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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 2

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I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now Volume 2

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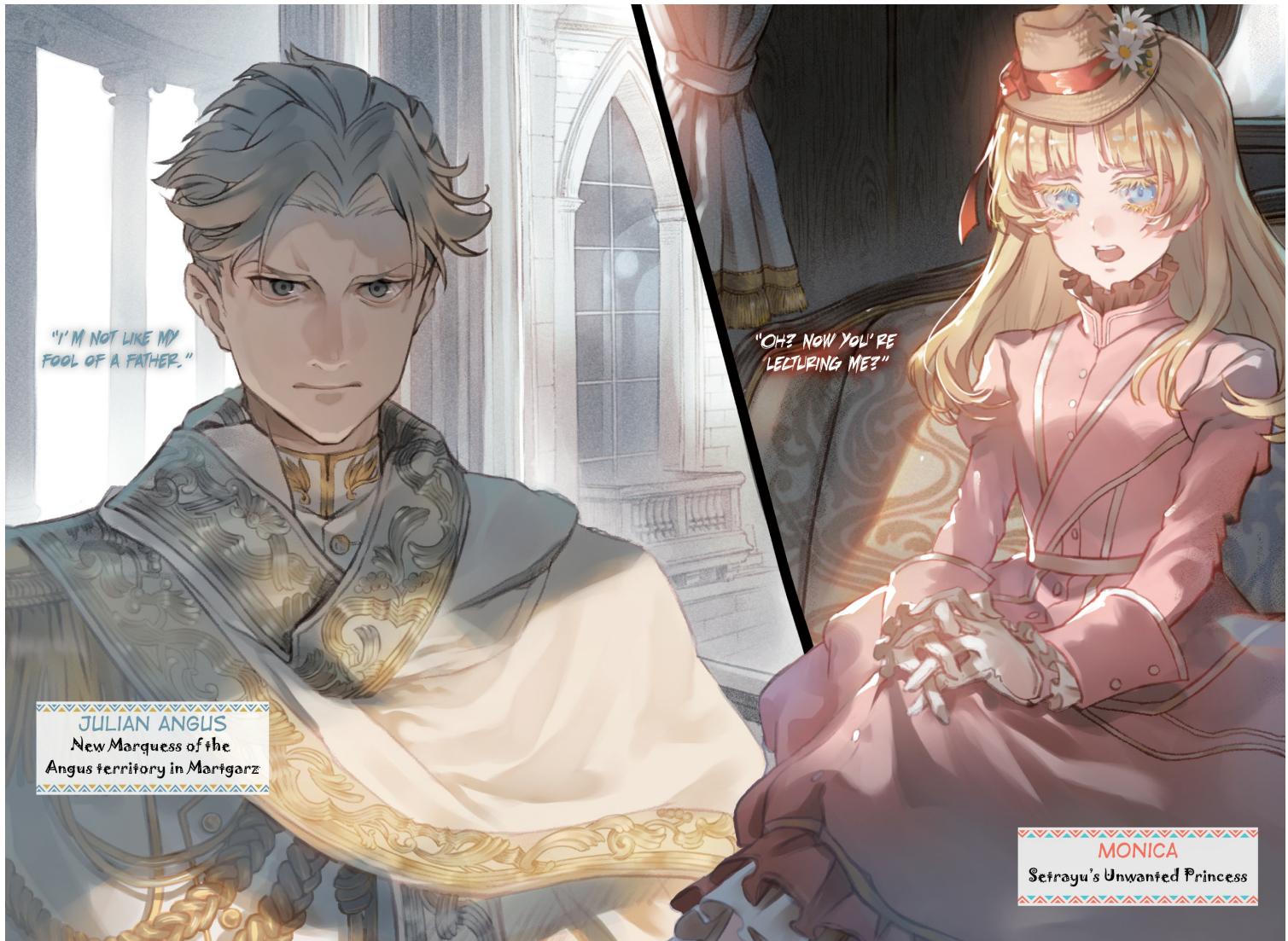
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JULIAN ANGUS
New Marquess of the
Angus territory in Martgarz

MONICA
Segrayu's Unwanted Princess



LUSHERA

KAPHAL

Prologue: The Dragon World

THE world was split into two halves: one for the dragons and one for the humanoid races.

In a time long past, humanoids and dragons clashed over domination of the world in the tragic Human-Dragon War, killing each other off until so few of each race survived that there was no longer any need to fight over territory, and so the war petered off. Humanoids did not win against the dragons, but neither were they eradicated by them. This left them in control of half the world.

The remaining half went to the dragons, who, as was the same before the war, were much fewer in number than the humanoids. They needed less land to live on, though they did require vast hunting grounds in order to survive.

Dragon territory was also home to variants, abnormally powerful monsters who had consumed a sliver of draconic power. Humans foolish enough to enter were killed as easily as insects.

There were also intelligent monsters, the monsterfolk, who maintained a coexisting relationship of mutual noninterference with the dragons. They founded their nations in dragon country from where they threatened the humanoid races.

Perhaps the biggest difference though was that, while humans kept control of the wild natural energy to maintain territories where they could live, dragons' existence instead gave more power to the world.

Dragon territory was usually in locations humanoids hesitated to enter even before considering the dangerous monsters living there. For example, the Flight of Mount Bermarl lived around an active volcano, controlling a region as large as the largest humanoid country. That group was composed entirely of red dragons.

These red dragons were close friends with fire, they favored sources of flame

that could increase their own blazing powers.

The ashen-colored Mount Bermarl spewed an inferno day and night, vast rivers of lava, not water, flowing down its slopes, illuminating the earth. Dragons and variants were not the only threat here. This wasn't even the sort of place a human should set foot in, a true horror to behold.

And it was in one cave of that volcano that two dragons met, around the same time Lushera was helping the party known as the Blue Flag back on Mount Kugus.

Hardened lava formed complicated, sharpened sculptures, reaching from ceiling and ground almost like fangs, making walking into the cave like being swallowed into the maw of a dragon. Lava poured down the wall in a high waterfall, heating the space to the point that any normal person would roast to death.

In the depths of that vast cave crouched a huge, regal dragon of vivid red. His plating and scales were roughened and weathered like a stone subjected to the elements for thousands of years, yet he seemed in no way deteriorated. His overwhelming presence came from a power granted only to those who have eons etched into their bodies.

Before that ancient dragon was another red dragon, young, her scales and mane a vibrant red, her head bowed. She was about half the size of the ancient dragon. Her name was Kaphal.

“Please teach me how to turn into a human,” she said, a faint tremble in her voice.

The ancient dragon let out a sigh filled with sparks of fire. *“It has been... decades since we’ve seen each other, and that is what you say? For what purpose could you possibly need that?”*

His dignified voice seemed to make the world itself shudder. His name was Shurei and he was the leader of the Flight of Mount Bermarl.

Kaphal remained silent, her head still bowed. Perhaps she was searching for the right words, or perhaps she didn’t want to say why.

“Is Luja dead?” asked Shurei.

"...Yes."

"I shall not offer my condolences. He was careless to be hunted by humans, incapable of fleeing or requesting help. And that is even more true as it was a result of him leaving his flight and choosing a nest near humanoid lands. A grave sin it is to reduce our numbers through such folly. He knew that well, as did you, I'm sure."

Kaphal said nothing, her long neck drooping farther.

The Flight of Mount Bermarl was once Kaphal's home, but she left decades ago. Luja was a blue dragon from a different flight, and, yes, she, a red dragon, had joined with a blue dragon! She left her flight to be with him.

That was not in itself against any draconic rules. Most of the territories controlled by flights of a single color were powerful sources of a single element, making it difficult for dragons of a different color to reside there. It was possible for multicolored pairs to be together if they moved to the boundaries between two appropriate areas. Particularly adventurous dragons who left the flights to live near humanoids also weren't stopped, as it was seen as beneficial to the overall race in the long run.

Mixed-color children were sometimes weak, but they were also sometimes incredibly powerful, strengthening the breeding stock of a flight, meaning that Kaphal and Luja's union was not the issue.

The problem was that Kaphal was young, having never laid an egg before. She became enamored with Luja, a blue dragon, and chose this difficult path without much forethought.

Dragons lived for such a long time that it was rare for them to stay with one partner for their entire lifetime. They may continue to have a special relationship with someone they once joined with, but it was normal to change partners several times.

Other dragons in Kaphal's flight tried to stop her, telling her she should choose a dragon of the same color for her first partner and remain in the flight so she could learn how to be a mother, but she didn't listen. She left and mated with Luja, finally becoming with egg after the third mating cycle.

Shortly after, Luja was caught in a human trap and killed. He was killed by a human country that was long at war and wanted his horns, teeth, scales, and flesh for their own fighting. Humanoid countries were careful not to get involved with dragon flights, but the same didn't apply to lone dragons who had left the group. A flight did not take responsibility for the actions of a dragon chased from their flight, but they also wouldn't seek revenge for harm done to that dragon. It was only logical.

"So then, what of your child?" asked Shurei, as if he'd already guessed.

Kaphal's large frame trembled. After a moment, words managed to crawl from her strangled throat. *"I...couldn't protect her..."*

"...I expected as much. That child had blood of both red and blue dragons. You would have a hard time holding it back with your flames alone."

Luja was killed at what was possibly the worst timing.

A dragon birth was an event that shook heavens and earth. When that shell cracked, the world's power rushed forth, out of control. That power could even threaten the hatchling if their parents weren't able to hold it back.

Kaphal, being a red dragon, could control flame, but that power wasn't enough to hold back the raging element of water.

Mount Kugus saw rains the likes of which came once a century, but that was not simply rains and floods. It was the pure concept of destruction by water, washing away and swallowing everything in existence.

Kaphal called forth her flames, until she nearly killed her hatchling herself, trying to protect the egg from the power of water, but she faltered for just a moment, her fires weakening as she was distracted by her adoration for her child.

It was in that brief moment that the water took the young one's life.

"Why didn't you ask anyone for help?" asked Shurei.

"I was...arrogant. If I asked the blue flight for help, they would've taken the hatchling away, into their flight. That would be just as bad as being separated by death... But I was wrong. I only understood that once I lost her. Even if I

couldn't see her for two hundred years, three hundred years, no, for the rest of my life! I wish she had lived! My daughter! Luja's daughter!"

Her cries of regret echoed through the cave. Gemstone-like tears poured from her eyes, bouncing off the rocks before evaporating.

Dragons very rarely reproduced and so they all felt strongly about growing their flight, even more true after the Human-Dragon War as they tried to replenish their numbers.

The future of a mixed-color child was a very delicate issue, one that was known to incite bloody duels between even the closest of friends. If Kaphal asked the blue flight for help, that would've been good cause for them to take the child, even with some force if necessary.

"...I see," said Shurei quietly. He might have reprimanded Kaphal if she didn't already regret her decision, but anyone who chose to rub salt in the bereaved mother's wounds now would only be doing so for their own amusement. "*Well...it is in the past. What I want to know is why you've come here all of a sudden to pester me into teaching you how to transform into a human.*"

"I..."

"*Say it. I have no reason to do you this favor without knowing why.*"

"*Does that mean you'll teach me if I do tell you?*" she asked, hopeful.

For a moment, silence filled the air as Shurei thought. The technique for turning into a humanoid wasn't the sort of skill they bothered keeping secret. And if Kaphal, who had left the flight, was willing to return in order to learn it, it was only natural to assume there were serious circumstances surrounding her request.

"...*I will,*" he said. "*But it may depend on what the situation is. If you tell me you've fallen for some human male this time, I might very well just feel the need to lock up my rash, youngest daughter.*"

Kaphal raised her head slightly to see her father's gaze piercing into her.

Chapter 1: The Visit

THE sun had set on Mount Kugus long ago, a magnificent bonfire blazing in front of Kaphal's domed home of stone. Meat roasted over the fire, skewered on sticks and metal rods, its juices sizzling with a tantalizing aroma.

"We can really eat this?"

"Of course! You're my party members, and you saved Mom's life."

This food was the smoked meat that Lushera worked so hard to save up. While they had driven away the Martgarz military, the sun had already set and it was too dangerous to go down the mountain, for humans, anyway, so Kaphal invited the three members of the Golden Helm to stay for the night in her nest.

"Eeek! This is such a luxury! I never imagined I'd get a taster session of different variant meats! I have to note everything down for future generations!" Viola took one look at the grilled meat and got swept away in her academic excitement.

"I got some seasoning. Here's some for you too, Lushera," said Timm, taking the meat from the skewers just as it warmed enough, piling it on a camping plate before sprinkling some seasoning over it that he pulled out of his pack.

Lushera tried a bite of the meat he passed over and her eyes went wide. There was just the right amount of seasoning, the salt drawing out the savory taste of the meat, and the sweetness of the juices, while the herbs gave it a punchy aftertaste.

"Wow, it tastes totally different," she said. "This is so different from eating plain old roast meat like I have been this whole time."

"I got loads of different spices," Timm said. "Try 'em all. In a bad patch, you might find yourself living off guild rations for a whole month while out adventuring. I got these together to change things up."

"Speaking of," interjected Weyne, "what actually *is* that mystery meat in the

rations and what did they do to it?"

"There's one big rumor that anyone who finds out is made to quietly disappear by the Guild's spy department," Viola chimed in.

The three adventurers laid into the food with astonishing gusto as they joked.

"...Wish I had a pint right about now," grumbled Timm as he stared at the juicy meat.

"I can't say I made any alcohol..." replied Lushera.

"I could cast Drunken Moon on you?" suggested Viola.

"No thanks. No point in being drunk if you don't drink to get there," said Timm.

The conversation made Lushera wonder if Kaphal drank alcohol.

Dragons with an affinity for water generally took a liking to drink in the same way they liked treasure. Lushera even remembered hearing an ancient tale of a wicked dragon who loved its drink a little too much and died after the hero caught it in a trap when it was drunk.

Lushera divided her share of the roasted meat and took some over to Kaphal. Her main body was curled up in the dome house, resting her injured body, but her human fragment form sat at the fire with the rest of them.

Lushera gave her the plate and said, "*Here you go, Mom.*"

"Oh, are you sure? I ate plenty a few days ago. Will you have enough for everyone else?"

Lushera spoke in Draconic using Giselle's Ring (real name unknown), which gave its wearer the ability to speak the language. Kaphal also responded in Draconic.

Draconic had multidimensional layers of meaning that weren't possible in any humanoid language, and all that meaning crashed into Lushera like a flood. The ring gave her the ability to understand what was said, but she still felt like her brain couldn't keep up.

"It's important to eat together," she said.

“Oh, sweetheart!” exclaimed Kaphal with a fawning smile as she pulled Lushera into her arms.

“Boy, does that put a smile on your face,” Timm remarked.

“Right?” replied Viola, the three adventurers smiling softly as they watched over the mother and daughter.

“But even this is just a momentary break,” continued Timm. “It’d be nice if this makes Martgarz give up, but I doubt it.”

“We’ll make them give up. We’ll make them think there’s no point in attacking the mountain. And to do that, we first need—”

“Everyone, be careful! Something’s coming!”

It was sudden. Kaphal’s fragment form released Lushera and stood, looking into the sky, her main body also raising its head and letting out a growl of warning.

“What is it?” asked Timm.

“Mom says something’s coming...” Lushera translated for her.

A few moments after Kaphal raised the alarm, Lushera noticed it too. *What is this feeling? It’s like the air is getting heavier...*

The night sky screamed under the pressure from above, and the source soon became apparent.

Wings beat powerfully, cutting through the night wind, coming closer.

Lushera had good night vision now. A wyvern, sharp and wicked, danced through the night sky towards them, a humanoid figure clearly visible on its back.

“Is that a pseudo-dragon variant?” murmured Lushera.

Pseudo-dragons were a type of monster that were like imitations of real dragons, with a fragment of their power. It’s possible that the dragons created them long ago to serve them, or that they were the result of an evil alchemist’s experimentations. There was no way to know now how they came to be, but they were far more powerful than your average monster, even if they didn’t

reach the same heights as dragons. And a variant pseudo-dragon, well that would have a power that should be feared.

So, then the question was, who would ride such a creature? The force pressing down that felt like it could warp the world itself was coming from the rider, not the mount.

The wyvern stretched its wings wide. Lushera was certain it was getting ready to attack, but it didn't. As it glided close to the ground, its rider leaped from its back, and it climbed back into the sky.

The man landed, and Lushera experienced an impact powerful enough to shatter the ground, but that was only in her senses. In reality, flames danced out, delicately softening his landing.

It was an old man, his expression fierce.

His head was bald, but his beard of fiery red was plentiful. His body—like a taut steel cable—was wrapped in a layered robe of red and the violet of an eternal dawn. His eyes burned like a blacksmith's forge.

"It appears there was quite the commotion here. But it also seems you took care of it. Well done. There are more humans than I thought, though," he said to Kaphal in draconic, his arms opened wide in greeting.

"*Father!*" she cried.

"Huh?!" shrieked Lushera.

This was, apparently, Kaphal's father. This old man who'd appeared without notice during their feast seemed to be hiding a power as explosive as a volcano's eruption.

"Who's this?" asked Timm.

"Mom just called him 'Father,'" Lushera told him.

Both the adventurers and Lushera felt like they shouldn't make any sudden moves, not even the twitch of one finger. They froze in place, bound by invisible chains.

The man of deep crimson glared at Lushera then addressed her in her own language, both regal and fluent. "I am Shurei, leader of the Flight of Mount

Bermarl. I cannot appear here in my true form, but I imagine you can tell who I am.”

Shurei, the leader of a dragon flight. Dragons were naturally creatures so powerful no normal person could compete with them, and the leaders that brought them together were surely beings beyond that, with power gained as they aged. He might be in humanoid form, but he had the strength to bring about a calamity.

The first to move despite the pressure and tension was Viola. She stepped forward, her movements surprisingly practiced as she gripped her skirt and curtsied. “Your Majesty, King of the Bermarl dragons, you honor us with your presence. My name is—”

“Don’t bother. I know you’re nothing more than your average human,” he said, cutting her off, almost like her introduction was a waste of his time. He looked them over with eyes of glowing orange. Their natural color was likely the same brown as Kaphal’s, but his contained a light like the sun shimmering off desert sand.

His eyes finally settled on Lushera. “You.”

“Urk!” she squeaked.

