Guard and get them to turn the Seven-Sided Die's base inside out.

Them running with their tails between their legs did mean Lushera and the others might as well give up on the Seven-Sided Die as a source of information. They were at least not going to find them and get anything out of them before

Martgarz attacked.

That left their best course of action to continue investigating Lushera in town while they waited for a response from the court.

“Timm, you got back surprisingly quick. What happened?” asked Lushera.

“Yeah, so I found him, that Charles Reiner guy,” he said, a quick response Lushera wasn’t expecting.

“You found him?”

“Huh, that was quick,” said Weyne.

“I mean, he was a doctor even if he’s not practicing now,” said Timm. “Found him right away when I started asking around.” But Timm’s expression was grim, as usual. “Thing is, he’s famous. And not for a good reason. Something made him quit being a doctor, and he’s been drunk ever since. Even tried to kill himself.”



IT looked like the house’s entrance hadn’t been cleaned for at least the past few months. The metal bin out front for trash was overflowing, practically an exhibit on all the varieties of alcohol bottles.

The owner of the home clearly had enough presence of mind to take his trash outside the house, but not enough energy or self-respect to actually dispose of it.

Timm knocked on the door. Then again, and the owner of the house finally appeared after the third time he knocked.

“H-Huh...what is it? Need to pay for the drinks...right? I’m sure...I did...sure of it...”

He was a shriveled man with obvious beard stubble. He was only middle-aged, yet looked elderly, his anxious eyes refusing to focus on Timm while he let out a breath stinking of alcohol.

“Are you Doctor Charles Reiner?” asked Timm.

“Don’t call me doctor, I’m not a doctor anymore. Hate it, can’t stand it, don’t

deserve to be called a doctor..." Charles turned his face away from Timm like he got a whiff of something terrible and waved his hand like he was swatting away a bug.

But neither Timm nor the other four people moved (three people and a dragon?).

"What? Give it up, go away, I don't treat people anymore."

"You remember a guy that used to work as a manager for the Seven-Sided Die?" asked Timm.

Charles's reaction was extreme.

He'd seemed completely dulled by drink, but his eyes opened so wide they nearly popped from his gaunt face, his hands tearing at his white-flecked hair as he collapsed to the ground and screamed. "Ah, ah! Aaaaaaaaah!"

"What's wrong?!" asked Lushera.

"Hey, get a hold of yourself!" said Timm as he gathered up the writhing man, nearly restraining him. "Do you know what happened to him?!"

"I... I... I killed him!"

"Calm down, all right? Calm down and tell us what happened. We want to know about him."

His eyes still weren't focusing, but it was like the dam broke and a flood of words came out. "His sister...or maybe his girlfriend, I don't know, there was that woman, Giselle, he lived with, she was my patient... She was sick, a curse illness, for so long... All I could do was make her live a little longer, make her suffer a little less..."

The regret in his voice was so fathomless it might just go all the way to the bottom of the world.

"Eventually, I just couldn't do any more... And then, he asked me, he asked if there really was no way to cure her, and, I said... I said..."

He cradled his head in his hands, pulling at his white hair. And, after a long while, he said in a trembling voice, "I said...medicine made from a dragon's egg might cure her... And he went up Mount Kugus! I know he did! I killed him!"

A dragon egg.

“Wha...” Lushera said, the sound slipping out of her.

The egg, what came before a new dragon was born. There was nothing in this world with a more powerful lifeforce. A person on their deathbed could be saved if they ate one.

But getting a dragon’s egg was near impossible. They rarely laid eggs, as if that too was testament to the fact that they were symbols of long life and great strength. And if you did take a dragon’s egg, you would also have a terrifyingly powerful creature incredibly angry at you.

The red dragon of Mount Kugus was with egg right now, though. And since she lived alone, it might be possible to sneak past her watchful gaze.

“What’s this ’bout? Mount Kugus? Why there all a sudden...”

He knew Gemmel couldn’t be trusted, so he was careful, he didn’t tell him about the real goal.

It wasn’t cheap, buying information on where the dragon’s nest was. He didn’t give that to Gemmel either, kept it only in his head.

“Right, you got a deal then. Everything we get is ours. Anything you want you can buy at market price. It’ll have a finder’s fee included, sure you can pay it? Well...it’s all good if you’re fine working for nothing for the rest of your life. If you try and make a run for it, we’ll catch you, then maybe we’ll sell you to a slaver or something.”

That was fine. If it meant he could save Giselle, he’d worry about the rest later. Actually, if it meant saving her, he’d give up his life too.

“I remember...” said Lushera.

And, after it all, he looked at the broken egg, and felt a calm understanding, an acceptance that this was it. He didn’t know why, but it made sense.

“Lushera?!” Timm shouted as Lushera turned and bolted.

She knew the place.

She knew the streets.

She remembered, recalled the place where she lived with her!

Giselle!

Lushera rushed through the streets, transformed into a crimson gale. People gasped as she leapt, soaring like a dragon over any buildings that were in her way.

How could I forget you, Giselle!

Months' worth of anxiety crushed together, urging Lushera on.

It was one of the buildings facing the canal that was divided into apartments, its square frame stained dark from rain.

She saw narrow hallways with postal addresses noted outside. The objects on the ceiling that might have been a magic illumination device thirty years ago. The sooty, black stairs.

The door to room number 202, partway open.

"Giselle!"



And she felt the moisture-laden breeze.

Opening the door caused the wind to flow, sending the curtain fluttering.

There was no furniture, no bed beside the window, no chair in front of the fire.

The room was empty, to the point that it was sad.

Lushera realized when she saw the only thing in the room—a single broom—that someone had been in the middle of cleaning it.

“Miss, what are you doing? That room’s empty,” said a voice. It was the old woman that managed the building. She was standing behind Lushera holding rags and a bucket.

“I-It was here! A woman named Giselle used to live here, right?!” asked Lushera.

“Oh? Did you know her?” she said, her eyes round as if that wasn’t something that happened often. “Giselle passed quite a while ago.”



GISELLE and XXXX were talking once, before they’d found themselves in Kugut’hulm.

“You can talk to dragons?” he asked.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not a big deal. There’s a trick to it.”

Giselle started telling him about it one time when they took a break, to sit in the shadow of a large tree on the roadside.

She lifted a lock of her odd-colored hair, flax smattered with white. It looked like the white was slowly expanding, at least, there seemed more than the first time he met her.

“You know I was in the Martgarz military, right? I had to do some secret negotiations with dragons,” Giselle said. “By the way, dragons don’t like it if you lie to them. Well, they didn’t like me anyway. That’s how I ended up cursed. My body’s gonna slowly wither away. Don’t think I’ll live much longer, to be honest. And no dragon’s ever going to trust me again. So, the military threw me out,

and I'm stuck as a pathetic little adventurer. Not that I'd want to work for the military anymore, anyway."

The odd thing was that Giselle didn't sound like she held a grudge against them, or that she felt sorry for herself.

She almost sounded proud of herself, like an innocent child who had an interesting story to tell someone, and XXXX didn't understand.



EVERYTHING was clear.

She knew about the draconic interpreter, and why she was in the mountains.

"Right, so...the person who could've interpreted for dragons..."

"Was Giselle."

They were in a meeting room they borrowed at the Guild, the space filled with just chairs and a table, all the more intimidating because of the lack of people.

Lushera told them everything she remembered. To all of them, from Timm... even to Kaphal.

Kaphal looked sad, her face turned down.

She'd learned that the person she doted on like she was her own daughter was in fact an egg thief who'd been after her real daughter. Lushera would have thought she'd be shocked and disappointed, or perhaps crazed with anger, but she wasn't. She couldn't figure out what she was thinking.

"Giselle saved my life, and we traveled together for a long time after that," explained Lushera. "I supported her adventuring work as a way to pay her back. She was an incredibly powerful adventurer, but cursed with a long-term illness. She couldn't even lift a sword by the time we came to this city. And then I... started working to support her...but things weren't looking good, and..."

Gemmel and his party were already the sort of adventurers to go foraging on Mount Kugus, but XXXX was the one who suggested they go that time, knowing that about them. His plan was to steal the dragon's egg in order to save Giselle.

But the party found themselves in trouble while in the mountains. Gemmel chose to sacrifice XXXX and make him a decoy so the rest of them could escape. And that was what brought Lushera here.

Timm clenched his jaw and slammed the table with his fist. “Gemmel, that bastard! I knew he was beyond help, but I never imagined he was that big a piece of trash!”

He burned with righteous indignation, as angry as if the crime was committed against himself, but Lushera didn’t have the energy to be angry.

She was reeling with shock after remembering Giselle and then finding out she was dead, drowning in regret that she couldn’t save her, and that she hadn’t even been there for her when she died.

She was also burning from an inferno of guilt, having learned she betrayed Kaphal before they even met.

If only Kaphal would just tear her to pieces...

“And, this...” she said, looking at the small box on the table. It contained the items Giselle left behind. The landlady had had it.

Weyne submitted a request through the Guild for Giselle’s things as “part of an ongoing investigation into a missing person, whom Giselle was family with.” The landlady agreed to the request from the Guild, and left Giselle’s things in their care. It seemed like she only held on to it because she felt bad throwing it away even though no one came to collect Giselle’s belongings.

Inside were some knickknacks, accessories, and a letter in an envelope. The first page of the letter was gone. It probably had XXXX’s name written on it.

Lushera started with the remaining pages of the letter.

Well, anyway, I’ll leave my boring life story at that.

My life changed completely the moment I met you. I’d given up, I was just going to wait until I died, basically. But the rest of my life was so much fun thanks to you being there. And so much longer than I thought it would be.

For that, I am truly grateful.

The time I spent with you was my treasure, a treasure worth more than an

entire dragon's hoard.

To be honest, I thought you were kind of annoying in the beginning. Maybe even dangerous to keep around. When you do the line of work I did, you end up saving more than one or two lives, so saving you didn't make you anything special to me.

But you were so damn persistent.

You kept following me around, even got your manager qualifications to support me.

At some point, I found myself feeling happy about that. And eventually, I wasn't just happy because of the things you were doing for me, I was happy just because of how you felt.

Thank you.

If you're reading this letter, it means you came back safe, but I didn't live long enough to see that happen. I'm sad I didn't get to see you one more time, but so, so happy that you're okay.

I'm not going to tell you to forget about me and get on with your life, but I am going to tell you to free yourself from the memory of me. Your life is yours. I'm dead. You don't have to tie yourself down with me anymore.

If you wanted to, you could go back to Martgarz. If you do, find a guy named Shun. He should treat you all right if you mention my name. You can make a perfectly good living as an adventuring manager.

The last thing I want to do is say thanks. I'd kept my trick for speaking with dragons a secret, but...I want you to have it. I hid it in a place that has memories for the two of us, from when we first came to this city. I'm sure you can find it.

You're free to use it however you want.

Goodbye.

It makes me sad for us to go our separate ways, but I knew this would happen eventually.

And I'm sure you'll be sad too. You're too nice not to be. I hope you can ride out that sorrow, and live your life with strength.

With love,



IT was down the road coming in from the east, where the path descended a cliff. That was the spot where XXXX and Giselle first saw the city.

“This your place of memories?” asked Timm.

“Yeah. I can’t think of anywhere else...” said Lushera, the wind blowing across her as her eyes took in the expansive sky above, her long hair and short skirt fluttering.

A lot of travelers along this road took a rest break here, perhaps because the view was so nice. There were a few tree stumps placed there for chairs and several circles of stones for making fires.

She looked around, trying to think of where someone would hide something.

“There are only so many things Giselle could do—she wasn’t even strong enough to lift a sword. But she did have a bit of a knack with earth elemental magic...”

Lushera focused on all her senses, searching for any hint of something, trying to read the invisible flow that constantly moved through the world.

That’s when she found a spot where the flow snagged on something, just a little.

“There,” she said.

There was a rock, just about the right size to sit on. She lifted it then carefully scooped away the dirt below with her hands.

It didn’t really feel like the earth had been packed back in to fill a hole, but, eventually, she found it. Her hands hit something when she’d dug about a foot down.

It was a small hemp pouch, a magic item used for storage.

The pouch could only hold something small, not anything much bigger than what it looked like, but it was still a magic item imbued with storage magic. Whatever you put inside went into a pocket dimension where it was safe from

degradation.

She turned it upside down, and out fell a ring resembling a mesh of gold.

“It’s just a ring...?” she said.

“Don’t be rude,” said Viola, her glasses shining as she inspected the ring. “It is, at the very least, a magic item.”

“Meaning, this is the secret to her interpreting?”

“Most likely. There are several examples of magic items that grant the wearer the ability to use a certain language. That isn’t normally possible with Draconic though. This is a rare item.”

The ring was heavy, cold, and small.

“So...we succeeded in our goal?” asked Timm.

“...Yeah,” Lushera said, her answer half directed at the sky.

They spent the past few days walking around town in an attempt to find an interpreter of Draconic. Though, they weren’t necessarily seeking the interpreter themselves. That person was just a tool to facilitate a complex conversation with Kaphal, who couldn’t fully utilize their language. So, from that perspective, they had indeed accomplished their goal with the discovery of this magic item.

That was something to be glad about. And yet...

Kaphal... What are you thinking? Did you understand from the flow of the conversations that I went into the mountains to steal your egg? Or, did the language barrier...? No, I don’t believe that would’ve stopped you.

Kaphal was there, just watching things unfold. She seemed unhappy, but Lushera wasn’t sure why.

She stood, planning to try out the ring. With that, she could get past the language barrier. She could ask Kaphal how she felt.

But she didn’t get the chance.

“Agh!” Kaphal shrieked in desperation.

All four of them looked at her. Her fragment self grew fainter, its outline

blurrier.

“Kaphal?!” cried Lushera.

“No! Danger! Humans come! Run, Lushera!”

And then she disappeared. It was so sudden. She was gone, leaving a horrifying silence broken only by the sound of the wind.

“She...disappeared? She’s gone?”

“Look,” said Timm.

This couldn’t be. The sound of battle rode the wind to them, destroying the peace. A large form flew up from Mount Kugus. The crimson dragon roared in pain, shaking the mountain.

“No... It can’t be...”

There was a cloud of tiny things flying around her like insects.



HOW does one hunt a dragon?

First, and most importantly, was to make sure it couldn’t run away. A dragon that took to the sky was difficult to attack, while it could easily turn the tables on you. People were restricted to the ground, and had nowhere to run from an airborne dragon, becoming mere targets for spells and breath attacks from the sky.

Another important step was to make sure you took the dragon by surprise. This meant the ideal strategy was to get a sneak attack in that pinned the dragon to the ground so it couldn’t escape.

The dragon flapped its wings and struggled like a butterfly caught in a spider’s web.

Several huge, lance-like implements were speared through its wings, with chains connecting the ends of the lances to the ground, chains made of adamantite, the strongest metal in the world.

“Groaaaaaaar!”

“Surround it!”

“Capture it! Don’t let it get away!”

There was a spell called Airwalk that let people who had the spell cast on them walk on nothing but thin air. It took lengthy training to be able to use it well, but masters of the technique could fight a dragon in their own domain.

Several warriors wearing odd armor that resembled black rain ponchos were running around the massive red dragon in three dimensions.

It lashed out with the sharp claws on its forelimbs, and swept its tail. A direct hit from either of those would result in significant damage or, worst-case scenario, instant death even for these experienced fighters.

But none cowered as they carried out their duties appropriately. They were expert dragon hunters who’d undergone hellish training to prepare them for this kind of carnage. Some of them had fought dragons before, some were from clans that passed down techniques for killing dragons from generation to generation.

The country of Martgarz had paid a hefty price to bring them in and have them join forces with their military.

“Raaaaaaar!”

The dragon roared and the warriors felt a tension in the core of their minds—an indication of magic.

“Get ready! It’s coming!” someone shouted.