“I see. You *are* odd. Weak, yet still closer to us than a human.” He smiled with curiosity. That was enough to make Lushera prepare herself for death. “What’s wrong, child? Will you not speak to even tell me your name? How rude.”

With his prodding, or rather, his command, Lushera worked her dry tongue until she could get the words out. “...*My name is Lushera.*”

“*What’s this? You speak Draconic? Gyahaha!*” Shurei laughed, a howling sound.

Lushera thought that laugh might blow her away, but she stood her ground.

“*Father... Why are you here?*” asked Kaphal.

“*I imagine you’ve guessed why.*”

Kaphal seemed taken aback by her father’s visit. This place was sandwiched between two human kingdoms, far from Mount Bermarl. The leaders of

dragons rarely appeared before humans, and they weren't about to come out here just to drop in for a chat without reason.

"I learned you had become involved in a battle against humans, that the number of variants on the mountain had declined, and its defenses weakened," he explained. *"There is no way of knowing when the humans might take advantage of that and strike again... And yet I am not able to burn a human kingdom to the ground in order to save you. Dragon flights must not engage in battle with humanoid countries. If you survived, I came to see if you wished to continue fighting, or if you would return to the flight."*

"Return?" said Kaphal. "But that's..."

"Inconvenient?" Shurei's eyes flicked towards Lushera while he spoke to Kaphal. It seemed he already knew about Kaphal's situation.

I...don't think I could survive somewhere where dragons live. So then...Mom...

Lushera had never seen dragon territory with her own eyes, but she knew they were places of such incredible danger that Mount Kugus paled in comparison.

If Kaphal gave up on Mount Kugus and returned to her flight, she would be escaping the threat from Martgarz, but there was no guarantee Lushera would be able to go with her.

"If that is the case," said Shurei, *"we should increase the dragon aura and number of variants on the mountain. That's all I can do, but it is something, at least."*

"Would you really? Thank you!" said Kaphal, sounding happy but surprised by the unexpected offer of help. But then a hint of confusion tainted her smile. Lushera felt the same. This sounded too good to be true. Her negotiator's sensibility was ringing alarms that something seemed off.

"Let's take a step back for a moment," said Shurei. *"My mountain is fairly far from here. It would be quite the trial to transport variants from there, which would mean we would have to request the help of those who live closer."*

"Closer? You can't mean..."

It was then, almost as if planned. The air around Lushera felt like it doubled in weight. Wings beat through the night sky. One set, two, three, shadows approaching, the moon resting on their backs. The three shadows were variant wyverns just like Shurei rode, riders on their backs as well, humans in form only.

“They are not strangers to us. We in fact have an alliance with them. I asked for their assistance, and they said they would listen to our request,” said Shurei. The wyverns sailed near the mountain and the three riders leaped from their backs. *“I’m not sure that we can convince them, however.”* Shurei crossed his arms and smiled, a look in his eyes that could kill a demon outright.

The three people, or rather, three dragons, landed with grace. While Shurei took on the form of an old mountain ascetic, these three men were young, graceful, and noble. They wore loose blouses with frilled jabots at their necks and trousers that showed the lines of their slender legs. Blue decorated their bodies at various points, their look finished off with ornamental swords at their hips and hair of brilliant aqua cut short and neat.

One of the handsome men, the one with the most overwhelming aura, stepped towards them, his eyes as sharp as daggers. *“It has been a long time, Kaphal, you who stole Luja from us.”*

“I...” Even Kaphal’s face was turning blue at this point.

Lushera couldn’t help feeling that Kaphal wasn’t happy with a visit by these three dragons, but there was actually a different shock Lushera was struggling with at that moment. *Kaphal? Luja?* she thought to herself in Draconic.

That blue dragon in human form had said the names of two other dragons. The sound resonated brilliantly, grandly, filled with a reverence towards their existence. Draconic was a language filled with substance, impossible in any humanoid language that can only express sounds, and these dragons’ names were the ultimate expression of that.

It was the first time Lushera heard that. Kaphal had never corrected Lushera when she said Kaphal’s name in her anemic human language, and when Kaphal said Lushera’s name...

The blue prince moved briskly towards them, scowling with eyes the color of the ocean’s depths. He stopped right in front of Kaphal, and his eyes shot

towards Lushera with such force she felt she'd been run through with a blade, but the next moment, he seemed to lose interest in her.

"Hmph," he snorted, looking at Kaphal, not Lushera. "*The king of the Bermarl dragons is your father. He may pity you, but I don't. I'll be blunt: your troubles are entirely of your own making. You are young and weak. It's only good luck that has let you make a nest here in a place as dangerous as this. You gobbled that good luck up along with your variants as you wasted them on pointless things!*"

Lushera felt a cold sweat break out along her body as he talked about wasting variants. Martgarz was attacking Mount Kugus because Kaphal had fed the variants to Lushera in order to strengthen her, reducing the number of variants that would get in the way of soldiers entering.

The blue prince was blaming no one but Kaphal. "*Our flights do have an alliance,*" he said. "*And we can't stand by while someone in that alliance has become the prey of humans. That is why we came to listen to the request from the king of Bermarl. But we will only help if you change your behavior.*"

"What exactly...are you telling me to do?" asked Kaphal.

"*Kick that pet out of your mountain and swear you'll never see it again.*" The blue prince pointed at Lushera without even looking at her.

Kaphal gasped. "...*I can't do that. I live here on this mountain so that I can live with her. That's why I want to protect it...*" She cast her eyes down slightly as she tried to argue back. If she couldn't ever see Lushera again, then there would be no reason to insist on staying on this mountain. If that was the condition, then she might as well return to her flight's territory.

But the blue prince didn't seem interested in listening to her at all. "*Think, Kaphal. I'm saying I'll forgive you if you only give that thing up.*"

It happened fast. His head snapped to look at Lushera, eyes glaring. She didn't even have time to feel afraid before he grabbed her.

"Aaaah!" she shrieked.

His hand squeezed around her slender neck as he lifted her into the air.

Lushera was durable, closer to a dragon than a human in terms of strength, but this man's hand was terrifyingly strong. The vertebrae in her neck creaked, and the word "death" flit through her mind.

Shurei didn't make any move to stop it. He stood still, watching.

"Gah, agh..."

"*Lushera!*" cried Kaphal without thinking.

"That! It's that name!" The blue prince's slender face contorted in a scowl. *"I want to end this thing's life right now! But you can still take back what you've done, so I'll settle for warning you. If you still don't get it, then I'll make you watch as I tear this human apart with my own claws."*

"*Stop!*"

"*Ah!*"

Luckily, the blue prince threw Lushera aside in a fit of irritation before she was killed.

She landed clumsily on her rear and coughed while Kaphal's fragment form knelt and leaned in close. Her main body had leaped out of the house as well to coil around Lushera and protect her.

"Haven't you realized? I haven't given her a true name!" said Kaphal. *"I know she's not something I can burden the Flight of the Shilneer Ocean with!"*

"Of course not! If you had taken it upon yourself to bring such a weak and lowly creature into our flight, I would have culled her long ago to avoid her sullying our name!"

Lushera was horrified by the blue dragon's howled declaration. Killing her was almost businesslike. That sword of threat was often more terrifying than someone wanting to kill you out of hatred or revenge, and even more so when it came from a dragon.

"But I have learned that you are the kind of fool who will toy with a dragon's name," he said. *"And for that, you must be punished."*

"And so you're telling me I have to leave her? If that's the case...I won't stay on Mount Kugus. I'll search for another place where I can live together with

her," said Kaphal without hesitation, hugging Lushera to her.

"Do you even know what you're saying?!" The blue dragon looked at her like he was looking at a child who wouldn't listen to reason.

"Then you wouldn't just be risking your life, Kaphal," said Shurei in warning. *"It would be a journey to sure death for you."*

Natural energies were weak in the areas humanoids controlled. The real world as it was without interference was one where natural disasters occurred once every five minutes. It was a violent place. Dragons had to live in places like that or they would steadily weaken.

Mount Kugus was an extremely abnormal location in that it had a mountain of the fire element in a land filled with the water element. It was a calm enough location for humans to live, perhaps because of the two elements interacting, and yet, still a place where a dragon could live. It was a rare and valuable location.

And there was no guarantee that Kaphal would be able to find a vacant home as miraculous as this one anywhere else, and, if she did abandon this home, Martgarz would likely take over the mountain, preventing her from ever coming back. A nomad dragon with nowhere to go and no place to return to would eventually find themselves hunted by humans or wasting away.

Which meant this blue dragon was trying to tear Kaphal and Lushera apart, by any means necessary. Kaphal refused to though, even insisting she would put her life on the line if it meant being with Lushera.

Lushera felt a stubborn, unpleasant fire burning in the back of her chest.

"...Wait," she said.

"Huh?"

"What?"

This whole time, no one, not even Kaphal, had asked Lushera's opinion, but she finally spoke up.

The dragons' gazes pierced into her. They just looked at her, but that was enough to make her feel like she'd be crushed to pieces. But she stood her

ground, her anger blotting out her fear.

“Why hasn’t anyone told me anything?” she said. *“Why is everyone deciding everything without me, ignoring me? Are you all free to decide when I live and when I die?”*

“Shut your mouth, you impudent human!” The blue prince’s well-formed, slender face twisted in displeasure.

His two attendants glared at her as well. They almost looked like they were dealing with a dog barking at them. Though, to dragons, a human was nothing more than trash.

“Are you under the mistaken impression that you can speak here?” said the blue prince.

“How would I know anything! No one’s even told me what your problem is!”

“Lushera, be careful!” cautioned Kaphal, standing in front of her to cover her. She wrapped her arms gently around Lushera’s shoulders and gently tried to reason with her. *“Leave this to me. Please understand, Lushera.”*

“You’re doing it too, Mom! Why are you allowed to talk about dying without asking me about any of this?” Her voice was so harsh that it surprised not only Kaphal but herself as well.

They’d been together for a year, and this was the first time Lushera showed Kaphal any sort of blatant irritation or dissatisfaction. Kaphal froze. Lushera stepped out from her shadow and again faced the dragons she should have feared.

“You think I’m completely worthless? You think I’m a weak and inconsequential creature that’ll never live up to a dragon? Well...I disagree.”

That was all pride. She couldn’t stand being treated as something so unimportant, when she’d just promised that she would become something more. She promised she wouldn’t just be a pet, she would be a dragon’s adopted daughter.

Lushera herself found it odd how hard it was for her to deal with other people, even Kaphal, deciding whether or not she lived. It awakened an almost

childlike temper tantrum in her.

"I will not let it be a mistake that Mom gave me my name! I plan to become someone that won't bring shame to that name! If you're not satisfied with me, then test me somehow! I'll give it my all! I'll show you!"

The blue dragons were taken aback by Lushera's bluster, their expressions filled with both shock and perhaps humiliation to be talked back to by something so small and insignificant.

The first to speak was the red dragon king. *"...Your bark, at least, is impressive."*

Lushera got the impression that Shurei was finally seeing *her*. He smiled broadly, but there was a dreadful look in his eye that sent a shiver up her spine. It was the sort of look she imagined a lion would make when they pushed their own cub into a bottomless ravine. It was far more terrifying than anything she'd felt from him so far.

"What do you think, Blue? I think there's something logical about what she says," he said.

"Have you lost your mind, Red?"

"We haven't confirmed anything about her yet." Shurei accepted what Lushera said surprisingly easily. It made Lushera shrink back. *"I won't acknowledge a fool who's all talk without backing it up. If you want to be tested, then I shall test you. You understand this might result in your death?"*

"...I do."

"Father! Please, stop!" cried Kaphal, her voice pained. Neither Shurei nor Lushera listened.

"I'm borrowing the mountain, Kaphal. In...seven days. I'll spend seven days preparing, and then I will test the welp. If you can show the strength and dignity you claim to have, I will make the plans necessary for protecting this mountain."

That was when Lushera learned a smile could be more terrifying than a glare.



PERHAPS it was because of all the changes to the plan.

The dragons left, for that night anyway.

“...Nearly thought I was gonna piss myself.”

“That all? I thought I was going to puke out my guts.”

“That was indeed enough dragon aura to make you dizzy. I might’ve thrown up everything if I’d been drinking at all. Not even I could enjoy that kind of situation.”

While the Golden Helm might be in a class of their own as adventurers, they were stuck on the outside looking in at a situation like that. They finally regained their capacity to speak once the dragons left.

“*Lushera, why would you do that?*” asked Kaphal.

“*Why didn’t you tell me anything, Mom?*” She advanced towards Kaphal, who stood there trembling. She understood that Kaphal was trying to resolve the situation as peacefully as possible, but she just couldn’t accept her solution, even after thinking it over again now. And she also couldn’t accept the fact that she was kept out of the whole thing, despite it being about her.

“*And what is a true name? Why...is my name different from your name?*” asked Lushera.

Kaphal hesitated, speaking only reluctantly, as if accepting she couldn’t keep it a secret if Lushera had realized that much. *“Dragons are bound not only by blood, but also by name into families. Naming has power, in the same way that naming you made you into something far greater than a human. I named you as my daughter, but...I didn’t name you as someone connected to the Flight of the Shilneer Ocean. I didn’t think they would approve.”*

The egg Kaphal lost would obviously have had a father, and that father was one of those blue dragons. But while Kaphal did define Lushera as her daughter when she named her, she didn’t connect her with the father of the original egg. Her name was empty, just sound, something not normally possible for a dragon’s name. It was like she’d been given a human name.

“*Why...?*” Lushera asked.

“*The short explanation is that the power of a flight’s name changes depending*

on the deeds of its members. If you, a non-dragon, were connected to the flight's name, the flight would be looked down upon by other dragons, and their control of the natural world would weaken... The blue dragons are afraid I'll do that someday."

It seemed a slight leap in logic, but Lushera was aware through personal experience that dragon names carried weight. If that power came from the fact that they were dragons, then she could vaguely understand how someone who wasn't a dragon taking on the same name might "dilute" that power.

Which was why the blue dragons would go so far as to say they would cull Lushera if Kaphal had given her a real name. They'd avoided that situation so far, but their uncertainty was still there, making them want to separate Kaphal and Lushera.

Shurei was already connected to Lushera through her name. What did he think of her as she was? In fact, Lushera just realized he never said anything for or against that situation. Would he allow her to be someone connected to his flight if she proved her strength? She wanted to believe that he wouldn't bother with testing her at all if that weren't the case.

"Would the blue dragons accept me if the king of the Flight of Mount Bermarl accepted me...?" asked Lushera.

"...Stop this, now, Lushera. We should run. Father can't back down now after saying what he did, he's the leader of a flight. He would kill me if it was best for the flight, let alone you."

That lit a fire in Lushera's heart as easily as setting fire to dried twigs. "So, I should just stand by and watch you die? I don't want to do that."

"I might not die."

"And I might not either! Why do you get to decide by yourself—"

"That's enough!" Viola jumped between Lushera and Kaphal, shouting loud enough to make Lushera's eardrums shudder. "I don't speak Draconic, but I can tell the two of you have lost your cool. The more difficult the situation, the more likely you're going to fail if you can't make calm decisions."

It seemed Viola was able to remain calm because she didn't understand what

was being said, but she sensed enough disquiet that she wanted to step in.

Lushera couldn't argue with her, she was right. The dragons were going to be the party she negotiated with, and if she lost her calm, she would also lose her chance at success.

The area was wrapped in darkness, the bonfire having burnt out at some point. They fell asleep inside the dome-shaped house, not saying much else to each other, the smoked meat growing cold as it remained untouched.



LUSHERA had a strange dream that night. She was in a tight space, the walls were hard, it was warm, her body curled up. Her eyes were closed and body tightly wound, but, for some reason, she still knew what was happening around her.

Well, dreams are odd like that.

"That's an odd thing you're wearing today, Luja."

"Mm, I saw a human wearing this. Thought it might be fun to wear it myself as well."

There was a young man standing in front of a red dragon in a large cave. His vivid blue hair stood out. He wore glasses, making him look more like he was about to go into the office to work than go on some journey. Maybe that's what made him look like a bit of an academic.

"I'm glad you came all the way here to Mount Kugus, but you seem so small and...lacking...in human form."

"I don't really have a choice. I don't want to stir up the humans when you have an egg. Maybe I should have come sooner in dragon form and gotten everyone used to me..." The young man, Luja, looked up at the large red dragon with a warm smile. *"It's a little inconvenient being so close to human lands, but that's just how valuable a place it is. Setrayu does have a strong affinity for water. And a volcano in the middle of that means there's still a strong sense of fire here too."*

"I'm sure this place you found will give our daughter the greatest power

possible.”

Kaphal crouched down with her neck wrapped around the egg, nudging it with her snout. The world shook around Lushera.

“But the important thing is that we love her, no matter what she is like when she’s born. Right?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right.”

“She might actually be happier if she has no special talent whatsoever...or she would have two flights fighting over her. She would likely end up in Bermarl because my flight owes the king so much, but young females are few. Everyone’s worried about it, so they might not give her up easily... My flight doesn’t care if the blood is pure, only if it’s strong.” Luja’s slender face was filled with sorrow.

Dragons had great power and long life spans, but in exchange, rarely reproduced. Births were important to all dragons.

“...Have you chosen a name?” asked Luja, changing the subject when he saw Kaphal was starting to look upset as well. The cheer in his voice sounded forced.

“Not yet. I wanted to ask your opinion.”

“I have no sense for that sort of thing. I think it’s better to leave it to you. Why don’t you think about it while I’m out hunting?”

“Okay.”

The two dragons seemed like they couldn’t suppress their happiness at having even that short exchange.

Luja crouched beside the egg and placed his hand on the shell. *“My beloved daughter, my unborn treasure... I wish all the blessing of heaven and earth on you.”*

His touch was so gentle, Lushera’s heart wrenched with sadness, and, while the sights she saw in her dream faded into mist as she woke, the feeling of that tender touch remained.



NORTH of Mount Kugus was the south-eastern tip of Martgarz, the Angus Marquessate.

It was once a key location as the starting point for the route through the mountains to the south, but its importance declined once the red dragon took up residence on Mount Kugus.

Even so, the lord, Marquess Kenneth Angus, ruled his land without any major incidents. It was stable both politically and economically, and a peaceful land beyond the impact of the war with the Guffarr Union to the east.

But that peace crumbled without warning.

Marquess Angus failed in his surprise attack against the dragon of Mount Kugus. He and many of his knights died in the attempt. The region was hit with such shock and chaos that no one knew exactly to what extent his death would have an impact.

There was one person who acted quickly amongst that chaos.

There was a patient in the Tortomia temple hospital in the Marquessate. This patient was in one of the internal, single-occupant rooms (the kind of room you couldn't use if you hadn't made significant contributions to the church), sitting on the bed, bandages wrapped around his torso and right arm.

He sat there in a daze, staring at the ground, enduring his pain, when heavy, confident footsteps approached from the hallway. Several men entered his room without knocking on the door.

"He's one of the ones who made it back from Mount Kugus. He was one of the Marquess's knights."

"*I'm* the Marquess now. I may not have officially inherited the title yet, but it is the inevitable future."

"Ah..."

The speaker was an imposing young man in his mid-twenties accompanied by a retinue. He was tall, and his brisk movements implied a soldier's training. His eyes were sharp, gleaming like a wolf's, and there was a dangerous air about him that made those around him hesitant to approach, like they would be

touching a bared blade.

His name was Julian Angus, he was Kenneth Angus's eldest son.

The injured knight was still in a daze, seemingly unable to keep up even now that Julian suddenly arrived. Julian frowned in annoyance at seeing that.

"Why are you just sitting there? You don't even bow to your lord?" he said, then kicked the man's shin.

"Huh... Eh, ah..." The injured man sluggishly stood, then knelt on the ground and bowed his head.

There was not a single shred of respect in Julian's eyes as he looked down at the knight. No concern, no appreciation. All there was, was contempt for a defeated man and scorn for the disgraceful behavior of a broken man.

"I have a general idea of what happened after listening to the other survivors," said Julian, "But there is still one part that is not entirely clear... I need to know exactly how powerful this Lushera is."

"Lushera...? Who—?"

Julian threw a metal plate on the ground where the knight was looking. It was an adventuring license. It showed impossible numbers and the owner's name: Lushera. The letters looked almost like they were written with soot.

"According to the adventurers my father recruited, this person used to be an adventurer. He went missing on Mount Kugus during the summer of last year, and was—for some reason—a little girl when he, *she*, next appeared in town only recently. *She* is also incredibly powerful. There were apparently sightings of someone resembling her at the battle on Mount Kugus. She is a little girl with hair like fire. Do you know anything?"

That got a reaction from what had been a shell of a man.

"Ah! Aaaagh! Her! No! She's coming! Nooooo!"

"...You. Make him more willing to cooperate," ordered Julian.

"Yes, my lord."

One of the guards accompanying him pulled out a slender baton-like object: a

wand. This tool allowed even people with no talent for magic to cast spells. This one was enchanted with lightning magic.

The guard swung it, striking the curled-up knight.

“Gaaaaah!”

There was a flash of electricity, and the injured knight collapsed.

“Speak,” ordered Julian. “What happened? What is Lushera?” He stepped on the man’s hand, while the man spasmed trying to draw in breath.

The man managed to drag the words out of himself. “She...doesn’t have scales...no teeth...no wings...but she’s still...a dragon...”

Just saying that seemed to be the limit of what his mind could handle. He stayed down on all fours, weeping, unable to say anything else.



PRIESTS healed wounds with holy magic, which was why temples that offered healing were also medical facilities. And despite there being several patients who required uninterrupted bed rest, Julian stormed loudly down the halls.

“Begin preparations to attack Mount Kugus,” he said.

“What was that, my lord?” The guards accompanying him questioned their own hearing.

“Nothing has changed the fact that there are currently fewer variants on the mountain. If we don’t take out that red dragon now, we don’t know when we’ll have another opportunity. We have a chance at success if we go in with the assumption we may be up against two dragons.”

“B-But, the Marqu—your father failed. We lost retainers and the dragon hunters. We would have no choice but to seek support from the neighboring lords, but they will all be hesitant to join forces for a second attempt.”

It was far too reckless an idea. Eliminating the red dragon was an order from the imperial court to Kenneth, in the first place, and the court sent more than just the order itself. They also provided support so that Kenneth could hire dragon hunters, and dispatched top-class monster exterminators to assist. And Kenneth still failed with that. He lost his life and the lives of many others.

They didn't even know yet what the court wanted to do about Mount Kugus at this point. There was a chance they might give up on it. Julian was jumping ahead.

"We'll have a dracovitae staff. With that, they will follow. We might not even need their help."

The knights accompanying him froze.

The dracovitae staffs were the foundations of countries. They were items used to quell the raging power of the natural world and create regions where humanoids could survive. The royal families of the various humanoid races used the dracovitae to calm their lands.

But the staffs had one other special aspect. They had the power to manipulate the natural world, so what if someone were to use that for battle?

It was true that Julian would be able to attack Mount Kugus if he borrowed that from the imperial family, but that was impossible, nothing more than a child's dream.

"My lord. All four of our country's dracovitae are deployed at the eastern warfront, and only with the four of them are they able to hold the line. Bringing just one here would open a hole in our defenses. Even if it would be safe from a strategic standpoint, politically—"

"Fool. I never said it would be one of Martgarz's dracovitae."

"What?"

Julian must be dreaming. After one second, confusion struck the knight. After two, he was hit by understanding. By three, it was fear.

"You can't mean...?"

"I suggested it to Father once. He laughed it off... But I mean war. Father and everyone else see this international war as a drawn-out jousting match. It's actually a good thing it's so peaceful. Fewer people will die."

The knights didn't argue back. It wasn't because something about what Julian said convinced them he was right. It was because they were gripped by the fear that the world they believed in and the order they thought existed was

crumbling away.

And they felt that exact same fear about Julian. Was he simply a fool? Or was he a revolutionary? Either way, he was not normal.

"Don't mistake me for my fool of a father. I will show this world what true war is. I'll swallow Setrayu whole," he said, clenching his fist like he was crushing something inside.

Chapter 2: To the Capital

THE building was on a corner of the main street in Kugut’hulm, its entrance a weave of delicate white metal, forming a huge bird’s nest in front of the building with its excessive use of glass.

This was the office of McGregor Adventuring Support Services. They provided a service for adventurers where they handled secretarial tasks (and adventurers considered them private caseworkers).

Lushera was meeting with a man in the main office of the building, a boastful space decorated with geometric shapes and potted plants. That man was Ivar McGregor, the owner of the office. The easiest way to describe him was to call him a “sophisticated thug,” with his suit and neatly slicked-back hair.

There were very few adventuring managers in the kingdom of Setrayu. Lushera—or XXXX, the person she was before she was Lushera—had been the first manager in the city. Ivar established his office here afterwards, and they knew each other in passing as two people working in the same industry.

Ivar seemed like the kind of disreputable man you couldn’t let your guard down with, but that wasn’t uncommon in the adventuring world. Regardless of who he was, XXXX considered Ivar an invaluable friend with whom he could always talk shop.

“...You? *You’re* the manager from the Seven-Sided Die?” asked Ivar.

“Yes. And I turned into this,” Lushera responded.

“Wait, wait, wait, hold up just a second. You can’t be serious. You’re serious? For the love of... Dragons are seriously beyond anything imaginable. They can do anything...”

Lushera always thought of Ivar as the kind of person who wouldn’t bat an eye even if someone died right in front of him, but even he was wide-eyed after hearing Lushera’s story.

"Why didn't you say anything when you were here yesterday?" he asked.

"I had lost my memories. I barely remembered anything from before I was saved on the mountain. And then yesterday...it all finally came back," she confided.

Ivar's information led Lushera to Doctor Reiner, then she regained her memories, and then there was Marquess Angus's attack on the mountain...

Ivar listened to her story, mechanically popping sugar cubes into his mouth every once in a while. When she finished, he leaned back in his chair, did a tired stretch and groaned. "Shit, so that's what happened? I knew it. Guess there was a whole load of mistakes. Things were touch and go there."

"Wh-What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you know. I knew Kenneth Angus was secretly moving his army to take out the dragon of Mount Kugus. I had a pretty good idea of when it'd happen too, within an hour, give or take."

This time, Lushera's eyes went wide. "Huh?! How?"

"It's what I do. I know who to talk to in order to get the information I need. But living on the darker side of things means someone's gonna take a disliking to you... Drew attention from someone I shouldn't've and couldn't stay in Martgarz anymore." Ivar almost sounded embarrassed.

Lushera did know he'd said before that he had connections in Martgarz. If he had an information network in the deep darkness behind the huge country of Martgarz, then it made sense he might be able to get accurate information more quickly than the Setrayu government could.

"So, uh...can you pay for information?" asked Ivar, the question darting out unexpectedly like a blade.

"You're going to help me?" Lushera cocked a brow. "Why?"

"Cause helping you seems like it might help me. I just want you to cover labor costs, that's all."

That part seemed the truth. He didn't really care much about the money.

Lushera couldn't have asked for better. Even if he was after something other

than money, Ivar's help was good to have. She trusted in his skill and personality enough to believe that.

"Then, yes, I would love to," she accepted. "The information to protect yourself is the value of life."

"All right, negotiations complete. First time in a long time I wanna thank those rotten gods. Seems it was a bit too early to give up and throw everything into my adventuring manager business."

They both held out their hands for a handshake at the same time. Ivar held back on gripping too hard—perhaps he was being cautious with Lushera's now small and soft hand—and something about that was funny to Lushera. She struggled to keep herself from laughing.

"Right. So. I already heard the Golden Helm's contacted the royal court. That's to mediate for the dragon, I take it?" he inquired.

"Yes. Our leader— Oh, uh, I joined the Golden Helm. As their manager," Lushera informed him.

"You? A manager? Looking like *that*? That ain't funny. Well. Whatever. And?"

"Our leader suggested working with the Setrayu government to protect the mountain. We're about to head towards the capital to discuss it."

They cut down the people who pushed into Mount Kugus to take out Kaphal, but that wasn't the end of the war. If there was a next time, Martgarz would come in with a more powerful force that would guarantee their victory. Lushera couldn't stand by and do nothing if she intended to protect her home.

The politicians of Setrayu quickly came to a consensus with their drawn-out debates now that Martgarz had made an open move against the country, finally inviting Kaphal and Lushera to negotiations.

There was still some time until the day of Lushera's test that Shurei decided on, and Lushera definitely needed to settle things with Setrayu as well if she wanted to protect the mountain. That's why they were going to hurry to the capital.

"Couldn't be better timing for Setrayu too," said Ivar. "With fewer variants,

the mountain's not the barrier it used to be, so the country's only option is to defend the border with their voluntary military, but they can't even build a watchtower without the dragon agreein' to it."

"There is a possibility that the variants' numbers will be supplemented in the near future..." Lushera gave a short explanation of what happened the night before.

Help from the dragons was another glimmer of hope for protecting the mountain, but Ivar's expression was bitter. "Hm. Depends on how the dragons feel, though," he said.

"...Would it really be that difficult without the additional variants? If Martgarz launched a full-on assault on the mountain, would the Setrayu military be able to win against them?"

"Hard to say. It'd depend on how much of its forces Martgarz dedicates to attacking the mountain. I don't think it can do anything right now, since all its forces are drawn together in the east, but situations change... Having the variants would mean you've got an ace up your sleeve for when things are looking hopeless, since armies aren't normally equipped to fight them."

Variants were a type of monster that served as guard dogs of dragon territory. It was because they ran rampant throughout Mount Kugus that the Martgarz military couldn't make it over the mountain before.

If Kaphal could protect the mountain without the other dragons' help just by allying with Setrayu, then the conversation would be simple. They wouldn't need to ask the blue dragons for help...but that thought was probably in large part wishful thinking. Lushera agreed with Ivar's evaluation.

"Well, dragon things are outside my area of expertise," said Ivar. "That's your problem to figure out. I'll worry about what Martgarz is up to and chase up stuff around the Setrayuan court. When you heading out?"

"Today, arriving tomorrow."

"All right. I'll head out a little after. We should be able to meet again somewhere before we get to the capital. If you stay the night in some legit lodging, then I'll find you and make contact. Should be easy, you stand out like

crazy.”

“Thank you.”

Ivar was quick to make decisions once he committed to a job. He rose energetically to his feet, but...he asked a question that seemed like he just couldn't hold in any longer. “So, uh...not sure if it's okay to ask this, but...why a little girl?”

“Lushera was the name of Kaphal's daughter, she died before she was born. She gave that name to me instead, and I became a dragon's daughter.” Giving that answer, Lushera felt both happy and proud. But Ivar didn't react right away despite the answer. “Um...was there something else?”

“Nope. It just...messes with my head 'cause I know what you used to look like...”

He let out a sigh that was trapped in his throat, massaging his temples as he struggled to take in the situation.



A carriage drawn by two horses was heading south along the main road under the clear blue sky of early summer. This particular carriage was what was commonly referred to as a “high-speed carriage.” It was a magic item imbued with spells that reduced rolling resistance, carriage sway, and the riders' weight applied to the horses, so that they could run nearly as fast as they could if they weren't hauling anything. This mode of transportation was used by royalty, nobles, influential merchants, and first-class adventurers traveling with a dragon.

The three members of the Golden Helm sat on the two three-person-wide benches facing each other, along with Lushera and Kaphal's human fragment form. Their destination was Alhyura, the capital of Setrayu.

“You nervous?” asked Timm. He seemed concerned about Lushera. She wasn't talking much. He was still in his armor, even inside the carriage, since it was common sense for adventurers to take appropriate measures to protect themselves while moving between cities.

“Well...if I'm going to be meeting a king...” She had undertaken negotiations

with people of a certain social standing before through her work as an adventuring manager, but she certainly hadn't ever spoken to the ruler of a kingdom. Not to mention the fact that whether Kaphal lived or died might depend on the success of these negotiations. There was no way she couldn't be nervous.

"It's not gonna happen all of a sudden today. Relax."

"Dooon't you worry. It's not like the king bites," said Viola.

It was almost unnatural how naturally Timm and Viola took this whole meeting idea in stride. Seeing that made Lushera relax too.

And then she went quiet again, staring at the landscape rushing by out the window.

She looked up towards Kaphal, who sat across from her. Her clothes, made from magic in the same way her body was, had been a vivid red evening gown. Now she wore the sort of apron-dress combo that was common amongst women her age. Kaphal was always going to stand out, but at least now she wore clothing that wouldn't seem out of place walking around the capital. Viola had coached her on what to wear. The colors were darker and more muted, making her red hair look even more brilliant in contrast.

Kaphal seemed upset. Their eyes met briefly, then both looked away. Not out of discomfort, but neither could find the right words to say anything.

"Shall we do something to while away the time?" suggested Viola. "I have a few things we can do."

Perhaps she was uncomfortable with the silence. She opened the folded table in the wall of the carriage and spread board games and a deck of cards out on it.

The Golden Helm had a few storage items that were connected to pocket dimensions, but there was still a limit to the amount they could carry. Most of the games Viola pulled out were compact, easy-to-carry types.

"Whoa, that's a lot," said Lushera.

"We travel a lot in carriages like this. It gets boring," Timm explained.

"All right. Let's go with our usual: Old Maid," suggested Viola.

Lushera reached for the cards. That was something she understood, at least.

But Weyne shook his head with a huff. “Let’s not. You can see everything on Timm’s face. Playing cards with him is boring.”

“What did you say?!” Timm snapped.

“We’ll just play what we can. Even that part of it can be fun, right?” Viola smiled as she shuffled and dealt with practiced motions.

Kaphal picked her cards up as well, looking at them like they were a rare object.

“Mom, do you know the game Old Maid?” asked Lushera.

“Know. Saw dragons in humanoid bodies play.”

“Oh! Dragons play cards too? Well, I suppose dragons living in humanoid forms do engage in humanoid pastimes,” said Viola.

Kaphal discarded a pair with an apologetic smile. “I no think humans win. That okay?”

“Bring it. Humans might not win against a dragon when they pick up a sword and fight ‘em, but that doesn’t mean we’re gonna lose even in games,” challenged Timm.

“Uh, Timm, why the hell are you acting like you represent all humanity?” asked Weyne.

The lines of Timm’s scowl deepened and sparks flew in the not-at-all-spacious carriage.



TEN minutes passed.

“...I never imagined *this* would happen.”

“I told you. Old Maid’s probably the hardest game for these two.”

It was a fierce, drawn-out battle, dragging through the mud. Timm was unlucky enough to get the Old Maid in the initial deal, and that fact showed very clearly on his face. Whenever anyone went to take a card from him that was the Old Maid, he’d look just a little bit happier, meaning he’d kept the Old

Maid the entire time, with only the normal cards changing hands.

But then Kaphal destroyed that equilibrium.

She eventually pulled the Old Maid from him, and the obvious widening of her eyes made that fact apparent to the others. She too would look just a little happy whenever someone went to take the Old Maid from her, so the Maid didn't move anymore after that.

While that was happening, Lushera, Weyne, and Viola emptied their hands of cards, leaving only Timm and Kaphal in the game.

There were only three cards left in play. It was Timm's turn.

"She's grown a lot during this battle," he observed. "She took the Old Maid 'cause she wasn't used to reading human expressions. If I pull the Maid now, I don't think I can get her to take it back! Meaning, I'm the one backed into a corner. I'm gonna lose if I don't get ahead here!"

"For dragon pride!" said Kaphal in Draconic.

"Timm, I think this is the most serious I've seen you all year," Viola remarked.

"You looked cool for about a second there, but then I remembered this was a battle to see who's worse at Old Maid," said Weyne.

Timm looked at the cards with an expression as fierce as the manly bust of a hero. Kaphal's face was stiff, giving nothing away, twisted up in a grimace like she'd been treated to a full course of the world's most bitter medicine.

Timm's fingers wavered in the air in this fierce battle between a dragon and a first-class adventurer.



Gauge your opponent's expression, breathe, feel the flow of air, sense movements around you.

That one moment was filled with hundreds of battles' worth of attempts to read the other, happening quietly inside their minds.

The pointless, low-skill—yet unnecessarily intense—battle came to an abrupt end.

“This one!”

“Ah!”

Timm’s hand slipped past Kaphal’s fingers as they tried to keep up with him, and he snagged a card. And it was...*not* the Old Maid. It was the Ace of Hearts, showing a dragon silhouette with its wings open wide.

“Yes!” Timm threw down his remaining pair and lifted his fist in the air.

Kaphal looked at the last card, the Old Maid, her shoulders slumped. “Lost...”