Just as they did, several huge explosions erupted around the dragon, splitting the air and bathing everything in brilliant white light.

The spell was on par with a natural disaster, it could wipe out half an army, but it was only once you were able to handle a spell like that without losing your composure that you were deserving of the title “dragon hunter.”

Some of them immediately judged the area of effect just from sensing the magic and fled outside that field. Others used defensive spells or magic items to limit the damage.

“It hit a few!”

“One dead! Another three likely hit!”

“Any injured, retreat!”

They didn’t even turn to look at their dead comrade, not now. Each of the warriors in the sky knew by heart what they had to do, and they worked in perfect coordination.

It would be impossible to win against a dragon in a one-on-one fight, but if you brought together this many skilled fighters and they attacked from every possible direction, then you forced the dragon to deal with all of them at once. Even the ultimately powerful dragons showed their weakness in that situation.

“Weaken it! Tie the wings tighter!”

“Fire!”

A man carrying what looked like a small cannon fired off a harpoon with a chain attached to the end. It opened another hole in the dragon’s wing.

“Gyaaah!” it shrieked.

“Hit!”

They attached a longer length of chain to the end of that one and one of the dragon hunters in the sky threw it to the ground. One of the Martgarz soldiers on the ground hammered it into the soil with a massive stake.

There were already several of those chains.

Those “dragon anchors” in its wings attached it to the ground and slowed its movement by limiting what its wings could do.

“Groooooooooaaaar!”

The red dragon spewed fire at the forces on the ground. Fire rained down on them, like the sky itself was burning and crashing down.

Before it reached them, a wall of light appeared like a roof over them, protecting the people on the ground from the dragon’s breath attack. It was a piece of military equipment that used mana to create a defensive barrier. A dragon’s breath attack was a type of magic and was weaker the further away you were from the source. Since the dragon was flying as high as it could in an attempt to escape, its breath couldn’t penetrate that barrier.

“Heal the wounded! Do *not* let restraints break!”

“Squad Two advance! Support Squad One! We’re lacking men on the right—flank the dragon!”

The Martgarz army advanced to support the dragon hunters who led the charge. Aerial cavalry astride hippogriffs launched themselves into the sky.

Hippogriffs, with their head and wings of eagles, upper body of a lion, and hindquarters of a horse, were possibly the most popular mount for soldiers who fought in the sky.

They were about twice the size of a horse, but still ineffective in close combat against a dragon because of how small they were. In this situation however, they were able to put up a fight due to the hindered speed of the dragon.

The hippogriff riders slipped past the dragon’s breath attack, its aim not quite on target, and took advantage of their momentum to jab huge lances into the dragon’s flank.

“Graaaah!”

The dragon howled in pain as blood shot out.

The lances were no normal weapons. They were special anti-dragon weapons, imbued with magic to impart the greatest damage possible to a dragon, only possible after extensive research into and analysis of dragon physiology.

“It’s just a matter of time now! Don’t let up! When it gets tired and lands, that’s the end of it!”

The commander continued to hurl orders from the ground.

With a military as expansive as the Martgarz military, there were going to be a certain number of inhumanly powerful individuals capable of fighting a dragon. Those soldiers waited on the ground, watching the dragon hunters and aerial cavalry fight. They looked like tigers lying in wait for their prey, just waiting for the battle in the sky to finish.



FAR from that battlefield, the main force of the Martgarz military waited.

Marquess Kenneth Angus, the man in charge of eliminating the dragon, listened to a report while under a tent that protected from both arrows and magic attacks.

“How goes the operation?” he asked.

“Well, when I last saw, my lord.”

Marquess Angus nodded several times, his beard fixed in a twirl bobbing above his ornate armor. He looked at the four people waiting at the edge of the tent. “You’ve done well, adventurers. Your directions were accurate.”

“Kind of you to say, my lord... I mean, we have gone deep into those mountains more than once,” said one of them, showing deference to the marquess. That was Gemmel, the large man who led the adventuring party known as the Seven-Sided Die.

The biggest problem when it came to attacking Setrayu was Mount Kugus. Before they even considered hunting the dragon, they needed someone to show them the lay of the land, and there wasn’t anyone on the Martgarz side who seemed up to the task. There were few freelance adventurers striking out into the unknown in search of money or adventure since the adventuring industry was operated by the government. The Guild was weak as well, meaning there was no one to aggregate the information from such adventurers.

So, they looked on the Setrayu side for someone who might be of use, and quickly found them—adventurers who knew Mount Kugus, who were at the very least stronger than average, and who could be bought with gold. That was these four.

If Marquess Angus had his choice, though, he would have preferred not to rely on adventurers from another country. It would have been better to conduct careful investigations and only move forward once they’d confirmed it was safe. That was how he’d always done things, and it’d always worked well for him.

But this was a good one-in-a-million chance to end this grueling fourteen-year-long war against the Guffarr Union. The Union would have a hard time continuing the fight if Setrayu fell, and the emperor had long ago grown weary of the fight.

It was the imperial court's idea to strike swiftly at Setrayu, before they could prepare for battle. They were taking a gamble, knowing the risk. Even Marquess Angus was convinced in the end. Now that he was here, he found it good that they hadn't yet encountered any problems.

"Oh, and, about that new employment..." said Gemmel.

"I'll put in a good word for you," said the marquess. "It's the least I can do to compensate you for your work. Martgarz is always seeking excellent monster exterminators. You will be welcomed with open arms. I imagine you'll be brought on at the highest rank."

"Thank you, my lord!"

"You are dismissed. Get some rest."

They'd drawn in the Seven-Sided Die with promises of employment in the government. The monster exterminators of Martgarz weren't knights, but they did serve under the imperial family, meaning they were technically government officials. The country provided the money to support them.

"Hehehe, didya know exterminators in the Martgarz military earn more than your average adventurer?" said Gemmel. "They get paid even when there's no jobs. And we're gonna be the highest rank! Hahaha! Now these people know what we're worth."

"Yeah! No one in Kugut'hulm understood how valuable we are! But turns out some people get it!"

The four adventurers left, talking about money while they let out vulgar guffaws.

"How fortuitous I was to find these people," said Marquess Angus with a chill, condescending note to his voice after he dismissed the Seven-Sided Die.

"Is it really wise to recommend that lot of miscreants to Central?" asked one of his men.

"That's just what you can expect from former adventurers. I doubt Central will have high hopes for them, either. They aren't unskilled though. They can send them to the front lines and use them until they break."

Government officials had their duties. Those adventurers likely didn't understand that. They were the sort of people who did whatever they wanted. Did they really think Martgarz could use people like them?

Which was why the marquess felt so lucky to have found people who took this talk of employment at face value and accepted without further consideration.

Chapter 7: Raining Fury

THE four of them raced up the path they'd come down only a few days earlier.

They leapt over bushes, jumped from boulders, scaled cliffs with waterfalls rushing down.

"Shit, they're too early!" cursed Timm openly, barreling up the mountain path with ease despite the heavy armor he wore.

This happened while the negotiation arrangements with the court were dragging out.

No, they weren't dragging out. The attack was just too soon. The people who had the information and the calm ability to think it through decided it was unlikely Martgarz had information on Mount Kugus, that they'd have to investigate first.

That's what Lushera thought too, and she knew something about Martgarz and their adventurer situation. Before the military was dispatched, the adventurers were ordered to investigate with the pretense that it was utterly, totally, completely, and entirely unconnected to the military's actions. That's how Martgarz always did things.

And when you moved the large forces of a military, they would be easily found by monsters, and have a hard time running away. It didn't matter how many people they had, not everyone was powerful enough to fight monsters. If a monster attacked a military formation, it was more likely that the soldiers would panic, resulting in even greater losses than usual. They needed to be careful how they moved through monster-infested regions.

It was impossible to investigate Mount Kugus until only recently, but they already sent dragon hunters in? That felt rushed, one step faster than it should be. Even if Martgarz was putting it all on the line in a gamble, there had to be

something that made them think they had a chance of winning.