“W-We’ll practice! You’ll get stronger with practice!” said Lushera, trying to cheer her up.

“...In all my twenty-seven years of life, I’ve never seen someone come up with the idea of practicing Old Maid,” said Weyne. It was hard to tell from his expression if he was exasperated or impressed.



SETRAYU was abundant with the element of water, rivers crossing its lands. That was why, despite it being a relatively small country, it took a long time to cross it. Rivers were convenient for transporting goods, but they made it more difficult for fast horses and high-speed carriages to continue in a straight line.

The group lodged in an inn overlooking a river that night. It was that languid time after dinner was done but still too early for bed.

Lushera and Kaphal were entertaining themselves with Old Maid.

“*This one?*” Kaphal reached for a card in Lushera’s hand, full of confidence, and pulled the Old Maid card with its demon drawing.

“Unfortunately, that’s a miss.”

“What? I was sure it was that one! You looked sad when I went for that other one!”

“Sorry. I was acting.”

“...Well, I forgive you. You’re cute whether you look happy or sad.”

Lushera was helping Kaphal train, like she’d suggested earlier, but Kaphal fell for even the slightest of tricks and couldn’t maintain a poker face when she was the one holding the Maid waiting for Lushera to pick one.

Thinking about it, Kaphal had only just recently gotten her humanoid fragment form. She likely couldn’t use the more minute intercommunication tools that humans used. That made Lushera a little uneasy, considering Kaphal was going to be speaking with the King soon.

“People deceive each other even when they’re playing,” said Kaphal, looking at the Old Maid with dejection.

“You could say that.”

“Why do people deceive each other? Dragons value promises. We don’t break them.”

Part of that sounded like Kaphal was just sore from losing, but she also seemed to really mean what she said.

There was a lot that was unknown about dragons’ ways of thinking, but there were legends and stories where they’d made promises with people, and Lushera couldn’t think of even one where the dragon broke that promise. Lushera wondered if it was instinctual, or perhaps just caused by the huge difference between their races.

“...People can gain a lot by deceiving others,” Lushera said. *“But dragons... they’re strong. Maybe they don’t need to deceive?”*

“Yes... It could be part of dragon pride. If people were as powerful as dragons, there would be a decline in the number of people who thought they could gain something by deceiving...”

Lushera had obtained a power greater than normal for a human, and that brought along with it its own kinds of revelations. She had the confidence to live

her life with pride, how she wanted, without resorting to petty tricks. Dragons would have that same level of confidence as a matter of course.

It was also possible that dragons had little to gain by deceiving other dragons. Each individual had incredible power and lived along massive time scales. They would likely lose more than they gained with lies used to get through a temporary problem. That must be why they valued their word.

“Dragons don’t deceive each other, but...they do make mistakes. Humans have human mistakes, and dragons have dragon mistakes... Perhaps that’s all there is to it...” said Kaphal, her voice tinged with sorrow.

She must’ve been thinking of the egg she lost. Or perhaps there was something else.

“...Want to stop practicing?” asked Lushera.

“Let’s do one more. I think I’ll need the ability to hide my emotions,” Kaphal said, shaking her head. She was serious about this.

Lushera could guess what Kaphal was thinking without having to ask. If she formed an alliance with Setrayu and developed a plan for protecting the mountain, then she wouldn’t need to ask the blue dragons for help, and Lushera wouldn’t have to go through with her test. If she could do that, then Lushera wouldn’t have to put herself in danger. Kaphal was dedicated to preparing that possibility.

The situation would be simpler if they could handle it that way. But, at the same time, Lushera had a feeling it wasn’t going to happen.

“Hey, Mom...”

Lushera started to say something, but Kaphal gently wrapped her arms around her. Perhaps she sensed the unpleasant direction that was going.

There’s no need to be worried. Leave it to me. That’s what that hug said.

Lushera swallowed back what she was going to say. Kaphal’s embrace was warm, and Lushera almost felt her will fading. Kaphal was simple, but that was perhaps why she was so effective in times like this.

“Hey-oh, Lushera. You have a sec?” There was a knock on the door and

Timm's voice called from the other side as Kaphal nuzzled her cheek against Lushera.

Lushera wriggled out from Kaphal's arms and opened the door to find Timm standing there with a red, un stamped envelope in hand. That was the kind of envelope a communications office used when they took a dictated message and sent it to an individual.

"It's for you," said Timm.

Lushera opened the folded sheet to find a short message (the sort of thing that would be fine if a communications office worker saw it):

*"Tomorrow morning, come to lodging town east-southeast. New information.
-I"*



RAJAR was a rapid horse rider, his partner was Fireball, and they spent their days and nights racing down roads.

Horses could naturally only run at top speed for a few minutes before tiring out. If they walked all day long, they were only slightly faster than a human. But this world had magic that recovered animals' stamina and healed the wear and tear of their bodies. Casting that on a horse all day would theoretically allow them to run at top speed for the entire day.

Almost all horses that people referred to as rapid horses, or the ones used for high-speed carriages, used these methods, though, simply running cost money as they had to use spells and drink elixirs like water.

That day, like many others, Rajar put the mail in his satchel, hopped astride his faithful steed, and rushed down the road while the sky was still a stunning gradation of deep azure.

Setrayu's land, blessed by water, was lush and filled with stunning water features. The rivers running through the plains glittered in the light from the rising sun. Paddy fields stretched as far as the eye could see, their vibrant green growth brimming with expectation for the season of bounty soon to come. The sight took Rajar's breath away no matter how many times he saw it.

There weren't many travelers walking the roads at this time of day. Rajar and his faithful steed had this early-morning beauty all to themselves, just as they always did. Though, this morning was soon to become a little different.

He didn't notice the sound at first, since it mixed in with the hoofbeats of his racing steed. He noticed Fireball's ears pricked up and the cadence of his steps fell slightly out of their normal rhythm, which was when Rajar realized the horse had noticed something.

Neither monster nor bandit could really keep up with the speed of a rapid horse, but speed was also a rapid horse's only defense. Their rider had to remain always on the lookout.

Rajar cast his eyes about the road, illuminated only by the weak dawn sun, and saw something strange.

There was a small figure chasing after them, darting down the road. They wore a cloak with a hood, the sort you used to conceal yourself, but the sheer speed at which they ran had pulled the hood back, flame-red hair fluttering in the wind.

"What the...?" Rajar questioned his own eyes. His horse was running at top speed, just like normal. And yet, there was a small figure running at high speeds, keeping up...? No, gaining slowly.

The person came closer and Rajar realized it was a young girl, beautiful and with a powerful presence. She had flaming hair, and not a single drop of sweat graced her brow as she nearly flew down the road. The sheer absurdity of the sight made Rajar wonder if he was still in bed dreaming.

"Good morning!" greeted the girl cheerfully as she came up alongside them.

"Uh, good...morning?"

She wasn't even out of breath. Rajar had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask but was in no state to be asking them.

The girl met eyes with Fireball, greeting him as well. He likely had questions of his own, but his first thought was his pride.

"Neeeigh!"

Acceleration jerked Rajar backwards. Fireball was already giving his all, but he ramped up the speed even more. The girl slowly started to fall behind.

To Rajar, Fireball was his partner, his companion, almost an extension of his own body. He knew how Fireball thought. He lived to run at high speeds, even if he needed magic to do it. And with that in mind...well, this rapid horse's pride would be injured should he lose to someone running on merely two legs!

But the mystery girl wasn't going to be left behind. She increased her speed and caught up again.

Rajar saw the fire grow in his steed's eyes. He immediately poured a combo magic potion into the bit (which had a built-in liquid delivery system), the liquid pouring into Fireball's mouth. This wasn't to recover stamina. This potion was for emergency use, for if they ran into a monster or bandits. It temporarily let Fireball break past his normal limits and run even faster.

His mithril horseshoes pounded the earth, rocking Rajar.

The cool wind from the river brushed Rajar's face. His rear bounced on the saddle, a magic item that absorbed shock for long-distance, high-speed horse riding.

The girl running beside them did step quickly, but it was like she flew. Each step itself wasn't any faster than a normal person was capable of, but the force in each step was frightening. The road was hard, packed down from countless hooves and feet, and yet her feet left indents in a straight line behind them. The frightening strength and her light body meant each stride was long, nearly a leap. She ran as if she were flying.

The girl and the horse met each other's gaze, side by side.

Fireball ran, as if using his life force itself to fuel his speed. They were neck and neck—he would not lose.

No. He *was* losing.

It was a draw, both sides refusing to give in, Fireball using power beyond his limits, but the girl started to pull ahead. Fireball's hoofbeats grew sluggish. If Fireball returned to his normal high speed, there was no way he was going to close the gap that formed.

The girl pulled ahead, and her form grew smaller in the distance. Rajar's beloved horse slowed down gradually once he'd been left behind. Rapid horses were supposed to run at full speed at all times, but Rajar didn't begrudge Fireball this one rest.

"Don't feel bad, buddy. There was no winnin' that one. That...was something you couldn't win against."

Fireball hung his head, but Rajar patted his neck in thanks.



"**YOU** ran here?!"

"Uh, good morning?"

Despite the early hour, Ivar was waiting outside the appointed town in the rest area at the front gate when Lushera arrived.

"I left before any stables opened. I don't mind paying the early morning rate, but I couldn't exactly get them to open outside normal hours," explained Lushera.

"Sure."

"And I run faster than a horse."

"Sure?!"

"I outran a rapid delivery horse on the way."

"Sure..." Ivar seemed to give up on saying anything more. "Fine, whatever. Get in. We'll talk on the way to Alhyura. People won't overhear us in here."

There was a high-speed carriage waiting outside the gate, all the more suspicious for its utter lack of any conspicuous features. He must have hired it for their travel. The driver, a man with a surprisingly sharp glint to his eyes, nodded in greeting to Lushera without saying a word.

"What about the others?" asked Ivar.

"They're heading to Alhyura on their own. I told them I'd catch up when I left."

"So, you're fine meeting up with them there?" They climbed in the carriage.

“You can set off,” Ivar said to the driver through the small window.

The driver snapped the reins and the horses pulled out, the carriage nearly gliding along. It was normal for nobility or prominent merchants to use high-speed carriages, so the carriages themselves were built with defense and privacy in mind, and the drivers were trustworthy.

Ivar glanced out at the land rolling by, a steeliness to his eyes that normally seemed more like those of a casual thug.

“Guess this place is as good as any. The hottest piece of info I’ve got for you this time is that Julian Angus will be unofficially visiting Alhyura,” he disclosed.

“Julian Angus?”

“North of Mount Kugus is the territory of Marquess Angus. That’s the same marquess that commanded the attack on the dragon the other day. Julian’s his eldest son. Since the Marquess is dead, Julian will be marquess soon.”

“His son...”

“And he’s quick. Word is he’s already in Setrayu. Apparently, he used a series of teleportation circle spells to go over Mount Tado. You can maybe take a dozen people that way in a day, but you need permission from Setrayu, but it is the fastest route.”

Large-scale movement between Martgarz and Setrayu ended when Kaphal took up residence decades ago on Mount Kugus, but that didn’t mean there was no travel at all between the countries.

You could avoid Mount Kugus altogether and travel through the next mountain over, Mount Tado, along a road that ran north-south. This was a dangerous path even despite there being no variant monsters, so it was limited to a few daring merchants who made that route their expertise and people of influence who had access to teleportation magic and could teleport along the several circles placed throughout the mountain.

“What is the purpose of his visit?” asked Lushera.

“Can’t say for sure since it’s a secret visit. The obvious guess would be to ease tensions. An apology, basically.”

Lushera was taken aback by that, even if it was a little bit of a letdown, since she had been so focused on figuring out how to protect the mountain. It was like when you put your all into picking up something heavy, but it turned out to be light.

“Sending their armies to Mount Kugus increased tensions, since that’s contested territory,” explained Ivar. “And taking out the dragon was laying the groundwork for invasion. But they failed. They don’t have any other moves to make for an attack. Apologizing and sheathing their swords is the best way to limit the fallout. They can still backtrack and start apologizing.”

“You think the soon-to-be Marquess would ignore the imperial court and do that? No, wait. You’re right, it is possible. If they go down the route claiming the attack wasn’t sanctified by the imperial court, if it was the actions of one marquess.”

“That’s how I’m seein’ it. And if so, they can wrap this all up neatly and peacefully. Wouldn’t be surprised if they arranged things behind the scenes so Julian could come in saying the court made him apologize.”

Lushera wondered what she would be thinking if she were Julian. He could avoid a breakdown of the relationship between the two countries if he claimed this wasn’t an act of the empire, but an act of one, lone, wild marquess. Setrayu wasn’t a large country by any means, but Martgarz was stuck in a long, drawn-out war. They surely wanted to avoid increasing their number of enemies.

Setrayu provided secret support to their ally, the Guffarr Union, keeping out of the fighting themselves, but if Martgarz took away any reason Setrayu had for being kind to them, encouraging them to fully join the war...well, it wouldn’t exactly be ringing Martgarz’s death knell, but it would be inconvenient for them.

It was unfortunate for Marquess Angus to have his honor used as a scapegoat for this, but he was already dead, and dead people can’t talk. If Julian went in saying it was all his father’s fault and he was different, he could mitigate the damage he sustained.

Lushera did agree that was one way to end this all neatly.

“Meaning, there’s a chance everything’s already solved,” said Ivar. “Even if

that's true, though, we still gotta be ready for the next thing."

"Yeah..."

It was a bit of wishful thinking, but even Lushera thought she was seeing good omens now.

Your opponent could find your weakness if you went into negotiations with no other routes of escape. If the current peace continued, they would have more time to shore up defenses on the mountain.

Though, Lushera didn't think it was right to run away from the test Shurei was preparing for her, even if Kaphal did. It was just a matter of time. They would need the dragons' help at some point, and if Lushera ran from this rare chance to get them to accept her, she might not find another.

"The reason I wanted to head to Alhyura was to check out how active Martgarz spies are in Setrayu," said Ivar. "If I can figure that out, I can get an idea how serious they are—how invested they are in keeping at it."

"I really appreciate your help." He really was good at everything.

"S-Sure..." He looked away and scratched his head, seeming a bit taken off-balance by Lushera's honest gratitude. "Never thought there'd be a kid who likes me. It's not so bad, even though I know it's *you* on the inside."

"Haha, well..."

"You know, I'm always up to helping, as long as you pay my dues."

Lushera took out her wallet and fished out two gold coins, which she flipped over to Ivar. He caught them in midair as they glittered and spun. "Appreciate it," he said.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"Come on, you know you can't trust someone who sells information. Anyone who sells the enemy's info to their allies is gonna sell their ally's info to the enemies every once in a while."

"It'll come back to bite you if you do that."

"They can try. But I'll know they're comin' three days before they do it. I

wouldn't be alive if I didn't." Ivar grinned, the particular fierce smile of a lone wolf who never thinks they'll find protection from others.

"The other thing," said Lushera, "is whether or not the king of Setrayu is the kind of person who will listen to reason. If he says he'll work with us, but then is only thinking about using Mom, then I'll have to call the whole thing off."

"Hm? I don't think you need to worry about that. I mean, the Golden Helm's got—"

And then there was a roar of something large breaking from outside, jolting the carriage despite its shock-absorbing construction.

"Ah!"

"What the hell!"

Lushera leaped out of the carriage next to the river they'd been traveling along and looked in the direction of the sound.

A horror was unfolding across the river. Beyond the bank of the other side, a carriage was being attacked by a being twice its size. From this distance, it looked like a giant wearing monster skins, swinging a club the size of a tree trunk in a garden.

"A monster?!" cried Lushera.

"It's huge!" shouted Ivar.

There were armed guards around the carriage, seemingly willing to die in the process of defending against the creature, but this mysterious giant sent them flying with a swing of its club as they moved in a tight formation around the carriage.

Just as Lushera thought the giant was about to stop moving, it opened its mouth and spat out a ball of fire. It exploded, launching the guards away and flipping the carriage.

That was the same noise Lushera heard while she was in her own carriage.

"Damn!" Before she could even think, Lushera pulled off her raincoat and rushed forward.

The coat was designed to look like normal outerwear for traveling, concealing her crimson dress below (crimson minidress, really) with its bared shoulders, corset tight across her torso, and huge bow at her waist spread like a dragon's wings in flight.

The exaggerated, frilled skirt was like dancing flames, stiffened to stay in place, and relatively short. As it was, there was serious concern that someone could see her underwear if they looked at her from the front, so she wore shorts (called hotpants apparently) that were so short they could honestly be mistaken for that same underwear, but that just about maintained her dignity. Her thighs were bared, save for a slender ribbon winding around them, held in place by garters.

The fingerless gloves connected to arm guards reminiscent of crimson flower buds protecting her elbows, while her upper arms were boldly exposed.

On her head she wore a fancy—yet country-esque in style—headdress that matched the knee-high boots with metal toe tips, both practical and decorative, increasing defense and kicking power. These boots were for adventuring, designed to withstand rough terrain and fierce battles.

Lushera didn't really want many people to see her dressed like this, but the outfit was crafted by a skilled armorer using variant pelts from Mount Kugus. It was made specially for her and was likely one of the greatest sets of armor in the world.

She took three running steps, then cracked the earth as she leaped, wind rushing past her ears. She vaulted the river in one jump, arriving at the other side already running at full speed. The carriage under attack had looked like a miniature from the other side, and the monster seemed to grow in size as well with her approach.

What is this monster?

Even while running at top speed, she was thinking, and what she was thinking was that this was an odd monster. She knew plenty about monsters, but there was nothing coming to mind that would match this one.

There were a lot of aspects about this monster that seemed to match the various giant races, but no giants lived in Setrayu. Giants were a type of

monsterfolk, and there were no monsterfolk nations near Setrayu. It seemed pretty impossible that a lone monsterfolk could be wandering around here.

Basically, it was weird for a monster like this to be in a place like this.

But the monster was here, and it was a threat that needed to be dealt with.

The skin-clad giant, having eliminated the guards, reached for the overturned carriage, destroying it like a child ripping the wrapping off a present.

“Aaaaaah!”

Inside the carriage was no present, but a girl about twelve or maybe thirteen years of age. She was delicate and cute, with features like a doll and glittering gold hair and blue eyes. Her dress was pale pink with only modest adornments, the sort of thing a lady might wear when going out.