“How do we stop them?!” shouted Lushera. “This is an army with the intention of killing a dragon! They’ll have come prepared!”

The ribbons on her combat outfit fluttered as she darted forward.

As long as she didn’t care about how she looked or who saw what, it was easier to move in this short skirt than the long, fluttering dress she normally wore. She didn’t have to be embarrassed here though, there was no one to see, like in the city.

“Quite simply, we use violence to stop them,” said Viola as she readjusted her glasses which were about to slip off her nose, though they still gleamed as she spoke. She might not be a frontliner, but she was still a top-class adventurer. She was physically strong enough for a quick run through the mountains.

“*Can* we stop them?!”

“They are trying to take down a massive dragon with their little human bodies! Dragon fighting is very finicky work, I doubt they can handle much more! Meaning, there’s a good chance the whole operation will crumble if we tamper with just one cog in the machine!”

Lushera had heard about several instances where humans killed dragons, but she didn’t know the details about how a military would go about taking down a dragon, or how they could stop them.

Viola sounded confident though, and Lushera trusted Viola’s knowledge of monsters. If she said there was a chance they could stop them then, there was.

Though, stepping in and attacking an army did have the potential for bringing up other issues.

“I’m willing to fight for Kaphal, but are you sure the rest of you want to get involved?” asked Lushera. “The Guild won’t give you any protection if you fight in political battles.”

“Don’t worry ’bout us. We adventurers have our own way of tackling a fight. I’m not exactly looking to draw Martgarz’s attention, but they can’t do anything ’bout non-human intervention,” said Timm with a grim, conspiratorial smile.

“Things’ll get real bad if we get directly in their way, but...” said Weyne, the phantom thief bringing up the rear as a lookout. He glanced back. “There’re monsters chasing us! If they all just happen to rush up on the army, well that’s out of our control! The bastards in Martgarz made a huge mistake moving so quick. The Setrayu Guild isn’t putting the restriction back on the mountain till the day after tomorrow! The Guild can vouch for us, we haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Raaaaaar!”

“Groaaaaar!”

Roars piled over each other like echoes.

The four of them weren’t running as fast as they had the other day.

There was a huge lizard, poison dripping from its mouth, a fiend you might get if you added a lion and a tiger together, then multiplied it by an octopus, a fire-shooting beetle the size of a cow. And that was just the beginning.

The party was holding back their speed, adjusting it so the variants chasing them could just keep up.

“There you go, come here! It smells nice, doesn’t it? Good monsters!” said Weyne.

“Graaaar!”

“Aghagha!”

Weyne was sprinkling some sort of peach-colored sand behind him out of a large bag as he ran. The monsters grew even more excited, rushing forward in a near frenzy. Even if they crashed into a tree, mowing it down, they kept on moving like they didn’t even feel it.

“Monster lure and stimulant? Only a crazy person would use that in a place like this!” shouted Lushera.

“Don’t worry! We’re plenty crazy!” replied Weyne.

The column of runners, steadily growing wider, rushed towards the dragon’s nest with such force they seemed they might just split the mountain in two.



THE mountain trembled from the sound.

Warriors fought with fear when they heard that tone, the sort of sound that invites dread, like wind howling through a cave.

“Wh-What’s that? That’s not the dragon, is it?!”

“Calm down, everyone! This is Mount Kugus, you’ll hear monster cries, but the military’s exterminators are taking them out. Shouldn’t be enough to cause a fright. If you let fear stop you moving, you’ll find yourself turned into dragon food!”

The knight commanding the soldiers tried to shore up their morale.

The dragon was fastened to the ground, while magic artillery provided additional fire into the sky. If they let their spirits falter, the fight against the dragon would end in failure.

There were fewer variants on the mountain these days, and they didn’t tend to go near the dragon’s nest anyway. There were also hand-picked hunters on the ground waiting to finish off the dragon when it landed. They would be able to send any monster that got in their way packing.

That was the plan, anyway, but that crumbled the moment the adventurers stumbled out of the bushes and collapsed.

“Adventurers?! What the hell, you can’t be—”

“Run! It’s dangerous! Actually, help, please!”

“What?!”

And then the avalanche of oddly mutated monsters came in droves, in a strange furor.

“Graaaaaaar!”

“AAaaaaah!”

Several soldiers were instantly rendered into blood-covered masses of flesh by the monsters’ claws and fangs.

Confusion hit the soldiers, and the knight, before fear did.

“What in the...?!”

“Variants have infiltrated!”

“What are the exterminators doing?!”

“Why are there so many?!”

These variants were so powerful that normal soldiers couldn’t even hold their own against one monster, and there were now ten. No, more. They could still hear the sound of underbrush being swept aside and trees cracking as more monsters approached.

The soldiers there wouldn’t have any way of knowing that the exterminators who had been both on standby and on guard had already been wiped out. It didn’t matter how great a warrior their members were, there was no way they could handle this many variants at once.

“Get back! Get back!”

“Aaah! Stay away!”

“Gaaah!”

The soldiers tried to follow after the fleeing adventurers, but the agitated monsters attacked anything within range, regardless of what it was.

They bit, they slammed, they tore, they belched flame, they launched magic lightning, they spewed acid and poison.

The area was turned into a hellscape in a matter of moments. The adventurers ran around the soldiers like a drunken fly trying to escape. Every person there was struck by the monster rampage.

“No, the dragon!” shouted someone, and everyone noticed.

The stakes connecting the dragon to the ground were pulled up or melting from acid and now completely unable to carry out their function.

The dragon fiercely beat its freed wings with harpoons still piercing them with chains hanging down.

“Roooooaaaar!”

And the sky burned.

Fiery breath sprayed while claws and tail lashed out in a dance of destruction, sending three of the hippogriff riders surrounding the dragon flying. The dragon hunters caught in the flames went to retreat.

“Retreat! This is a lost cause!”

“Where do we run?!”

“Dammit, you stepped on my foot!”

“Mommyyyyy!”

The soldiers on the surface were in no position to support the battle in the sky any longer, though. Huge beasts let their instincts run free as they rampaged. Those still barely alive abandoned even their weapons and ran.

No one even noticed that the adventurers had disappeared in the chaos.



“**WE** did it!”

“Haha! Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

The four watched events unfold from a rise a little way off.

After luring the variants in, Viola used a teleportation spell to put distance between them and the mess, while also disappearing from sight. She also used magic to wipe out their scent, canceling the effects of the lure and leaving the variants for the army to deal with.

The result of all that was the destruction of the ground forces that had captured Kaphal.

“Lushera!” came a familiar voice from behind.

“Kaphal?! You’re all right!” said Lushera, turning to see Kaphal’s fragment self in the same flaming dress as usual.

Her main body was still in the sky fighting, but she decided to send a fragment of herself here rather than wait for the fight to finish.

She was worried about Lushera, flustered as if she’d seen the worst possible

disaster ever.

“Why Lushera come? No safe. Human country...Lushera enemy too...”

“That doesn’t matter. I wanted to save you...that’s all,” said Lushera. She wouldn’t be able to live in the human world if she fought against a human country. That’s what Kaphal was worried about, but she didn’t have to be. “Thank you. You were in a life-or-death situation, and you still told me to run. I realized...you care more about me than yourself.”

“Lushera...”

She looked at what Kaphal had in her hands. It was a decoration made from hard nut shells, particularly colorful pieces of monster fur, and nicely shaped bone. It was destroyed. Torn in pieces, parts cracked like it’d been stamped on.

It was the horn decoration Lushera gave to Kaphal. It must have come off in the fight and fallen there.

She took it from Kaphal. “Timm. You said adventurers have their own way of fighting, right?” she said, her voice like red-hot iron.

“I did...”

“Well then, from here on out, this is a dragon’s fight! Laws don’t matter, countries don’t matter, and people can’t step in! I’m going to show them what happens to anyone foolish enough to trample through dragon territory!”

Tears blurred her vision, though she didn’t know if they were tears of sorrow or tears of rage.



AN adventuring manager knows that things go faster when fighting a group of well-organized monsters if you take down the leader first.