Lushera wasn’t sure exactly who she was, but she looked like she could be the daughter of a noble.

The girl had suffered only some bumps and scrapes despite her carriage being overturned, since the carriage was designed to protect its occupants. But she couldn’t run when she found herself face-to-face with the giant. She sank to her knees.

The giant carefully examined her, then reached out its hand and—

“Hiyaaaa!”

Lushera put all her momentum behind kicking that hand. But, no matter how much force was behind it, Lushera was small and only as threatening as a bullet. All she managed was to make the giant stumble, losing its balance.

The hand felt harder than she’d expected, and there was a metallic clash as she kicked it. “It’s...a *golem*?!” she cried in realization.

That made sense. Why would there be a single giant in a place like this? Why wouldn’t Lushera have any clue what *monster* it was? It was nothing more than a humanoid combat golem wearing pelts, with leather worked to look like skin, and magic used to control it like a puppet.

Golems could move wherever they had a user, making a golem not nearly as odd and ideal as a lone giant wandering around.

The golem immediately regained its footing, defending itself to faithfully carry out the orders of some unknown person. It seemed to acknowledge Lushera as a threat and hindrance.

"Well then...I'll just smash you to pieces!" shouted Lushera, putting herself between the golem and the girl.

The giant golem slowly lifted its darkly glinting club. Slowly? No. It only appeared slow because it was so large, but it was actually surprisingly fast.

The club crashed down, shaking the ground, but Lushera jumped nimbly out of the way. That was a snap decision. If the golem had aimed to take out both Lushera and the girl behind her in one swing, Lushera would have instead blocked the strike, taking it herself to defend the girl, but the golem didn't step very far forward. Lushera judged that it was only aiming to smash herself.

Hm? Is this thing trying to avoid accidentally hitting the girl with an attack?

She didn't know why, but the attack wasn't all in, and that naturally left the golem open for a counter. She bounced up onto the club and used it as footing to jump higher.

"Haaah!"

She rushed up its arm and delivered a rising kick to what functioned as its chin. Her foot met firm resistance, and there was another clang of metal on metal.

Lushera thought she'd put enough force into that kick to tear its head off, but the golem still moved, its eyes turned to the sky.

SCREE-EE-EE... KREE-EE-EE

The golem turned its head, letting out the sound of cogs grinding together.

"I'm over here!" Lushera moved so she wasn't near the girl, and the golem ignored the girl and targeted Lushera.

It took its club in both hands and swung it, swiping horizontally, mowing across the ground. Lushera easily jumped over it as it passed with a roar.

GA-CHUNG!

It opened its mouth with a clang and belched out a ball of fire. It was probably shot by a mechanism similar to a magic cannon. The fire aimed at Lushera as she jumped, calculating her trajectory without fail.

“Ack!”

It exploded on her, concussive force and raging flames slamming into her, sending her flying like a kicked ball with a trail of smoke behind her.

She hit the ground once, spinning out of control, bounced, then hit the ground again, this time taking control and landing on her feet, cutting grooves into the dirt with her boots as she stopped her momentum.

“That was close... Good thing my enemy’s using fire!” she said.

She was uninjured.

Her body was abnormally resistant to fire and magic, meaning a fire spell wasn’t about to burn even one hair on her head.

The golem didn’t seem surprised. It probably couldn’t feel that emotion. But it did seem able to evaluate the situation and chose not to shoot another ball of fire. It raised its club.

“Shit, this thing just keeps coming!” shouted Ivar, appearing on this side of the river, though Lushera didn’t know how he’d crossed it.

“Ivar, it’s dangerous!” she said.

“I ain’t gonna die, don’t worry about me!” he shouted back. “You need to be looking at that thing. You see it? It’s a golem. There’s gotta be something!”

Ivar already realized what it was. A golem. Meaning it had to have a user somewhere. This wasn’t an “accident” where they happened across a wild monster. This was an incident. Perhaps even a plan. It was Ivar’s job to figure out what that was.

“All right then, Ivar, you stay with the girl! I don’t think it’ll target you!” said Lushera.

“Sure thing!”

Lushera made sure Ivar hid himself behind the remains of the carriage, then

turned back to face the golem. She took in one sharp breath and poured the dragon energy running through her into the earth.

“I’ll burn you to a crisp!”

The ground cracked and flames burst forth. The crimson glow formed a wave with intent and rushed towards the golem.

It stumbled, fire enveloping it. But there was nothing about the way it moved that implied it was damaged. Its metal skeleton showed as the pelts and leather burned and fell.

Shhhhew, the golem’s body hissed.

“...I’m not getting my full power.” Lushera had aimed to burn away the internal mechanism of the golem, but she lacked the power. Unlike a real dragon, Lushera didn’t have an internal organ that produced her breath attack, but she could imitate a breath attack by drawing on the natural elements in the world.

But Setrayu was the land of water, which was the least compatible with Lushera’s fire. The slumbering volcano that was Mount Kugus was an exception. Here, her fire breath was no more powerful than any number of fire spells.

Scree-ee-ee, the golem moved, bursting from the flames towards Lushera as it swung its club.

“Eeek!” the girl let out a stifled cry as she watched the fight. From where she was, it probably looked like Lushera was crushed, but the moment the club crashed down, Lushera slipped towards the golem, inside its reach.

“Take this!” Lushera plunged her hand into the small gap on the back of the golem’s knee joint, grabbed whatever she could, and pulled hard, bringing out a rounded part that had been attached to a rod, shredding mithril cables as she did. Not that she knew what that part was.

The golem jerked and lost its footing, its movements slower.

It started waving its arms around, like someone trying to bat away an insect, but it was far too slow to deal with Lushera.

She bounced up the golem, from part to part, reaching into joints and jerking

out whatever she could.

“I-Incredible...” said the girl.

“She’s crazy,” said Ivar, both him and the girl staring dumbfounded at how Lushera fought.

Though, while they might have been admiring her, she was starting to get frustrated.

This thing’s stubborn... I can break parts of it, but it’s so big I can’t get to its core.

Its motions had grown quite clumsy, but it could still move.

It didn’t matter how abnormally powerful Lushera was, it would take no small feat to get through this thing’s heavy armor. Especially when you considered Lushera was using her own body as her weapon, and her body didn’t weigh enough. She also didn’t have an appropriate tool that would let her use her power to its fullest.

Inside! I need to smash it from the inside somehow!

She slipped past a hand that tried to snatch at her small frame and jumped up to the golem’s shoulder, where she straddled its neck like a child riding their parent’s shoulders.

“Conscious light. I am she who destroys omens. The infallible ultimate, the river of glass, the golden ring’s ending, out of reach...” she recited.

“Ack, shit! Miss, get down!” shouted Ivar.

“Uh, o-okay?”

“Ears covered, eyes closed, mouth open!”

Before coming on this trip, Lushera had studied a few spells. As the golem tried to crush her with the palm of its hand, she thrust her own slender arms out to block it. And, just as she was finishing up the incantation, she plunged one of her arms down the golem’s throat.

“Roar, child of blessing! Incinerating Blast!”

For a moment, she felt no gravity, followed by an explosion that rattled her

brain.

Lushera launched her explosive spell right into the golem's insides, and that shattered the creature, sending burnt cogs and mechanical bits flying in all directions.

The golem's body didn't completely contain the blast, which left a crater in the ground and sent Lushera flying high into the sky from her very own spell.

She spun wildly and smacked face-first into the ground in a not-particularly graceful landing. She was *almost* uninjured.

"Oh...?" said the girl.

"You idiot! You go ahead and tell *me* this thing is dangerous then you go and do *that*!" shouted Ivar from beneath a tree at the side of the road, spit flying. "You got bystanders here and you go and launch a dangerous spell like that at full incantation?!"

"S-Sorry," said Lushera. "I didn't get much chance to practice that, so I didn't know how to scale back the power..."

"Well, thanks to that, you managed to finish the thing off, but...ah, it's a mess. How're we supposed to tell where it was made from this pile of shrapnel?" He sighed and kicked one of the golem's shredded arms away, his head craning back and forth as he examined the wreckage. "...Welp, anyway, I used a call charm to contact the Guild through the communication office. Someone should be coming soon. They'll need to investigate this as quickly as they can."

"Thank you, Ivar..."

The golem wasn't moving anymore, but this might just be the first move in whatever was going on.



ON the top of a hill quite a distance from the battleground were some men.

"*Huff...* Aaah, what in the world! That monster! Why is she here?! Damn it, damn it all! How could this happen?!"

Julian, who had been crouched, stood, threw down his magic binoculars and stamped on them.

The marquess and his men had secretly entered the country, had a meeting with a member of the royal court, and disguised themselves as simple travelers as they moved towards the capital.

Obviously, they hadn't disclosed to the Setrayuan government that they would be doing this sort of thing in this sort of place, but everything was going exactly as planned. It all went up in flames when someone unexpected stepped in.

Julian saw it all. He saw the war golem smashed to bits by a single little girl.

"M-My lord, please keep yourself calm!" said one of his guards.

"How dare you!"

"*Gyah!*"

Julian punched the guard (also dressed as a traveler) who tried to reprimand him, sending him flying, and then stood there, his shoulders heaving with each breath. "*Huff... Hah...* My plan is perfect... It *was* perfect... I'm not like my fool of a father... Who could ever anticipate a coincidence like this...? Damn it..."

He raked his fingers through his hair, his teeth grinding together. In his chest was a coiled anger, so powerful he wanted to kill something, anything. But he had just enough control of himself that he could hold that back.

"*Hah... I am* perfect. I will change the plan... The next one will be more infallible, you better believe it. Haha-hah...!"

Julian laughed alone. He never even saw his companions trembling in fear.

Chapter 3: Amongst the Bustle

LUSHERA and the others left the scene of the battle to the adventurers that responded to Ivar's message, then continued on to the capital, since Lushera wanted to get the girl who was attacked to a safe place as quickly as possible.

"I never asked you to save me. You are just a meddlesome busybody who jumped in entirely of your own accord. Don't expect a thank you from me."

It's just, the girl was not grateful whatsoever.

Her ego has grown several sizes now that she's safe... thought Lushera.

The three of them were riding a high-speed carriage: Lushera, Ivar, and this mystery girl.

She crossed her legs, not exactly a polite pose considering the travel dress she wore, her eyes the color of the sky locked on Lushera and Ivar. Her shining gold hair, pale skin, and cute features made her the perfect example of a doll-like girl, but she trampled over that general first impression.

Wait, she looks like someone I know...doesn't she?

There was something about the girl's facial features that tugged at Lushera's memory, making Lushera very curious.

"But if we hadn't stepped in, you may have died," said Ivar. He might have sounded polite, but the comment was out of line, caused by his irritation with the girl.

"You're right. It would have been better if I *had* died. There would have been many more people celebrating my death than mourning it." But the girl just gave an empty smile, as if nothing at all was worth smiling over, and looked away.

"It would have been better if I had died." That's what she said. She never had any hope for this world. These words sounded like a type of self-defense.

Lushera probably should've just ignored it, but she couldn't leave it be.

"You shouldn't say things like that," she said.

"Oh? Now you're lecturing me?" She responded to Lushera challenging her claim with a sharp gaze. Lushera wouldn't call that gaze overpowering. It was more like her eyes said, "Don't touch me. Stay away." A dog who'd spent its life chased by humans with sticks and stones might have eyes like that when it howled to scare others away.

"I'm the one who decides if I have value, yes? All right. I'm worthless. Thank you, we're done here," said the girl.

"But...you looked scared when that monster was chasing after you!" Lushera countered.

"I was not scared!"

"There's nothing wrong with being scared. It's normal to be afraid of dying. People who have done everything they possibly can and given up on everything else...they can die quietly without fear. But I'm certain there's something you haven't given up on yet," pressed Lushera.

Lushera had seen someone once who had come to terms with her death. Compared to Giselle, it was obvious this girl hadn't yet accepted hers. She could only say what she did because she'd realized she didn't want to die when she was forced to really think about it.

She was certain the girl was standing on a precipice, looking into the depths and hesitating to take the step off the cliff. But someday, she'd take her sorrow and dive. That was the bad feeling Lushera had.

"...You are full of yourself," she muttered, perhaps unable to argue with what Lushera said, her forcefulness crumbling slightly.

"By the way, may we ask your name?" asked Ivar.

His question revived her fire. She shrugged her shoulders sarcastically and said, "Do you not recognize me? Are you country bumpkins? I have no obligation to tell you my name."

"We don't know where we should take you if we don't know who you are."

"Just hand me over to the gate guard when we get to town. That's enough."

Alhyura was already in sight ahead of the carriage, surrounded by a deep blue moat and high, sturdy walls that looked capable of functioning as a fortress all by themselves. The gatehouse almost seemed to draw the road into it.

"See," said the girl, pointing to some people in front of the gatehouse.

They weren't gate guards. They were knights in resplendent armor waiting to escort someone.



THE girl jumped down from the carriage with no help and walked towards the knights. They said nothing. It was disconcerting how silent they were, but it didn't seem to bother the girl. Everything proceeded with an unspoken understanding between the participants.

"Thank you. Are you adventurers?" said one of the knights, his imposing voice coming from inside the helmet that concealed his face.

"Of a sort," said Ivar.

"Same!" said Lushera. They both showed their adventuring licenses.

Ivar had received his adventuring license to make things easier for his work as an adventuring manager. Lushera had also gotten hers for the same reason. Things got complicated after that, but she was able to confirm her identity with the branch office of the Adventurers Guild in Kugut'hulm and keep the same qualifications XXXX had before. They even reissued her a license, since her original one had been taken away.

But the knight looked at her license and grumbled, "What in the...? Is this license broken?"

"No, it's..."

=====

Name: Lushera

LV: 40 | HP: 812/871 | MP 2219/2433 | STA: 720/720

Strength: 58 | Magic: 75 | Speed: 60

Dexterity: 20 | Endurance: 52 | Resistance: 93

=====

The knight was suspicious of her license and the impossible numbers on it, though, all the stats it showed were a faithful representation of reality.

"That is her. She's the one who saved me. I'm sure of it," said the girl, unexpectedly throwing Lushera a lifeline.

"Ah, I see..." The knight backed down at that. "Let me compensate you for your work."

He then pressed a money pouch into Lushera's hands in a manner that said he wasn't going to allow them to refuse the money. It was not so big that it didn't fit in Lushera's hands, but if it was all gold inside, it was about enough money for an average family to live off for a month.

"Thank you for your work," said the knight. "If you wish to enter the city, please follow the standard process."

And with that, the knight turned away, not waiting for a response. The mystery girl turned back and glanced at Lushera only briefly, then she and the knights disappeared into the city gate.

"Is this hush money...?" guessed Ivar. "No, it's 'don't look further into this' money."

"Who was that girl...?" Lushera wondered.

"I have one idea, but I hope I'm wrong. Things are complicated if I'm right." Ivar opened the pouch and counted the gold coins, not looking particularly happy. "Eh, whatever. I'll let you know if I figure anything out. 'Bout that golem too."

"Thank you. All right, I need to go meet up with Mom and the others."

"Mm. Good luck."

Though they both felt uncomfortable with not knowing more, they continued on to the gatehouse and the procedures for entering the city.

There was no sign of the mystery girl there.



THE knights surrounded her so no one could see her. People looked on with curiosity.

Where was she being escorted to? A jail cell? A mansion? A tour through the city? The situation could've fit any of those.

And in fact, it was something like all of them.

No one had ever explicitly told her that her existence was a sin, but that was how it seemed she was treated when you took in her entire life.

But Monica forgot all that, just this once. She even forgot that she was nearly killed not long ago. She didn't care about what happened now.

Her feet were unsteady, like she was walking on fluffy clouds. She wasn't stumbling. In fact, she felt if she didn't think through every single step, she might just leap away like a rabbit.

The early summer sun shone, the river babbled, the birds sang, the leaves of the trees lining the streets whispered in the wind. She saw all these things from her mansion's window all the time, but they'd never seemed so brilliant before.

That girl...she saved me. And...she talked to me. A little.

She kept thinking it over, digesting it. On the back of her eyelids was seared the image of the crimson girl, how heroic she was, and what she said.

It was awe-inspiring. All of it. Just thinking back to it made Monica's heart race. She felt she wasn't the lowly, hateful thing from before. She'd turned into something else. The girl treated Monica with decency. And that was a single beam of light into the darkness of Monica's life.

Monica also felt sorry. She never even said thank you to the girl who saved her life, instead she responded with hate and vitriol. It was half on purpose, and half out of habit.

Hope. Expectation. Monica learned early on that never having those things was easier. That was why she threw away anything she got. She wanted others to hate her.

The knights who came to pick up Monica had given the crimson girl an

excessive payment, which meant this was the end of that. She'd never have anything to do with the girl again.

That was for the best. Monica knew what would happen to someone who showed her kindness, who helped her.

Or perhaps the crimson girl would find out who the weak young lady she rescued was and she'd regret her actions. Maybe she didn't even need money, maybe she'd wish she could go back in the past and just leave Monica to die instead.

Her heart hurt thinking that, but she was used to giving up. She wouldn't be hit by any nasty surprises if she set her expectations low for those around her.

It could just be like a pretty flower pressed between pages, or a story she finished reading that she went back and read again. She could just think back to this one day, remember the crimson girl, reliving the one tiny happiness she'd been allowed.

She wished she could say that would be enough. She didn't think she'd be allowed any more than that.



ALHYURA was a city well suited as the capital of the kingdom of water that was Setrayu. If you looked down on the city from the sky, it likely looked like one gigantic fountain, or perhaps a cake sculpted from water and stone.

The king's castle was on a slight rise in the center of the city with waterfalls pouring out from its base, forming a circular island lined with cascading water. That was an expression of the power of the Hurricane of Insight, the dracovitae staff used to quell the lands of the kingdom. It resided in the castle during times of peace. Its waters filled the city's canals, running to the walls where it burst out in fountains, falling into a moat-like river surrounding the city.

The canals glittered like jewels, the city filled with cheer and brimming with life.

Smooth, polished stone stood out, used along the roads and edges of the canals, but most of the buildings were actually made of wood. Lumber was cheap in this country, with its abundant water, and the wood helped moderate

the humidity, something to worry about when living in a country as rainy and damp as this one.

Lushera walked around the inside of the wall, about forty-five degrees of the circle, and came to the meeting place they agreed on earlier: the north gate (presumably the inside?). There she found a throng of people.