They were in the mountains, some distance from the hunting grounds. There was a clump of people in the Martgarz military there, the exterminators and hired dragon hunters who survived the attack, as well as the knights and soldiers that guarded the general.

The soldiers had activated defensive magic items, protecting the force at large from attack while they made preparations to withdraw.

“Remain calm, maggots! We’re getting ready to fall back. The dragon won’t be an issue if you all remain calm! People who panic are the first to die!”

The general, his hair formed into a hardened swirl and wearing pompous armor, shot orders to the people under his command who were losing their composure.

If fear caused people to try and flee, their forces would be scattered, and they wouldn’t be able to retreat. Anyone who abandoned the others to run probably wouldn’t be able to escape in the end. Only death waited for them.

In that sense, what the general said was correct. His clear voice had an authoritative power to any who could hear it, but it didn’t matter by that point.

“You’re wrong. You’re the first to die.” Lushera stood in front of the general, having brazenly walked right up to him, weaving between the soldiers as they dashed back and forth in preparation to retreat.

“What? A little girl? Who are you?” The moment their eyes met, his grew wide and he stumbled back in fear. “A-Ah, urk—”

“Huh. You can tell how much stronger I am,” she said.

“H-Help, somebody help me!” he begged, trembling with fear.

“I can tell too. You...you’re so weak you’re like trash compared to me!” She leapt at him, smacking him so hard through his helmet that he crashed to the ground, where she stamped with all her strength on his chest plate.

“Gyah!”

The ornate armor felt heavy and thick. It was the armor of a general. It was likely to be an appropriately high-value magic item, with the strength to withstand a stampeding elephant at the very least.

But Lushera’s stomp was powerful enough to split it, destroying its contents. The general coughed up blood and died.

“Who’s next?”

Her interest in the general was already gone and she glared at the people around her who stood frozen in shock. She felt like there was fire on her breath.

“A-Ah, d-die!”

The first person to act wasn't one of the superhuman exterminators used to fighting monsters. It was one of the normal soldiers, meant to fight other people.

Maybe he didn't really understand what was going on. He just reacted to the general being killed, drawing his sword in near desperation and launching himself at her. He gave no quarter, showed no mercy just because his opponent looked like a little girl. Yes, he was frightened, but he moved with the skill of a warrior who'd seen battles and become used to killing others.

But it was at that moment that the sound of powerful wingbeats filled the sky.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaar!”

The roar came both from Kaphal in the sky and Lushera on the ground. Their voices overlapped, splitting the air and shaking the earth. Clouds were torn to pieces, trees creaked, their leaves falling. Spiderweb cracks ran through the ground out from where Lushera stood.

The less brave amongst those who heard lost consciousness, falling like dominos. Those with some amount of courage still fell, blood running from their ears.

Kaphal picked up speed, the wind howling with her.

She sucked in air between her fangs, her chest ballooning.

“Groooooooooaaar!”

And she spewed fire at the knights.

This was not just fire, either. It slammed into them with great force, smashing them, sending several flying as they burned.

Lushera immediately searched for any signs of survivors. There were some already passed, some on the edge of death, and...there! There was one who still smelled strongly of life.

She snatched up a javelin from the ones set up inside the encampment.

“Hyaah!”

It flew so fast it could burn air, punching through the armor of one of the knights flung into the air before he landed. He had survived the blast, but died before he could even hit the ground.

“Well-made weapons are sturdy after all. A stick with a monster fang attached to the end might make a sharp spear, but it breaks easily,” she said to herself.

The javelin had been a rather ordinary mithril weapon, but it had the force for an instant kill when Lushera was the one throwing it. It seemed even human techniques had their uses when you considered how easy to use and sturdy their mass-produced items were.

It was just as she was thinking that, that someone screamed, “Die!”

“Huh?”

The exterminators fired arrows at her.

Adventurers often limited the weapons they carried to the ones they were most proficient in so as not to unnecessarily increase the amount they had to carry while trekking through the wilderness, but Martgarz’s exterminators used a variety of different weapons depending on the situation.

Bows were useful weapons for taking down an enemy they couldn’t approach. Or...at least for injuring it from a distance.

Those powerful bows drawn with superhuman strength were something to be feared, something capable of piercing thick monster hides.

The threat didn’t stop at the bows. The arrows too were specially made. Everything from the arrowhead to the shaft was forged from adamantite, making them heavy, expensive, and powerful. A thick rain whizzed towards Lushera.

And they pinged off her and fell to the ground.

“That was close...” she said. “I was worried you’d ruin my new clothes!”

“What the?!”

“Though, that actually hurt a little. What do you think you’re doing?!”

Her combat clothes had incredible defense since they were made with variant skins. Their full strength had been drawn out with appropriate crafting, making them even sturdier than they were on their previous owner when they were alive.

Normally, no armor, no matter how powerful, could keep vicious ranged attacks from at least bruising the flesh below, but Lushera wasn't normal.

She was already moving to attack back.

"I'll burn you alive!" she roared.

A sensation ran through her like when she cast spells. She controlled the mana rushing through her body and linked it with the world itself. Heat poured into the ground, cracking it.

"Gyaaaaah!"

The ground spouted fire, flames erupting as the earth cracked.

The fire burst up from the spiderweb-like cracks extending from Lushera, transforming the area into a hellscape.

"What the hell spell was that?!" shrieked someone.

"Unfortunately for you, it wasn't a spell. I only just learned I could do that."

At first look, Lushera's attack looked like some sort of fire spell, but the exterminators realized it wasn't.

Even if a spell was quickcast by cutting short the incantation, you should be able to feel the mana coalescing, allowing you to react at least at the same time the spell was cast. It was the same way they avoided Kaphal's spell earlier.

But Lushera's attack was almost like she naturally drew the fire out, hitting them head on before they could react.

"That was my fire breath," she said.

"What?"

"But I don't have a dragon's throat! Sorry, I had to figure out how to use it all on my own!"

She swung her arm. The fire oozing from the ground moved like it had

consciousness, attacking the exterminators who were lucky enough to avoid a direct hit the first time as they tried to flee.

Mount Kugus was a mountain sleeping with fire inside it. It had a powerful connection to flame, waking from its slumber at the dragon's call.

Lushera's call might not have brought forth the power of a true volcanic eruption, but it did cause a blaze spreading like a flash flood.

"Gaaaaaaah!"

They were bulldozed over. Even the superhuman bodies of the exterminators were crushed into nothing.

"Roooooaaar!"

Then the real fire breath poured from the sky, pursuing the fleeing and panicking soldiers, burning them alive.

There was no one left who made any attempt to fight back. They just trusted their fates to the heavens and ran.

That wasn't reason enough for a horrifying dragon to stop fighting though.

"Hm?" said Lushera. She saw someone among the people running, in the destroyed battlefield, now a sea of fire. "Gemmel."

"Eek!"

Lushera guessed everything the moment she saw him. "You already figured out who I am, haven't you? Well, I remember everything now. I'd forgotten it, but it's back."

The large man, dressed in armor for adventurers, stopped as if his feet became tangled, then turned slowly back to face her.

"I put up with you," she said. "I...I thought there was nothing else I could do, so I worked so hard to make you think one day you were lucky to take me on, despite all the times you called me a parasite or your lackey."

Memories of Gemmel flitted through Lushera's mind, ninety percent of them unpleasant, and the remaining ten percent not exactly good either.

She spent everything she had working under Gemmel. She had to work, for

Giselle's sake. There were no other jobs she could do with her strange skill, adventuring manager, so she even felt gratitude that Gemmel took her in.

The Seven-Sided Die was exactly the kind of adventuring party that needed a manager. They rose like stars thanks to XXXX's support. XXXX wasn't given what he deserved for that, but at least he felt like he was accomplishing something.

He wasn't even sure if they appreciated him.

But he did think he was needed.

"But you killed me. And what happened because of that? You couldn't do anything after all, and ended up pawns for invaders? How the hell could you fall so far, Gemmel?!"