As she worked her way closer, she realized it was just a blockage caused by people slowing down as they passed by. And at the center of that blockage...

“Lushera!”

Was Kaphal, of course.

Timm did stand out a bit, with his mountain-like armor, but adventurers in full gear weren't an uncommon sight on the main streets of the capital. Kaphal stood out more, with her fire-like beauty.

She may have left her main body back on Mount Kugus, only bringing a fragment of herself here, but she was still like a ruby mixed in with pond stones. Her being shined with an unusual brilliance.

Kaphal stood at the side of the gate waiting, and, when she saw Lushera, broke into a smile as bright as the sun and rushed over. The crowd naturally parted before her. Lushera moved straight for her, and Kaphal hugged her, lifted her into the air, and nuzzled her nose against Lushera's cheek.

“Mom... What's this about?”

“Make up for amount we separated.”

“Everyone's watching. It's uncomfortable.”

Since everyone's attention had been on Kaphal, they were all of course now staring at the two of them, gentle smiles on their faces. A lot of them seemed to make their own guesses about what was going on, some even had tears in their eyes. They probably thought this was the emotional reunion of a mother and daughter who got separated.

Which wasn't technically wrong. But they'd only been separated for less than half a day.

“Where's Weyne and Viola?” asked Lushera.

"They went on ahead to our inn. I'm gonna head into the Guild to say hello," said Timm, while Lushera was still trapped in Kaphal's embrace.

"That's convenient for me. I actually ran into some trouble on the way here. I want to bring it up with the Guild," Lushera said.

"What happened?"

"Well..."



THE Guild in Alhyura was a sort of headquarters that brought together all the branch Guilds in Setrayu and the adventurers that worked with them. It may be a small country, but the Guild still had many employees carrying out their duties in a large building, really about the size of a castle or fortress on its own.

The Guild had a general policy of noninterference in political matters.

But this really just meant that the Guild shouldn't involve themselves with political conflicts as a general rule. Royals, nobles, and government organizations often submitted requests to the Guild. In fact, the Guild worked closely with such organizations in order to deal with monsters, often coordinating together (though this did often create a relationship that undermined the noninterference policy).

All of that was why Setrayu's head Guild was located close to the king's castle in the center of the capital.

Both people with requests and adventurers walked into its vast lobby, with adventurers of every size, shape, and color waiting inside. There were even some adventurers aiming to snatch up those people coming in with requests where they would give them a sales pitch and try to get them to ask for their party by name when they put in their request.

Timm, Lushera, and Kaphal entered. One large, armored man saw them, his expression immediately changing as he rushed over.

"Timm! You son of a scoundrel, did you go and get married and have a kid?"

"You moron! When could I've had a girl that grew this big?" retorted Timm. The man, with hair swept up in a style reminiscent of a cock's comb, must have

known him. “Sorry, Lushera. This idiot’s Martin of the Howling Dusk Storms. He’s an adventurer working out of Alhyura. He’s not the brightest, but he’s good at what he does.”

“Oh, shut it, Timm. I’m smarter than you at least! You even know what a flame test is?!”

“Martin, this is Lushera. She’s our newest member,” said Timm, ignoring Martin’s strange counterargument like he was used to that sort of thing.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Lushera. “I’ve joined the Golden Helm as their manager.” That was largely an oversimplification of the situation, but she shook his hand as she introduced herself.

He looked at her with confusion. “Manager? What’s that?”

“Oh, uh, I support the party doing paperwork and things like that...”

“...And anyway, this is Kaphal. She’s Lushera’s mum. She came along with us since she’s got some business in the capital,” continued Timm.

Martin looked at Kaphal and must have noticed something odd because he stared at her for a moment with a look of suspicion. He didn’t poke into the situation any further though, he just greeted her as well.

“So, Martin, apparently, Lushera saw something a bit weird...” started Timm as he went on to tell Martin about what happened to Lushera on her way to Alhyura. While listening, Martin nodded with an all-knowing look.

“Mm, yeah, there’s been rumors about that. Heard some nasty monster attacked Princess Monica while she was out on a little pleasure jaunt.”

Timm’s face instantly soured. “Ah... So, it was Princess Monica that Lushera met...”

“Um, who is that? Is she well known? I’ve never heard of her...” said Lushera.

Both Martin and Timm seemed to understand everything simply by the mention of this girl’s name, leaving Lushera in the dark.

Timm hesitated for just a moment, wondering if he should tell Lushera. “You wouldn’t since you only came to Setrayu, what, two, three years ago? It’s pretty well-known inside the country though. It was like twelve or thirteen years ago

that the king's wife, you know, the Queen Consort, had an affair, and she holed herself up after that."

"The royals and nobles marry for political reasons," added Martin. "It's not uncommon for them to get so bored they just surround themselves with lovers."

"So, the affair itself wasn't the problem. The problem was that the Queen Consort's also got royal blood in her, and she's got a high compatibility with the dracovitae."

"Urk... That's bad," said Lushera, her face clouding over.

The humanoid races maintained the lands of their kingdom with a dracovitae staff, which they also used as an ultimate weapon in war if something were to happen, but they couldn't very well let anyone have that control over their dracovitae. In most countries, only the royal families inherited the ability to wield the dracovitae.

This wasn't because there was something special in the blood of the royal families of every kingdom. It was simply that, for some reason, there was a need to tie the ability to use the dracovitae to a bloodline when the staffs were created. In most cases, the bloodline chosen was that of the ruler.

There was almost no way to change this. The various royal families worked hard to ensure the bloodline capable of using the dracovitae never died out, but also tried not to scatter it aimlessly about.

It wasn't uncommon for the king's official wife to be chosen for whatever political goal needed to be achieved at the moment, but he would also take mistresses chosen for their high compatibility with the dracovitae, and it would be the children of the mistresses who would stand in line for the throne. Though, it was obviously better if the Queen Consort herself had a high compatibility.

Many of the higher-ranking nobles also had royal blood, so they were often chosen to marry the ruler in order to maintain the bloodline of dracovitae users, meaning it wasn't that odd for someone who was selected purely for political reasons to also have the ability to wield the dracovitae.

"All royal families are real strict 'bout controlling the bloodlines of people who can use the dracovitae," said Timm. "And the Queen Consort was part of that, but...she ended up getting pregnant from the guy she had an affair with and the whole thing got messy."

"The man didn't have any royal blood in him, but the baby had the same high compatibility her mom did. It was a huge scandal. It's a bad thing for the royal family if there aren't enough people who can use the dracovitae, but having lots of people outside the family that can use it undermines the legitimacy of their rule," added Martin, nodding with a grim, knowing expression.

"Then the Queen Consort shut herself away. Her daughter's been kept on a short leash her whole life. And there's a legitimate older daughter born to the King and Queen Consort, but she ended up leaving the court 'cause she got hit with all sorts of restrictions with people questioning the legitimacy of her blood too."

"That's just terrible..." said Lushera.

"You want some more details that'll depress you even more? The guy the Queen Consort had an affair with was someone she's loved since they were both kids, but she had to marry the King for political reasons."

"That's just terrible!"

Humans had a tendency to complicate their personal relationships when they were bored, and all their primary needs were met. Even more so when they were placed on a stage with a premise as twisted as that.

Normally, having an affair was bad. Lushera thought so as well. But, so what if it was? Wouldn't that make basically everyone in that situation a victim?

"After that, a mistress bore a prince for the King, everyone tossed aside the Queen Consort, and lived happily ever after. You probably figured it out by this point. The child born between the Queen Consort and the man she cheated with is Princess Monica," said Martin, tying the story up neatly with a tone that showed little respect to the royals.

It wasn't even that much of an exaggeration to say this girl, Monica, was born with a curse on her. Even when Martin called her "Princess," the title seemed

used sarcastically. It probably wasn't an official title anyway, likely just sarcasm.

"They never acknowledged her existence publicly," said Timm. "Wherever she goes, she's treated like she doesn't exist. But everyone knows. They know about her. They know how she was born. It's gotta hurt. Pretty sure I'd go crazy if it were me." He sounded bitter.

Lushera felt a little sorry for Monica. They say if you feed a starving person all of a sudden, they might die. Lushera had encouraged Monica without knowing her situation, and those words might even turn into poison for Monica.

But there was still something Lushera wondered. If Monica's existence was such a horrible thing, then who would target her? And why?

Lushera could think of a few possible explanations, but the biggest question was, *why now?*



THE group was staying in some lodging fairly close to the center of Alhyura, the sort where they rented a whole suite.

The main room was so large you could probably have a practice swordfight in it. Elegant artwork-like furniture, polished up like precious gems, not a single speck of dust or nick in sight, was arranged stylishly throughout the room.

The large windows allowed you to step out directly onto the balcony to a view over the bustling city, the buildings jostling inside the city walls as if floating on the canals.

"There ya are, Timm, Lushera," said Weyne, waving from his position lounging on the sofa.

There was also a woman who appeared to be roughly in her sixties. "Oh, welcome back, Timm!" she greeted.

"Um...who are you?" asked Lushera.

"Sh-She's my ma..." said Timm.

"Wait, *she's* your mother?!" cried Weyne.

Timm's "ma" greeted him like this was their own home.

Her gray hair was dyed purple, and she was rather tall for a woman, with a strong build, which did imply she shared genes with Timm. She was also so plump and white that someone might mistake her for a snowman if she walked down a snowy street.

“Really now, dear, you should have told me ahead a’ time you’d be visiting Alhyura. Oh, is this little girl Lushera? Oh my word, she really is as cute as a pickle! My name’s Mira. I hear you’re a new member of the Golden Helm? Is it true you’re really strong even though you’re so cute? And, what is it like being a girl when you used to be a man? Do you like oranges?”

“Uh, I, um...”

Mira swept up and took Lushera’s hand, assaulting her with an avalanche of questions, but Mira’s attention shifted elsewhere while Lushera was still shocked and frozen, unable to process what was happening.

“Oh my, you must be the dragon of Mount Kugus, is that right? And you’re so gorgeous. I never met a dragon before. I see dragons can turn into people too. You look just like little Lushera here. Oh, but...why? I thought children looked like their parents ’cause they gave birth to them, but, do they just grow up to look more and more like them? Do you like oranges?”

This time she took Kaphal’s hand and pumped it up and down in an emotional handshake. Kaphal still couldn’t fully utilize their human language and was quite simply overwhelmed, so she let Mira do as she pleased.

“Weyne. You told her ’bout these two?” asked Timm. “They’re still supposed to be a secret from the normal citizens.”

“...Sorry. But she just kept on like that, asking questions about every tiny little thing, and I told her everything. Seriously, countries should use her instead of torture for getting intelligence.”

“We can all chat later, but we should let Lushera and Kaphal rest too. After all, we did just arrive in Alhyura,” said Viola from the kitchen where she was prepping some food.

“Oh, that’s right. I am so sorry. Have you eaten lunch yet? I’ll whip something up for ya,” said Mira. She joyfully pulled out an apron she had brought along

with her, put it on, and went to the kitchen, which looked as clean as the day it was built.

Yes, this room had a kitchen en suite, and it was a fairly top-of-the-line one, too.

"Wow, I've never seen an inn that has a kitchen, and a magic range in that kitchen," said Lushera with a gasp.

There it was, a range that required no kindling. You simply pressed a button and flames appeared on the burners. It was a unit with a built-in oven, too, also magically operated.

Most cities had a magic supply grid running to homes and businesses but, even if there was enough magic to power these sorts of appliances that emitted fire spells, the appliances themselves were rather pricey items. You didn't generally see a magic range outside the kitchens of mansions.

"It's a nice room, but the rent must be expensive. You could have all fit back in the house. And if you have to cook your own food, that's no different from staying back home, is it?" said Mira with a sigh, but Timm shook his head.

"I don't mind if it's a cheap place or even back home, but we kinda gotta keep up a certain level of appearances when we're in the capital. Especially when we've got a dragon with us. But I just don't feel comfortable in a super fancy place where everyone's constantly bending over backwards for you and everything's so frilly. So, I avoided that by picking somewhere like this."

Timm spread a protective sheet in a corner and started removing his armor. Even a warrior in full armor didn't go about their daily lives wearing it.

"By the way, Lushera, do you know how to cook?" asked Viola. She looked just as witchy as ever, the only difference being she took off her belt with its odd tools. She stood next to Mira, taking ingredients out of a paper bag and her magic bags, lining them up on the counter.

"I do!" said Lushera. "I had to cook for myself when I lived out in the wild."

"Aw, that's cute. But this is a little different. When you're out in the wilderness, you're always cooking something that can just nourish you while using as few cooking implements as necessary, right? That's just survival

cooking. It's not quite the same as culinary cooking." Viola wagged a finger, her glasses gleaming. "And Kaphal, I imagine you know nothing about cooking, right?"

"I never cooked."

"That's what I thought." Viola nodded, unsurprised.

Since dragons could live just by consuming large quantities of raw meat, cooking was nothing more than a curiosity to them in the end. Some dragon flights did apparently employ monsterfolk servants to cook for them, but that was only to enjoy the flavors of small amounts of food while the dragons were in human forms, since cooking quantities large enough to fill a dragon's stomach would be too difficult. Their situation was quite different from the humanoid races, where cooking was synonymous with making the food necessary to continue living.

"All right, here starts the first of Viola's Cooking Classes!"

"Are you really that good at cooking, Viola?" asked Lushera. Her impression of Viola was closer to someone who would rather nibble on biscuits while reading a book before even getting dressed in the morning, but perhaps that wasn't the most flattering impression to hold.

"Is it really *that* surprising?" asked Viola. "To be honest, I never even went near cooking when I was a child. But then one day, I just had the burning desire to learn to do everything I needed to be able to do in order to live, and I did."

"She is pretty good," added Timm. "She's even taught us a few things."

"Even though I said you don't need to help with the cooking."

"I'd feel bad if I didn't," said Timm with a sigh, though Lushera couldn't tell why he sighed.

"Oh dear, this kitchen's getting a little crowded," said Mira. "Viola, what are you going to make?"

"Well, I am teaching. Let's make some of Setrayu's famous fish cakes."

"All right, I'll whip up a meat pie. It's still nice and cold, so you can have the leftovers for dinner."

The kitchen seemed so unnecessarily large before, but they were nearly packed in like sardines once the four of them lined up in front of the counter. Mira separated out the ingredients she would use from the piles of food.

“Lushera, do you know how to clean a fish?” asked Viola as she pulled fish after fresh fish wrapped in waterproof paper from her magic bag. They weren’t just filets; they were whole fish. You couldn’t put living things into a magic bag, meaning these fish were definitely dead, but they looked so fresh they might just start swimming if you popped them in some water.

Lushera almost felt like their black beady eyes were staring at her, saying, “Do it, I dare you to try and eat me.”

“I-I can roast fish whole...” she said.

“Haha... Well, since we have the opportunity, why don’t we learn? Kaphal, while we do that, could you chop up these root vegetables? Just a nice chunky dice like this.”

Viola started by showing Kaphal, the least experienced there, how to do a simple task. She took out a cutting board, cut a thin-skinned potato up into bite-size pieces, then handed the knife to Kaphal.

Kaphal stared intently at the cooking knife, and eventually stabbed another potato onto the tip of the knife.

“Hiya!”

She slammed that down, the potato splitting in two and the knife hammering down into the cutting board. The knife couldn’t handle the sheer force of the strike, and the blade snapped off at the handle.

Kaphal stood there, holding nothing but the knife’s handle. Her swing came down all the way to her hips, but the knife blade didn’t make it that far. It flew off and clattered across the floor.

“Damn...that was close...” said Timm. The flying blade had nearly caught him. He dodged it by pulling up close to the wall.

“I-I am so sorry!” said Lushera.

“...Broke...” pouted Kaphal.

"Kitchen knives aren't meant to cut with force like that," explained Viola. "You cut just by pushing or pulling, you just keep that in mind. Perhaps I should have started by saying that..."

"I-I didn't know her fragment form packed that much power..." said Lushera.

"I adjust," said Kaphal. Viola handed her a new knife, and she started dicing the vegetables. Carefully, this time.

"Lushera, you're over here," said Viola. She plopped the fish so bursting with life in front of Lushera. "When you remove the head, you slip the knife under the front fins, yes, just like that. Very good. We'll take out the guts since we're only going to use the meat."

Lushera did as instructed, stabbing the knife in and...it didn't go too well. The fish's body, skin and all, slipped and caught on the knife's blade, but she somehow managed to turn the fish into three filets in the end.

Viola threw the bones into a pot and the meat into a bowl. "We'll make fish paste out of this," she explained.

"I think Mom could do that," said Lushera.

"I do," said Kaphal. Lushera was a little worried Kaphal might break the bowl, but it seemed she'd learned from her previous mistake and approached the task with an appropriately gentle touch as she took a pestle and mashed up the fish meat, mixing it into a fish paste.

Then they seasoned it and put in a binding agent before rolling a chunk up into a patty, the size just about right. And then they rolled up another. And another, until they had rows of fish cake patties. It made Lushera think back to when she would make mud pies as a child.

"Half are going to go in the soup, and the other half I'm thinking we'll add a little more flavor and try pan frying," said Viola.

The vegetables had been stewing in the stock made from the fish bones, and now they plopped in half of the fish cakes. The other half were coated with a sweet and spicy glaze and put in a pan.

"Fry!" said Kaphal.

“Oh, direct flames?” murmured Viola.

“Her fragment form can even produce fire...” said Lushera.

Rather than use the fire from the magic range, Kaphal scorched the fish cakes with her own breath. Even if it wasn’t nearly as much as the breath from her real form, fire containing dragon energy added nutrition to the food it cooked. Maybe. Soon, the room was filled with aromas that made your stomach rumble.

“All righty, it’s done!” announced Viola. “You know, cooking really is its own sort of torture. You have to work, staring at food while you’re hungry.”

“This is done too,” said Mira. “Would’ya listen to this? This oven, you just flip this little lever down and the fire shoots out. Then you flip it back up and it cuts right off. Can you believe that?”

“Wow, that looks delicious!” exclaimed Lushera.

Mira used thick mittens to pull out a heavy cast iron dish from the oven, then took the pie out from the dish. The egg wash resulted in a golden-brown crust with gravy oozing out of the slits cut on top.

And while the pie was in the oven and Mira had some free time, she diced up oranges and mixed them in a syrup. That was dessert.

The men, having been unable to fit in the kitchen, insisted on at least dishing the food and bringing it to the table along with a baguette. While they did that, Lushera and the others put the bowl and pans in to soak, getting ready for the cleanup.

“Lushera, remember beginning?” asked Kaphal.

“Beginning?”

“I cook meat, you eat.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that!”

If they were talking about cooking, then there was when Kaphal would cook the meat from her hunts and feed it to Lushera, though it was hard to call that *cooking*. That first started out of pure chance. It felt so long ago.

“What are you talking about?” asked Viola, her glasses and curiosity

glimmering.

“This is funny. When Mom first took me in, she tried to feed me raw meat!” said Lushera, telling her about that day. “I was near death and desperate, so I ate it, but I threw it back up.”

“I no know humans well then,” said Kaphal.

“That...sounds like it was rough,” said Timm.

Everyone gave awkward smiles. It was a funny story now, but then...

Then a thought hit Lushera. She would probably be perfectly fine eating raw meat now. Her stomach could likely handle it if she tore into her prey with her teeth like a dragon, feeding on bloody meat.

But she still ate cooked food. The plates of food on the table wafted up columns of steam. This was the kind of thing Lushera thought looked tasty. On the mountain, she’d watched Kaphal lay into the meat of her prey many times like it was the most delicious food in the world, but she never felt like imitating Kaphal in that. She only ever ate meat that was cooked before she got it.

She never questioned that before, but now, she wondered why.



THE next day, a carriage came to their lodging to pick up Lushera and Timm and take them to the castle.

The muscled white horses pulling the carriage wore decorative helmets like a knight’s, and the carriage itself seemed as sturdy and imposing as a stronghold. Despite that, the seats inside were so comfortable that you sank in the moment you touched them, nearly becoming one with the cushion.

“So, what I’m saying is, the court’s got all these annoying customs and ways of doing things. It’s made it inflexible. They have no clue what to do about a dragon,” said Timm.

“Hm... Which is why they want to talk to me first. They’re going to secretly try and figure out how to handle Mom.”

Timm nearly looked like a different person without his armor on, instead wearing some navy-blue formalwear he must have borrowed from somewhere.

Blue hues were valued in Setrayu since it was a country of water and was blessed by the Hurricane of Insight dracovitae.

Lushera, on the other hand, was dressed in normal clothing. She wore a shirt, skirt, and leather vest that Viola brought from somewhere. It was an entirely normal outfit for a girl, though there was something that seemed similar to Kaphal's new outfit in terms of color combos and general make.

Lushera's formalwear was in the works. Viola had Midum, the craftswoman who made Lushera's armor, send Lushera's measurements to a tailor in Alhyura so they could get to work. Viola was thorough, if nothing else.

Later, Kaphal would be meeting with the King of Setrayu. What would that meeting look like? That was a problem to be figured out even before "what" they'd be talking about. Lushera needed to work it out.

"Well, Mom only just became able to make a human form. She has no idea how to conduct herself while in it," said Lushera.

"I know. Which is why I was talking to Viola about it, and we decided going for 'dignified' rather than 'polite' would be best. You know, be just a bit commanding."

"I think that's probably good. Though, it won't be any good if she makes the King lose face."

"That's true too. Which is why we need to figure out what the King is thinking and what he has planned."

It was a real hassle to deal with, but Lushera understood that hassle was the price she paid in order to operate in the world of the elite. Besides, this too was part of the fight to protect Mount Kugus. Not all battles were hacking, shoving, and burning.

"The other thing is checking out your ring," said Timm. "The King'll be wearing it during the audience with Kaphal, and they can't exactly have the King wearing some questionable magic item. They need to check it all out, make sure it's not cursed or anything. Which means you'll need to leave it with them until then."

"They will give back, won't they?" Lushera asked, concerned.

“Probably. The officials of the court aren’t that stupid. Probably.”

“Probably...”

While they discussed a variety of things, the carriage traveled at a leisurely pace to the front gate of the castle. It stopped there and the two stepped out.

“We have to check your things. Stand over there,” said a gate guard. One of the two guards went through Lushera and Timm’s belongings while the other squinted at them through an extravagantly decorated magnifying glass-like object.

His eyes immediately went wide. “Wh-What in the...? Is your entire body a magic item?”

“Oh, is that just a magic measuring glass? Lushera’s magic’s so strong you’re not gonna see anything else looking at her through that. ’Cause the magic in her body is so highly concentrated,” said Timm with a crooked grin.

It was very important for anywhere with high security, like a king’s castle, to prevent dangerous magic items from being brought in. The gate guards used an item that let them detect magic, allowing them to make sure someone didn’t have any magic items on their person, but this magic meter was made with the intent of using it for normal people. It was responding to the dragon energy Lushera was overflowing with.

“Hm... I guess we have no choice. We’ll have to settle for a self-declaration on whether or not you have any magic items. Do you?”

“Um, just this ring... I was told to bring it by someone in the court,” Lushera answered.

“Mm-hm, we were informed of that.”

After magic items, they underwent a pat down to make sure they weren’t hiding any weapons anywhere.

Though, when it came to trained warriors, their bodies (including the magic inside) were weapons deserving fear, so it really wasn’t that big of a problem if you were carrying a weapon.

It was more important to control the person.

“All right, you may enter.”

After that easy security check, the two passed through the gate, listening to the sound of falling water.



WHILE the castle did have walls to make it a stronghold, it was also a structure made to magically defend the palace. The castle grounds weren't filled with the normal defense structures you might see in a castle. Instead, there was a splendid and elegant palace built from wood and plaster and gardens with clear running waters and seasonal flowers in full bloom.

Manmade creeks sparkled between the neat rows of trees in the garden, and a path of hydrangeas led to a gazebo. You could spend a whole day in one spot here, just looking and never becoming bored.

No one really showed them the way. Timm walked in without waiting for permission, leading Lushera to a gazebo in one corner of the garden. There was a set of delicately worked chairs and a table beneath the roof, setting the sort of scene that would work well for an elegant afternoon tea.

They were given high-quality yet businesslike tea, which they sipped while having a meeting with a rather meek-seeming, middle-aged government official. His social status and fief were gained not through owning land but through his service to the court, which was why people called people like him court nobles.

“Well then, perhaps an outdoor setting would be best?” said the official. He'd brought along several plans for Kaphal's meeting with the King, which helped move the conversation along.

“I think so. Going inside would require her to adhere to certain...rules of etiquette. And you'd be forced to roll out all the pomp and circumstance for her.”

“Indeed. There are many commonalities between the various countries' ways of showing hospitality, and...we may accidentally send the wrong message if we fail to meet the prescribed method for providing the highest of welcomes. Though in this case, perhaps it would be more likely that the message we must

get across would fail to make it at all.”

Politics was, in general, the act of putting one mask over another.

The official chuckled, as someone one step removed from that context, and said, “Haha... I suppose it is rather meddlesome, all these politics.”

This man is an incredible negotiator, thought Lushera. He immediately gets the other person to like him. He'd be effective against even the best managers.

The more important the negotiations were, the greater tendency people had to send someone of higher rank, rather than of greater skill, but that didn't seem to be something Lushera had to worry about here.

“Now, this may come as somewhat of a surprise, but our proposal would be to set up a sort of mock military encampment in the courtyard. That would be suitable if our goal was a military alliance. The King also acts as the general for the country's entire military, and this would show that we are engaging with the queen of Mount Kugus as a general of the same rank as His Majesty.”

“...I see. That seems good, then.”

Lushera didn't have much confidence in her political knowledge, but she still did her best to look for any pitfalls that might have been placed in these plans. Even so, she got the impression the court was approaching her with honesty and openness, knowing she was a newcomer to this world.

“There is one request we would like to make, if at all possible. While the Lady Kaphal is staying here in the capital, His Majesty would appreciate it if she were to...go out and enjoy herself where people might see her.”

“Um, sorry?” said Lushera, the pitch of her voice rising suddenly at the unexpected turn in the conversation. But she got what he was aiming for after a moment of thinking. “Ah, I think I understand. This is about public perception, isn't it?”

“Correct. The court believes Lady Kaphal is deserving of trust as it was the Golden Helm who introduced her to us, but that fact is not obvious to everyone. There is a fear of dragons amongst the people, which could turn into a crippling issue down the line.”

Lushera's impression of the court's handling of them was that they were both careful and thorough. It was likely a reflection of the current king's temperament.

Martgarz might try to use that fear...but probably not. A more likely scenario is Mom getting dragged into internal political conflicts. Someone could use the people's fear of her as a platform for their own advancement.

There were rumors that the King was fairly cautious of internal stability. He paid attention to the people's discontent, soothed conflicts between nobles, and made sure everyone was together as they moved in one direction or another.

No horse pulls a carriage without being fed, no fire burns without kindling. And if two people hate each other so much they would likely kill each other, they would probably end up only insulting each other if they had no swords. If you looked at it that way, then it was dangerous having the people divided on something so great it couldn't be ignored, like a dragon.

"Lady Kaphal has become a topic of much discussion even amongst the people since her arrival yesterday," continued the man. "Not everyone has quite realized she is a projected form of a dragon, but the dragon aura she emits has drawn everyone's attention. We feel we must take advantage of this."

People in power often put out political propaganda that painted them in a light that the masses would find favorable.

The people were likely to be curious and excited to learn the beautiful mystery woman everyone was talking about was in fact the incarnation of a dragon. Lushera felt bad making a spectacle of Kaphal, but...needs must.



"SO, is there anywhere we can go out for some fun?" asked Lushera.

"The King's being ridiculous, demanding you just go out and have fun," muttered Weyne with a shrug. Lushera came back to their flat and told them all about what happened while he sharpened his throwing knives.

Honestly, the only part of Setrayu Lushera was familiar with was Kugut'hulm.

This was her first time in Alhyura. She had no idea how to “go out and just have fun” here. That’s why she asked the other members of the party.

“Hm, let’s see. There are all sorts of sights to see, but... Oh, Lushera, you notice how there are loads of people walking around town wearing swimsuits?” asked Weyne.

Lushera nodded. People wearing swimsuits weren’t exactly overrunning the place, but she was surprised to find there were certain spots filled with people wearing them. All types of people too, men and women, young and old. “Everyone’s going swimming, right?”

“Yeah. And Alhyura’s incredible for that.”

“In Kugut’hulm, you can swim anywhere so long as there are no boats passing by,” said Timm. “But you can only swim in certain spots in Alhyura. And there are loads of folks going swimming. You get people packed in a tiny space. On the weekends, it’s so busy you can’t even find room to swim.”

Setrayuan summers were hot and humid. And, since there was so much water throughout the kingdom, people did a lot of swimming.

“Lushera in a swimsuit...” muttered Viola. “I mean, it will be crowded, but it won’t be anything near what it’s like during the summer weekends. Right now should be just about the right level of busy. We should definitely go.” Viola’s glasses gleamed suspiciously.

“Your mouth’s letting your dirty pleasures slip out,” said Weyne.

“I don’t actually have a swimsuit that fits my new body,” said Lushera. “We’ll have to go buy one.” She hit on the idea listening to the suggestion Viola seemed excited about (which was therefore quite ominous).

“Good idea! If we do that, I want to take you and your mom to look at a bunch of shops. How does that sound?” Viola asked.

“That sounds great!”

Thinking about it, even “shopping” was a sort of pastime they could do for fun in the public eye. They could use that to achieve their goal of showing the people a Kaphal who was having some laid-back good times.

“Shopping? Buy what?” asked Kaphal.

“Oh, right. Shopping isn’t part of dragon culture, is it?” said Lushera. “We don’t necessarily have to buy anything. We can just have fun looking at everything on sale...and if we like something, we can obviously buy that...”

Lushera was also hoping this could help Kaphal learn more about human society in the process. Alhyura had all sorts of interesting shops selling various luxury goods or items brought from far-off lands. This could be a good chance for Kaphal to interact more with humanoid culture, since she was lacking in that area.

“I think we’re about to embark on a long shopping excursion, so why don’t the two of you take a little rest for now,” said Viola. It sounded like she was planning on doing all the cleaning up after the meal on her own, but Timm sighed and stood too.

“I know the worst isn’t gonna happen if you’re with Lushera, but I’m gonna feel uneasy with you lot roaming around Alhyura while I put my feet up here. I’ll come along and carry your bags or something. If I get too bored, I can do some squats.”

“Please don’t. You know how much worse you’ll smell of sweat if you’re doing strength training in this heat?” said Weyne.

Summer was quickly approaching. The sun shone early on, like it was ahead of the turning of the seasons, creating the perfect day to go swimming.



LUSHERA stared at the object in her hand, something resembling beef jerky if you ignored the fact that it was a marbled mixture of orange, green, and purple. “Viola... What is this?” she asked.

“Dried tototoka, apparently.”

“Tototoka?”

“Tototoka.”

It seemed there were still monsters out there Lushera had never heard of. Like this one that lived only in very specific locations.

In the markets of big cities like this, there were bound to be some people selling odd food items.

This stall had a tent roof made of woven plant fibers, and was operated by a beautiful, slender woman with skin the color of fresh wood, hair the color of new spring growth, and pointed ears.

“xxxxx! xxx. xx, xxx. xxxxxxx, xxxx,” she said.

“More accurately, this is tototoka breast meat left to soak in a clear creek for three days, then dried, then soaked in a secret blend of fruit juices where it’s allowed to ferment in a hole in the ground along with tree leaves, and then dried after that. It’s poisonous if you don’t treat it with that process, it seems,” Viola interpreted.

“I didn’t realize you can speak Elven,” said Lushera. “So, what *is* a tototoka?”

“Most forest elves believe you should eat everything edible within the forest and become a part of the ecosystem. And if you’re planning to eat that, you shouldn’t ask what tototoka is.” Her expression remained still while she gave that disquieting explanation.

The elf pushed the dried tototoka into Lushera’s hands with a kind smile and some phrase that could have been a friendly, “Please, go ahead.”

Lushera froze, uncertain, but Kaphal quickly popped the tototoka in her mouth. “Yummy.”

“Seriously...?” Lushera watched. After another moment’s hesitation, she took a bite. It definitely wasn’t *bad*, but there was something about it that she couldn’t put into words, making Lushera reflect on the deeds of the races they call humanoid.



THIS store was a somewhat questionable establishment, something you might call an antique shop, or maybe a pawn shop, its insides crammed with objects of varying sizes. There was a bone necklace, the kind that could have been made by a goblin, and a staff that looked so brand new that it actually made you more uneasy about it since it seemed unsuited to a place like this.

“This, and this, amazing,” said Kaphal, selecting a teacup and a small painting without hesitation from the hundreds of other items.

The shop owner, with his fishy drooping mustache, leaned in, rubbing his hands together. “What a wonderful eye you have, ma’am. To be honest, I would hope to sell these two items together for six large gold pieces, but I’ll give you a special discount and accept three. How does that sound?”

“I buy.”

“Your purchase is much appreciated!” The man always had a smirk on his face, but his smile grew to a full-on grin at that point. He pretended to lower the price for Kaphal, but he likely estimated the items to be only two large gold pieces in value. Kaphal never even realized she was being baited.

But the fact that Kaphal selected these two items without a moment’s hesitation meant they were likely at least worth ten large gold pieces, or more. Lushera and Viola kept silent on that fact, only fair payback for the man’s sales methods.

Timm was waiting outside, Viola’s decision because she seemed worried that he would end up being pressured to buy some strange vase if he went in.

“Ma’am, what do you think of this item? It was crafted 130 years ago by the great Gudjimu—”

“This no amazing. Old is lie.”

“Uh...”

Kaphal immediately lost interest in the old-looking plate the store owner held out, leaving him lost for words.



ESSENTIALLY, Kaphal was no different from any other dragon in that she liked rare, valuable, and sparkly things. Which was why Viola took them somewhere Lushera thought was quite insane.

“So pretty...”

A man in refined attire reminding Lushera of a butler brought out item after item: necklaces dripping in gems, a stunning diamond ring that was also a

defensive magic item, and many more just for Kaphal to “try on.”

She'd changed into a gown-like outfit and sat in front of a large mirror, her eyes glimmering as she looked at the jewelry, putting each one on and letting out captivated sighs.

This shop specialized in gemstones. Though, “shop” was perhaps a far too normal word for a place like this. It was a boutique, with an exhibition of only a few items (they weren't on display, definitely not just a display) arranged throughout the elegant store. The majority of the items for sale were kept in the back, which they brought out for a customer to try on when they wanted to. Lushera had a hard time wrapping her head around this method of business.

“Dragons really do love gems,” Viola commented. “Why don't you look at some things too, Lushera?”

“B-But...this is my first time in a store like this, and...I feel like I look like I don't belong...”

Viola and Lushera were given a cup of some unfamiliar tea. Lushera didn't want to know how much a cup of that cost. Lushera was trying to take up as little space as possible on the simple-looking yet surprisingly comfortable chair. She only came in because she worried about Kaphal being without her. Now she felt jealous of Timm, who was outside doing squats.

Viola, on the other hand, was so at peace with this environment she seemed well-adjusted to it. “You're worrying too much. You have enough money to buy this entire shop if you wanted to. You could just buy some random piece then look at everything you wanted without feeling awkward.”

“Just because I *have* money doesn't mean I should *spend* it!” Lushera demurred.

It wasn't easy to get rid of the penny-pinching tendency she had that had seeped into the very marrow of her bones. And, in that way, she really didn't belong.



THE sun began to set.

“I know I only noticed this because I’m a bit of a genius, but we never did see any swimsuits,” said Viola.

“I just noticed the same thing. It’s strange,” said Lushera.

“Hey,” called Timm, carrying quite a few parcels at this point.

“Shall we head to one of the larger clothing stores next? They should have swimsuits,” Viola suggested.

Having finally remembered their original goal, the group went to an area that had the larger shops. There were lots of people around, but the crowd naturally parted for Kaphal and Lushera when they walked side by side. The people weren’t running away from the pair, but they did keep their distance and watched them. Lushera felt their eyes boring into her.

They walked, eliciting cries of awe and wonder, but, through that buzz, they heard another, more upsetting call.

“Please! Please just let me have the medicine today! I swear I’ll pay you back!”