The Seven-Sided Die was in a terrible situation. There were four of them. Four against one. One tiny, pissed off dragon.

"I guess you really wanted to pay for it in the end then, huh?" she said.

"What?!" He bellowed, as if putting his unmanageable emotions into words. "H-How d-did you turn into, turn into *that* and c-come back?!" he screamed, like he was the protagonist of some tragedy.

It was actually incredibly good luck (or incredibly bad luck from Gemmel's perspective) that led Lushera to where she was now. She normally would have died in the situation she was in, but she was saved, which destroyed Gemmel's plans for the perfect crime.

Even if it was his own fault that he found himself here, in some ways, it was perfectly sensible for him to wonder how this possibly could have happened.

"I learned something recently. This sort of thing is called 'fate,' apparently," she said.

"You're open!"

Someone else attacked while she was busy with Gemmel. They must have decided she was distracted by their conversation. It was one of the members of the Seven-Sided Die, Anthony, the martial artist. He came at her, trying to slam her with a backfist strike.

They might have been corrupt, but these people were adventurers on the

culsp of becoming some of the top in the field.

Anthony's iron fist could knock out monsters much larger than him.

But Lushera didn't even waver.

"Huh? Hah?! O-Owww..." Instead, he ended up pulling back, cradling his hand like he'd struck something incredibly hard even though he'd used the back of his hand.

Lushera glared at him. "I'll make it hurt more."

"Eek!"

With a hand much smaller than his, Lushera gripped his muscular arm and simply squeezed, his bulging arm crunching beneath her fingers. She felt the bone snap and the muscles pop.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He collapsed with a shriek.

"Lightning Spear!"

"Hm?"

A flash struck the back of Lushera's head and ricocheted off, momentarily creating stark shadows in front of her, but not even a single hair on her red head burned.

She turned around and saw another member of the Seven-Sided Die—the magic user, Gregor—standing with his staff raised.

He could use several healing spells, but he was most skilled at air spells which allowed him to manipulate lighting.

That attack spell had finished off many enemies before. This time though, the lightning that shot from his staff didn't even scratch Lushera.

She took a step towards him.

"Ah! E-Electric Shock!"

Electricity exploded in a shower of sparks, Lushera at the center. But she was uninjured.

She took another step towards him.

“C-C-Call Lightning!”

The sky glowed and a bolt of lightning leapt down, striking her. The dazzling flash threw everything into stark blacks and whites.

But even then, she was uninjured.

She took another step towards him. She was right in front of him.

“Gah!”

She kicked him, not with any particular skill or technique, just a simple kick.

His staff broke, his body bent as he flew backwards.

Lushera didn't bother checking if he was still alive or not. She could finish him off later if he was.

“Th-There's nothing we can do!”

“Hey! You're just gonna lea—!”

“Gah!”

The last member of the Seven-Sided Die was Jean, a ranger. He saw the other two go down and immediately tried to run. Jean was a master of skills that supported exploring, meaning he wasn't as good at combat. Running away was one of his specialties.

It seemed he decided he should run once he saw his comrades taken down one after another. That was likely the correct choice.

But a spear immediately blossomed from his back as he tried to flee. Lushera had thrown it at him, after picking one up from the ground nearby.

He fell, crawled a little, then stopped, red staining the ground around him.

“You're next,” she said, turning to Gemmel.

“Eek!”

Now all alone, he found himself shaking, his legs unable to move either to run or fight, like they'd been sucked into the earth.

“W-W-W-Wait! S-So, I m-might've killed you, yeah, but! But I also took you in,

in the first place! Right?!”

“Shut your mouth. Everything you say stinks.”

“I-I do the fighting, you do the stuff in the background... Th-That went well, didn't it? We could go back to that!”

“You're the one who ended that. Why would you want a lackey *now*?”

“Eek! P-Please, forgive me!”

It was painful watching Gemmel try to call in what she owed him. She smacked him, leaving no room for reconciliation.

He crumpled to the ground in shock, then pressed his forehead to the dirt and groveled. “P-P-Please forgive me!” he said, his voice shrill as he spoke quickly. “I-I'll change my ways, I'll stay on the straight and narrow! I'll never do anything like this again, you'll never even see me again! Please, please just don't k-kill me!”

“What?”

Gemmel gave up on all other options and was begging for his life. He looked so disgraceful, that huge frame balled up as he nearly kissed the ground, but Lushera was just dazed.

She was beyond angry. She felt bleak.

This man, this pathetic little man had bossed her around, even nearly killed her. The world didn't make sense.

There was a moment where she felt everything was pointless, sapping her of even her will to fight.

“That's right... You are just a little bully,” she said. “You just got swept away for the sake of money, doing bad things. It wasn't like you actually felt any malice. Just a pathetic, little bully who will only tarnish my honor if I kill them. And I do believe that if I let you go, you'd run off somewhere and hide, living in secret and never getting involved with me or Kaphal ever again.”

“Y-Y-Yeah, exactly! Haha...”

If there was dog crap in front of you, would you want to touch it? If it was

right outside your front door, you'd probably plug your nose and clean it up, but if it was on the side of some street somewhere, you'd likely ignore it.

That was about how Lushera felt about Gemmel right now. He smiled timidly, hopeful that Lushera would let him go.

"I'm sorry, though," she said, and something huge crashed down beside him with enough force to shake the mountain.

"Gah!"

"I don't think Kaphal is as nice as I am."

The dragon looked down, eyes burning with rage, and then she tore him limb from limb.

Epilogue: Dragon and Child

THE gigantic red dragon folded her injured wings and looked quietly down at Lushera. The previously hectic mountain returned to its usual calm, bathed in the setting sun as the girl and dragon faced each other.

Lushera gulped, took a deep breath, and slipped Giselle's ring on her finger.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" she asked.

"...Yes." Kaphal's voice was still no more than an animal cry, but Lushera understood meaning from it.

It was only now that Lushera understood the true nature of Draconic, thanks to the ring's power. If human language was a two-dimensional diagram drawn on a piece of paper, then Draconic was a three-dimensional form.

The language almost made her feel like there was some cryptic telepathy mixed in with the growls, but it was really just multi-layered, impossible to decipher if you didn't know how to approach listening to it.

"The reason I came to the mountain..." she started, a series of sounds coming from her mouth that would sound incomprehensible to a human. She understood now how to place the meaning onto those sounds.

That crimson, massive dragon looked gently away. "I already know. Even if I could only understand half of what was said, I could figure out what had happened with a little deductive reasoning."

"Then, why?! Why didn't you do anything to me when you figured it out?! I tried to steal your egg, your precious child! I..."

That entire statement was perhaps one or two sounds. Draconic could carry a significant amount of meaning and deep emotions in a short phrase.

They went down to the city, investigated her past self, and her memories returned. Lushera herself had been shocked to learn that her past self had been after Kaphal's egg.

Kaphal learned that information at the same time, but Lushera couldn't figure out what Kaphal was thinking based on her reaction. Anger? She could have killed Lushera then if that's what she felt. Lushera wouldn't have minded either, since it would have meant atoning for her wrongdoings.

Lushera wondered if Kaphal maybe didn't actually understand what Lushera had done. But she did.

"If you had succeeded in stealing my egg, I would have brought a world of suffering upon you," said Kaphal. "But there is a difference between anger and hatred. You simply wished to protect someone important to you. That's just the way of the world—one life struggling against another. If there's an enemy in front of you, you cut them down. You don't devote any further hatred to them... And that's even more true when that person didn't even succeed in harming you. That's all that needs to be said about that."

"But—!"

"And if we're comparing the weight of our wrongdoings, then mine is far greater than your failed mistake."

Wrongdoing? That word felt almost physically heavy when Kaphal said it.

"What did you do?" asked Lushera.

"I stole you from the human world."

That sounded insane, Lushera couldn't understand it for a moment.

But Kaphal spoke with deep regret in her voice. "When I found you on the mountain, I thought you had lost everything, that you would hate everything. I also felt I had lost everything, and so I sympathized with your loss. I wanted to protect you. It...was also the first time I'd seen humans as weak, endearing creatures. All the people I'd seen before were powerful, capable of standing toe-to-toe with great monsters. I only ever saw the ones powerful enough to survive in the monster-infested lands where dragons live."

"Oh. Yeah, not many people get that far, and the ones who do..." Lushera was probably the first person to climb Mount Kugus who, not only couldn't fight a variant, but also had a good chance of losing to a finger-eating mouse.

Even if someone like that did try to enter the mountains, they would in most cases die before they reached Kaphal. And she cherished those small, weak beings.

“I thought I was saving you from the human world. I wanted you to forget your hatred towards some distant world and simply live happily, belonging to me. That’s...why I gave you your name. The name of my daughter who died before she could live. I did it knowing what that meant, knowing what it would result in. I put you in my nest not as a human, but as a replacement for a dragon.”

“So...you were *trying* to make me lose my original name...to make me forget everything from the past?!”

What did it mean for a dragon to give a name? The dragon herself had known full well what it meant.

If things had gone how they were originally meant to, Kaphal would have given that name to her own offspring. Instead, she gave it to XXXX.

Dragons were believed to be living creatures tied directly to the core of the world’s existence. Kaphal giving that name turned “him” into “the daughter of a dragon.” That definition was recorded on the world itself. That’s why Lushera’s body turned into that of a little girl, why she became a vessel that could hold draconic power, power greater than any human’s, why her memories were wiped out, and even why XXXX’s name was washed from the world.

“You weren’t lost, though,” said Kaphal. “You left a lot behind in the human world. And I stole that away from you. I even took away the memories you had of someone very important to you... I...I am so sorry...”

Lushera gasped. Though her memories were gone, she learned when she went down to the city to investigate that she wasn’t thought of negatively by those around her. She learned she had left a mark on the world.

Kaphal also learned that.

That was why she had seemed so upset. She took in Lushera thinking she was someone who had lost everything, but it turned out that she was the one taking away what Lushera did have left.

That included Giselle. XXXX cared about her so much that he was willing to go into monster-infested mountains for her even though he couldn't fight at all. Kaphal had cut their connection.

Lushera wasn't able to save Giselle. Though...there was no way she could have regardless.

Lushera couldn't be there for Giselle when she passed. Though...Lushera would've died if Kaphal hadn't taken her in, so it was hard to claim that was really Kaphal's fault.

But she had forgotten about Giselle. She lost her memories of the days they spent together. She couldn't even grieve Giselle's passing. That was the result of what Kaphal did to Lushera.

You might very well be correct if you claimed Kaphal's love was selfish.

"Tell me, I have to know... I am a dragon. You are a human. Shouldn't we...live that way?" Kaphal asked haltingly.

The light of the setting sun set her eyes ablaze.

Lushera tried to say no, that it was okay for them to be together. But...she couldn't. Why was it all right? The answer was so clear to her, but she couldn't figure out how she got to it, and the words wouldn't come out.

As she thought it through, for some reason, she couldn't resist the urge to laugh.

"Hah... Ahaha!"

"...Why are you laughing?" Kaphal asked.

"I was just thinking, we finally get the chance to really talk to each other, and the first thing we talk about is going our separate ways, and that's like some cheap, tearjerker novel. And that seemed funny."

Lushera laughed because, when she thought it through rationally, it all seemed so funny. She realized that all the heaviness in her heart had been unnecessary, and she felt light as air.

"I started this conversation because...I could understand if you killed me for trying to steal your egg," she said.

“Why?”

“There are...a lot of reasons. I think the biggest one was that I felt bad for you, because you were doting on someone who tried to steal your egg and you didn’t even know.”

“But that’s—”

“The thing is, that’s not the way the conversation went. You actually apologized for what you did. You didn’t have to say anything. You could’ve kept it to yourself, but you thought about me, and told me everything... So, basically, we’re in the same boat,” Lushera said.

They both laid out their secrets, while thinking that would end in disaster. They both cared for the other, while hiding something from the other.

Was that tragic or comedic? No. It wasn’t either. Could this possibly be anything more than the denouement for the story between one human and one dragon?

“We met because we were both doing something to benefit ourselves,” said Lushera. “Maybe it was lies that started our temporary parent-child relationship. But the happiness I felt, the warmth, that wasn’t all a lie. And at some point, we stopped focusing on ourselves. I was there for you, and you were there for me.”

Lushera smiled, a natural, happy smile.

She looked up at Kaphal and said, “So, don’t say this is the end. That’s too sad. Or are you going to make me say it out loud?”

Even at this point, Lushera wasn’t a replacement for the child Kaphal lost, and to Lushera, Kaphal was just a convenient guardian who saved her life.

Kaphal had considered the pain of a tiny, insignificant little creature and apologized. If Kaphal could do that, then Lushera needed to take a step too.

Not as the plaything for a giant dragon, but as a daughter.

“If you forgive me, then I’ll be your daughter, Mom.”

“Lushera!”

Kaphal rubbed her nose against Lushera, and Lushera hugged her large face back.





“OH my, what a cute little girl she is!” Lushera returned from speaking with Kaphal, Viola greeting her with a violent wave before tousling her hair.

“Wh-What are you doing? And have you started understanding Draconic or something?” asked Lushera.

“I just gathered from the tone of the conversation.” Apparently, she’d done a good job eavesdropping.

“You can’t go back to your old body?” asked Timm, and Lushera shook her head.

“I’d go back to my old form if I got my old name back, but I’d also lose all my strength, so I decided not to. And anyway, this body is proof that Mom gave me my name, I thought it was good the way it was.”

The three of them smiled warmly at that.

“So, it’s ‘Mom’ now?”

“How cute!”

“Nice!”

Lushera hadn’t thought anything of saying “Mom” since she was just going with the flow of the conversation, but she felt her face burning from embarrassment as the three started teasing her.

They didn’t mean anything bad by it though, it was more like they were congratulating her.

“Heeheehee... If you’re that determined, then little ol’ Viola here can give you some lectures to make sure you become a wonderful daughter,” said Viola, her glasses glinting.

“Don’t do it. I got nothing but bad feelings about this,” said Weyne, jabbing her and putting an end to her evil scheming before it could start.

But, so long as people were people, history would repeat itself.

“I wonder what I should do now...” said Lushera.

“The forces in the mountains have been wiped out for now, but if Martgarz is serious about this invasion, they’ll come again,” said Timm. “How ’bout you think about starting talks with the Setrayu court now that you’ve got a way to talk to dragons?”

“Yeah, there’s that, but, that’s not what I mean.”

With the advancing threat pushed away for now, Lushera turned to thinking about the future. What did it mean to exist as the child of a dragon, even though she was a human? What should she do in order to be that?

She still wasn’t entirely sure, but she did have one idea.

“Timm. Do you have any interest in hiring me?” she asked.

“Uh...what?” It took him completely by surprise, and he looked as dumbfounded as he possibly could.

“H-Hold on a sec, what’s with this twist?” asked Weyne, he and Viola looking just as shocked.

“W-Well, I do have experience as an adventuring manager,” said Lushera.

“That’s not the problem! Why are you suddenly looking for employment?!” said Timm.

“...I thought it’d be good if I had some place in human society. Besides, I owe you for helping me and Mom. I have to pay you back.”

She couldn’t just live quietly in the mountains. She couldn’t take peace without working for it at all. She had to make her own decisions and walk through the human world in order to protect the quiet life she had with Kaphal as one human and one dragon.

She was both the adopted daughter of a dragon and a human. There was a chance she could protect Kaphal from threats that not even a red dragon’s strength could fend off.

Living as a vagrant wasn’t going to let her do that, but she also understood she didn’t fit into any of the normal boxes of society. The adventuring industry did have a great capacity for taking in the odd and the abnormal, though, and adventuring management was the only job she knew. It didn’t seem like a bad

idea to start that up again.

“Ah... Well...first off, forget everything about owing us,” said Timm after thinking for a moment. He stuck his finger under the face guard of his gilded helmet and scratched his face. “I for one wasn’t just helping you out of the goodness of my heart. If you still want to, though, you’re more than welcome to join our party. No adventurer with half a brain jumps on something that sounds too good to be true, but if it really is good, then I’m not gonna say no.”

Just a sense of obligation didn’t make you into an adventurer. Timm would have evaluated this as a party leader, weighing the merits of her joining against the potential trouble it could cause, only evaluating the remainder in the context of his pride.

Lushera was honored and overjoyed that he would still choose to include her as a comrade.

“All right then, thank you for letting me join!” she said.

“Don’t mention it! Oh, and, in this party, we help each other out with our problems. Meaning, we’re gonna protect your mom.”

“Thank you!”

Lushera gave Timm a firm shake of the hand, their hands coming together at quite a steep angle.

“Thanks you.” Another hand laid on top of theirs. It was Kaphal in her fragment form.

Her main body had gone to chase away the variants the party drew near to the nest (it was too dangerous to go down the mountain right now because of that, so they were going to stay in the nest for the night), leaving only her fragment form here.

“H-Hah... Kinda feel unworthy of getting thanked by a dragon,” said Timm, looking just a little bashful because Kaphal gave him a carefree smile while in her ladylike form.

“Lushera. Kaphal learn more human language,” she said. She was making an active choice to appear as a human and speak their language even though

Lushera had a convenient ring for their communication now. That must be what she was getting at.

“You don’t want us to use the ring?” asked Lushera.

“Know now need ring talk to Lushera. But, use only ring, have trouble when no have ring.”

“Yeah...that’s true.”

It was thanks to Giselle’s ring that Lushera and Kaphal could actually communicate now, and there was nothing wrong or unjust in relying on it. It’s just, they both understood how frustrating it was to be unable to express their feelings to each other. That sort of feeling made you want as many methods of communication as possible.

And Lushera felt that too.

“Yeah, I’m going to work hard to learn Draconic too, if you want to teach me,” Lushera said.

“Work hard!”

Lushera felt ridiculously happy that the two of them agreed to learn together. Kaphal wrapped her up in a hug and spun her around.

“I see nothing but a real mother and daughter here,” said Timm.

“We are a real mother and daughter. Even though we were strangers not that long ago. Right, Mom?”

Kaphal was right there with her, and Lushera stayed with her in her embrace.

Afterword

NICE to meet you! Or, maybe, long time no see. I'm Suzume Kirisaki.

Did you enjoy the first installment of *I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now* (or *Dragon Mom* for short)?

There's a certain story archetype that depicts a husband-wife relationship between humans and non-humans, one of the most famous being *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*. This story, on the other hand, depicts a mother-daughter relationship between a human and non-human.

Different species have fundamental differences, but will share some similarities, which is why it can be so moving to see a relationship flourish from that foundation. In this cold and decaying world, everyone is looking for some emotional warmth.

Dragon Mom is, on a personal level, the result of me writing a work, relatively seriously, on the topic of the love between a parent and their child. I blended this theme of familial love in with what I specialize in: action-packed political stories, sprinkled with a dash of popular stereotypes for flavor, and served alongside a hearty helping of grim action and suspense.

To a little child, their mother is as powerful and great as a dragon. And small things are often adorable, but children become more independent as they grow. You're in for a surprise if you think they'll stay small and cute forever. I promise.

Well, no matter what happens, cute things are cute. Some things change and some things don't. The love between parent and child always prevails. That's the sort of story I was aiming for.

Regardless, *Dragon Mom* is what's known as a "transsexual fantasy" (TSF for short), which is a term for stories that touch on gender changes, whether they be through reincarnation or magic. That's the only type of book I've been writing as of late. While I was writing this, I kept mulling over what made a good

TSF story. Should I include more of the tropey, classic moments? Should I leave readers baffled by the gender differences? What kind of story would I even want to read?

I might be an old guy who writes nothing but TS high-fantasy, but I still haven't figured out the right path for my own TSF stories.

And as some of you may already know, I started a YouTube channel around the same time I started writing *Dragon Mom*, and on that channel, I appear using a girl avatar and use voice-changing software. I think my work on that might have influenced the soul of *Dragon Mom*.

I originally became a VTuber to promote my own work, but writing became my main focus, with YouTube becoming a place for nightly game streaming.

Part of the preparation process was watching YouTube videos I hadn't yet seen, to observe the VTubers working there right now (but only ones of a certain kind, like Tomari Mari, Demon King Magrona, and Hinomori Anzu). Then, I too dove into the virtual world, exchanging a large portion of my sanity for divine revelations.

The goal isn't necessarily limited to becoming a girl! There are some cases where becoming a girl is used as a means to become cute!

I started making myself a girl character in games around the time I hit puberty and even developed an interest in works with cross-dressing men, or *otokonoko* type works. I didn't look at things of the erotic variety a healthy boy my age would normally take to, instead declaring things like, "I want to be an elementary school-aged girl and wear my school-issued bathing suit to a public pool, where I realize after swimming that I forgot to bring underwear, so I have to go home commando in my white dress." I lived a life full of shame that I was more likely to be jealous of cute female characters than I was to be attracted to them. But at the same time, I always knew my gender identity was male, so in the end I asked myself, "What the hell?!"

I mostly just laugh about it now.

I found an answer to that question in the end. I just wanted to be cute.

I think within the *babiniku* VTuber community, there's a scale and people fall

somewhere between those two extremes. Between actually wanting to be a girl and just wanting to be cute (or having others think you're cute). I'm on the latter end of the scale.

So then, if that's the case, what if the main topic wasn't really the sex change, what if it was a transsexual transformation just to become cute? Is the change the method or the goal? The reason I was confused and lost was because I was thinking of them as being synonymous. And being cute is a fundamental human desire! Maybe. I mean, there are plenty of transformation stories where the man turns into a little boy, for those male readers who want to be cute but don't want to go all the way for a sex change.

And with that, I completed *Dragon Mom*.

So, in the end, this story did originate in TS, and I think TSF made this story possible. The primary goal was to depict the love between parent and child, and I wanted to make a girl the main character rather than Kaphal, but the relationship between a mother and her daughter can be complex. Since I wanted to focus on the positive aspects, making the main character a TS girl was actually very convenient.

I was lucky enough that *Dragon Mom* received good reviews on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, the free web novel platform, and it was doing quite well point-wise, but I had a hard time getting it picked up for publication as a novel. Maybe that was because it's TSF? It seems like it's generally accepted in the light novel industry that TSF novels don't sell... And then S from Futabasha Publishers contacted me about turning it into a novel. He was so excited about the series it was like he wasn't even an editor, just a fan of *Dragon Mom*. Which I'm grateful for, but I was skeptical if that was a good decision as a businessman. He supported me not just in turning the story into a novel, but also for improving all of *Dragon Mom's* content as a whole.

I also want to express my thanks for Cosmic, who pushed through their health issues to take on this job and put the world of *Dragon Mom* into visual form in the best possible way. I think this was an incredible connection for us to make, since Cosmic read the web version of *Dragon Mom* long before they came on to do the illustrations.

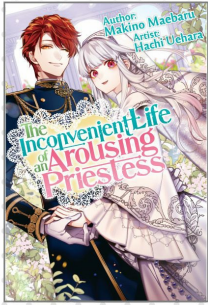
I'd also like to thank my Japanese teacher, S, from high school, and the librarian, F. I am who I am today because of the two of you. I'm going to make it a point to thank the both of you every time I get a new series going. I'm planning on visiting the school one day once the world calms down. Make sure you're ready for that.

Thank you to my family and my beloved cat, Kurumi. Even though I was an author with no books published, you never rushed me, you let me go at my own pace. For that, I am truly grateful. It's thanks to all of you that my work was turned into a book so I could share it with the world.

Most of all, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for picking up this book. It is a humbling truth that we authors can only exist because we have readers like you.

Thank you so very much, and I hope you continue to read *Dragon Mom*.

That, and please like and subscribe to my YouTube channel!



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Author: Rino Mayumi
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