It was at an apothecary selling primarily premade medicines, including magical ones. A burly guard dragged a woman out of the shop, accompanied by another man in white. The woman groveled on her knees, pressing her head to the ground in front of the man in white. The surrounding crowd was in a fluster, wondering what this was all about, but the woman didn’t spare them a glance. She was desperately focused.

“Ma’am, I’m sympathetic, I am, but I have a business to run,” said the man in white. “Everyone knows your face. Even if someone is feeling charitable, you never pay them back. I can’t have that.”

“But—”

He closed the store’s door, his expression flat, and there was silence filled with the buzz of onlookers.

“Um, excuse me. What happened...?” inquired Lushera, unable to abandon the woman who was so distraught she couldn’t even stand.



THEY moved to an open-air café on a side street to avoid drawing attention. There were some curious people who followed them, but there was less foot traffic here and their followers were cautious, so Lushera wasn't that concerned with them.

"My name is Joanna. I live here with my daughter."

It was hard to tell how old Joanna was, in the worst possible way. Her struggles showed themselves in the deep creases of her face, white mixed in with the orange of her hair, despite the initial impression of her being on the younger side.

Lushera bought her a coffee, though she was hesitant to accept.

"I used to work as a maid, but I caused a problem at my former place of employment and they fired me," Joanna explained. "I couldn't find any work after that and...my husband left me, and I lost anyone else I could rely on."

Joanna slowly told her story, which Lushera did have some questions about, but she didn't prod.

Maids and other in-house workers received an introduction letter from their former employer when they left one household. This introduction letter would go over what the employer felt about their skill and conduct. It was the deciding factor for when they went to find new work. Any maid that caused a problem would of course receive an introduction letter with a poor review. Sometimes the potential new employer would contact the previous one to ask for more details.

Because of that system, one black mark could follow someone forever whether they wanted it to or not, and that was the sort of thing Lushera assumed Joanna was talking about.

The problem was it would have to be quite the big mistake to prevent her from ever finding any sort of employment. People knew there were some masters or mistresses of the house that hated a person and would write a worse review than was called for, and any average houseworker capable of doing their job well could find a place of employment even if their manners weren't impeccable. Joanna didn't seem like the kind of person to do something extreme enough to nullify that.

The other odd thing was that Joanna had been married. Most houseworkers weren't paid enough to cover constant childcare while they were living and working in their master's home. Low-ranking housework was generally seen as work for unmarried women. Hiring married women was regularly avoided.

Which meant that even though Joanna was a maid, she had enough status to have her marriage approved. Her skill was probably enough to justify that, and yet, she still couldn't find another place of employment? That made her situation all the weirder.

Lushera thought she heard Viola whisper something along the lines of, "This is where you were," to herself.

"I sometimes find work I can do here and there, but it's far from enough to buy the medicine my daughter needs," Joanna continued. "She's been ill for so long..."

"Medicine... Do you mean life-support medicine?" asked Lushera.

"Yes..."

Life-support medicine... Lushera's heart hurt every time it beat in her chest.

In general, modern humanoid society had the ability to use magic to heal most ailments of the mind and body. You could purchase magic elixirs or receive treatment at a temple, if you made sufficient contributions. But that mostly just eliminated symptoms. If the body was weak and afflicted by illness after illness, or if the body simply could no longer function, there was no effective medicine.

Those people needed to improve or recover their base vitality. And, until their body could heal like that, they needed life-support medicine.

Life-support medicine wasn't just one type of drug. It was a category of magic medicines that supplemented a person's life force and kept them alive.

It could be bought, but it was fairly rare and there was unlimited demand, so it was definitely not cheap. Aging nobles and the rich bought it to extend their life, at which point it turned into medicine for longevity. This increased the price, putting it out of the reach of anyone who was ill and poor.

At one time, Lushera had worked desperately to get life-support medicine. She was well aware of what that was like. The family of people with chronic illnesses could destroy themselves trying to buy that medicine. It wasn't despair that killed people. It was hope.

Joanna's story hit far too close to home for Lushera.

"I'm going to ask you a stupid question," said Lushera, starting to talk before she even knew what she was going to say. "If... It's just if... If there was a medicine that could save your daughter in...a place filled with monsters...and you couldn't hire adventurers to get it for you...would you go get it yourself?"

"Lushera," said Kaphal, sitting next to Lushera. She wrapped her arm around Lushera's shoulders. "Lushera, why ask?"

"I...don't know. But I want to...check. I guess. I want to know if I just made a foolish mistake, or if I just did what anyone would do. I don't know if it'll make what I did okay."

There was always a doubt inside Lushera that her last decision as XXXX had been a mistake, even if doing differently wouldn't have changed anything.

"Of course I'd go," said Joanna. "I'd go even if there was only a tiny sliver of hope that it would save her." She gave a small smile, at ease with her decision.

Lushera was relieved, a little. She let out a breath, like she was releasing something pent-up inside her, then pulled something brilliant and red from a pouch she could attach to her belt. "Please, take this."

"What is it...?"

"It's the scale of a red dragon. It can be used as a substitute for the life-support medicine, though that's not its usual application. In fact, it's even more potent."

"What?!"

It was one of the scales that fell from Kaphal's main body after the battle on the mountain. It contained a fragment of a dragon's energy.

Rather than let the variants of the area eat it, Lushera took it with the intention of using it strategically to raise more variants. If a human ate it, they

wouldn't gain the same power as a variant or Lushera, but it should compensate for the lack of energy filling them.

"I, I... I have to thank you somehow!" Joanna covered her mouth with trembling hands, overcome by emotion.

"Would it be all right if I visited your home?" Lushera asked. "It has to be processed a little before your daughter can take it as medicine."

"Of course! Please do!"

Joanna's form, tears in her eyes, seemed distant to Lushera. She got this power too late. But...but that didn't mean that her path from here on out had to be meaningless.

"I'm sorry, Lushera, something's come up that I have to take care of," said Viola. "Let's meet back up later."

"Hm? Oh, yeah."

"Sorry from me too. I'm gonna have to stick with Viola," said Timm.

"*Sigh...* All right. I'm fine though," muttered Viola.

For some reason, the moment the conversation was finished, Viola took Timm and went off somewhere.



JOANNA'S home was in an area that was just on the edge of being considered shady, without quite stepping over.

Space was limited with the city being surrounded by the walls, so the citizens lived in multifamily buildings. There were some buildings that even had lifts, but those were rare. In general, the higher floors were cheaper because of that.

Lushera walked up the apartment building's stairs to the fifth floor, the walls smelling of mold and the paint peeling off.

"Kate, I'm home!" called Joanna.

"Welcome ho—"

They entered the small room. There were two beds next to each other, a girl in one of them. She sat up, her eyes growing wide at the sight of their strange

guests. Her skin was so pale it was nearly see-through. She looked a little older than Lushera. Well, Lushera's outside appearance anyway.

"Mom, who are these people?" Rather than being on edge, she seemed overwhelmed.

Lushera stepped forward to make the introduction. It was a special situation, but it still fell within the role of a manager. "Hello, it's nice to meet you, Kate. My name's Lushera. I'm a member of the adventuring party, the Golden Helm. And this is, uh...my mom."

She was an adventuring manager who traveled with her mom. It was an abnormal introduction since she only said what was okay to be said.

"I met your mom while she was looking for medicine," she continued. "I gave her this, something I just happened to have. It's a red dragon scale." Lushera brought out the fragment of life force, as red as flame.

"A...red dragon scale...?" Kate looked at it in shock, covering her mouth in the same way her mother did, just with a thin, bony hand. "How much did it cost?"

"Kate, sweetie," said Joanna, gently reprimanding her for asking the price, even if it was only a hesitant question. It might be rude.

"I just want to help. I feel there's a bit of a connection here. Basically, what I'm saying is...it's free," said Lushera, trying to be as gentle as she could to put Kate at ease.

This was part of being an adventurer too. Sometimes you did jobs not for money, but for society, for people. This wasn't for nothing though. Adventurers with heart were the ones society rooted for, the ones who became famous.

"Joanna, do you have a pestle and mortar? And could you boil some—Actually, cold water should be fine," said Lushera.

"Of course, I'll go get it right away!" Joanna went into the small kitchen to the side of the small room.

Then, after they watched Joanna leave and they heard sounds of her rummaging through the shelves, Kate whispered quietly, "Um, I'm sorry, Lushera? Could you come here?"

Lushera did.

“Take the scale and go, please.”

“What...?”

It took some time before Lushera processed what Kate said. She looked straight at Lushera, her eyes gentle. They were eyes that had long watched their own death approach, a gaze that affected even seasoned adventurers.

“If you really insist...give it to my mom after I die. It’s got to be worth a lot, right? If you do that...she can buy herself something to eat. Something nice, not just the stale bread they sell at the end of the day...” She sounded meek, even submissive, which contrasted with the steadiness of her tone.

“Why would you say that...?”

“I can’t do it anymore. My mom works herself to the bone for me. She’s taken out loans, but she’s always smiling in front of me... She’s happy just because I’m alive, but I...”

Lushera gasped in realization, for more than one reason.

Kate continued. “Will this one scale make me better so that my mom never has to worry about me again? If not, it’s all pointless. It just means my mom will keep suffering for longer. I want her to be free...”

A single tear fell on the sheets, crumpled in Kate’s grip.

She would never be able to say these things to her mom. What she said was the unfiltered truth, only shown because Lushera was someone from the outside. What Kate wanted was a quick and a painless death. A parting that would satisfy her mother after her long, arduous battle. She wanted that to come as soon as possible.

“Pretty sure you’ve paid me back by now. You don’t have to worry about me. Go somewhere, live free. I’ll decide how I die.” Lushera heard a pleasant, low, sad voice in her mind. Her throat tightened and she couldn’t get any words out.

“No. That no good.”

Lushera turned back to look at Kaphal, she spoke in her faltering human language while Lushera was as still as a statue.

This doll, the incarnation of a dragon of fire, knelt on the edge of the bed and took Kate's frail hand in her own. "You special thing to Joanna. You throw away yourself, you throw away Joanna's special thing. Protect special thing with everything. It not...suffering."

Her emotions came through even though she wasn't speaking in Draconic. She had lost her real daughter before she was born. She took in Lushera, then dedicated everything to protecting her. That was why she understood how Joanna felt.

"But...but what do I do then? Even if it doesn't hurt her to do it, if she keeps going like this, someday she'll just...wear herself down to nothing..."

"Then, the first thing you need to do is tell her," Lushera said, wiping away the tears that nearly spilled from her eyes. "Tell her it makes you sad to see her going through so much, in the same way it would make her sad to see you die. Maybe she hasn't noticed, she hasn't realized..." Those words were the confession of a fool who hadn't realized that very thing themselves.

"Oh, there it is! It must have gotten pushed to the back because I haven't used it in so long." Joanna came back in with a somewhat large and old mortar and pestle. She stopped in her tracks, taken aback by the emotions in the room, realizing they weren't normal. "Oh... What's going on?"

"Nothing," said Lushera. "Kate was actually just telling us how much she loves you."

"What? I—"

"Aha... Thank you, Kate. I love you, too, sweetie." The creases at the corner of Joanna's eyes deepened as she smiled and hugged Kate.

Kate seemed uncertain of what to do, both embarrassed to be treated like that in front of guests, but also not wanting to push her mom away. Lushera could almost feel her emotions as her own. Maybe it was more accurate to say she sympathized with her.

"Thank you for the scale, Lushera," said Kate.

"Hm? ...You're welcome." They nodded to each other, Kate's expression softening slightly.

"So, I guess adventurers call people by their given name. Like, you haven't been using our family name. You call us 'Joanna' and 'Kate,'" Kate observed.

"Oh, does that bother you?"

"No, it's just that I'm always in the house, so I never have anyone call me by my name other than my mom. It feels a bit odd."

"Guild receptionists refer to all adventurers by their given name. There are a lot of active adventurers using trade names or fake names and don't have surnames. That's why it's normal for people to use given names when doing anything related to adventuring," explained Lushera.

Kate gently brought her hands to her chest, like she was putting something precious in there for safekeeping.



LUSHERA and Kaphal walked down the apartment building's stairs. It was unclear when it was last cleaned, and it smelled of mold. The only sound in the stairwell was their footsteps.

"Hey, Mom," said Lushera after a while, once they reached the landing on the third floor. "I'm not planning on dying."

"Not me either," said Kaphal, and the conversation faltered there.

Lushera saw similar things to her own past and present in Joanna and Kate. There was a huge difference in power between a dragon and a human, an even greater gap than that between a parent and a child. Lushera understood why Kaphal would feel like she had to protect her. But the side being protected was more than just a plant given water so it can bloom—it had feelings too. Did Kaphal understand that? Did she realize the things that Lushera, when she was XXXX, was too foolish to see?

"Hey, Mom," Lushera said again when they reached the second-floor landing. "I don't...want you to die."

"I no want Lushera to die." They were just saying out loud the things they fully understood, making sure they hadn't forgotten.

"We're exactly the same," murmured Lushera without thinking.

“...Haha.” Kaphal couldn’t suppress her laughter.

“What do I have to do for the dragon test?” Lushera pressed on, taking advantage of this moment where Kaphal seemed more relaxed.

Lushera intended to go through with the test regardless of what it was, but she should plan ways of handling it in advance if she could learn what it was and it seemed feasible to plan for. You did the same when adventuring.

There was a pause, as if Kaphal was uncertain if she should answer. “Test show power when need to. There no one way do test.”

“Ah, it’s not standard.”

“Not normal do test. Because dragon strong. Reduce dragon numbers no good. Lushera different.”

Dragons didn’t easily die. And on top of that, everyone was worrying over how to maintain the current dragon numbers. They would be careful not to kill another dragon over something like a test of strength. But they didn’t need to worry about that with Lushera. That’s why Kaphal was so concerned.

“I’m not planning on dying,” said Lushera. But she was prepared to face this. She wouldn’t let this end in tragedy. That’s why she *had* to face this.

Lushera was no longer a normal person. She may not reach the heights of a dragon, but...to say she was worthless...well, perhaps...to a real dragon, there wasn’t that much of a difference between Lushera and a normal human. But Lushera wanted to believe that wasn’t the case. Regardless, she had to stand her ground.

They exited the apartment complex onto the cramped street where Viola and Timm waited.

“Hello there, congrats on a job done,” said Viola.

“Did you take care of your errand?”

“Yep, all sorted.” She thumped her chest as if to say they could leave everything to her. And then, with complete sincerity, she said, “Thank you, Lushera.”

“Uh...why are you thanking me?”

"Hm... You're right. I really don't have any reason to be thanking you. Or maybe I do? Anyway, I did what I could to help those two out as well." Viola didn't expand upon what specifically she did, or why. "Okay, let's go buy you a swimsuit. The sun is about to set."

"Oh, right."

Lushera didn't press Viola for details.



THE next day.

"Aaaaaah! People, there are people *everywhere!*" Lushera shrieked, looking down at the beach from the road up on an embankment.

There were several swimming spots set up in the rivers of Alhyura, water created by the power of Setrayu's dracovitae.

Parasols stood in rows along the sand—sand made artificially with magic—and throngs of people in swimsuits enjoying themselves, each in their own way. Some swam, some sunbathed, some ran out to play with beach balls made of leather, some built sandcastles, some ate food. Vendors with stalls swarmed the beach like ants, hoping for these crowds so they could sell toys and food. This was the first time Lushera had seen the pastime of swimming so well commercialized.

Lushera came wearing her new red one-piece swimsuit, though...she wasn't certain it really qualified as a one-piece. The main mass of fabric only covered her trunk, while the frill at the bottom didn't even deserve the name "skirt."

The fabric for her swimsuit was spun from iron spider silk then treated with a special resin and chemicals. This let it dry quickly and kept it from getting heavy even when it was soaking wet, making it the go-to material for swimsuits. Adventurers used to get regular jobs for gathering iron spider silk, and swimsuits were a luxury item. That changed when people developed the technology for raising iron spiders on farms, and the luxury items turned into cheap swimsuits, and the spider silk jobs turned into the occasional job for hunting down an escaped iron spider.

Kaphal was wearing a bright red swimsuit just like Lushera, but the design was

a little extreme. There was a top that cradled her ample bosom like a hammock, then a bottom that looked like simple panties, with a sarong wrapped around her waist that resembled fluttering flames. They hadn't purchased this swimsuit. Kaphal created it as part of her magic for forming a human body. Viola oversaw the design.

"What a lovely sight..." sighed Viola. She was also in a swimsuit, seeming pleased with the whole situation.

Her swimsuit was an utterly plain, non-embellished navy one-piece that covered her trunk. According to Viola, this swimsuit was used in a particular country for children when they learned how to swim, and that fact made the swimsuit suddenly look questionable to Lushera. Where did she even get it? And why was she wearing it?

And more importantly, why was Viola still wearing her bottle-bottom glasses even when going swimming? Was she actually planning on swimming?

They walked down the sun-heated sands, water mist mixing with the air and taking the edge off the heat on their skin. Some cads who saw Kaphal stood there, their mouths gaping, while others even whistled at her.

"All right... Well, we came without having any real plan. What do we do now?" asked Lushera.

"How about this?"

"Gah!" Lushera jumped back when cool water suddenly splashed her in the face.

At some point, Viola had taken out a water bottle in the shape of some plant that shot out water like a little fountain. She cackled when she saw Lushera's shock.

"...A water gun?" asked Lushera.

"It's a toy. You can play fight with them."

"Sounds fun, but Mom will probably break it if she uses it."

"Oof, you're right."

The toy Viola brought was the type that shot out water when you pushed a

trigger. Kaphal still had a little trouble using tools that required a certain level of force.

"Well then, how about you just try swimming around a bit? There are fewer people farther out," suggested Viola.

"...xxxx, deep... Wash xxxx..."

Lushera realized Kaphal was letting out what sounded like a low growl and staring at the river, muttering something in Draconic. It was true that the center of the river was deep enough that an adult wouldn't be able to touch the bottom.

"Lushera swim?" asked Kaphal.

"That's why we came. I'm definitely going to swim."

"Humans drown." She took Lushera's hand firmly in hers.

"Don't worry. I used to bathe all the time in the river near our nest."

"Know river there. I protect." She refused to budge, seemingly on edge.

Kaphal must know that Lushera was far sturdier than a normal human at this point. It was likely dragons almost never died by drowning, so perhaps she didn't have a good grasp of how dangerous different things were to humans.

Lushera thought for a moment, and then—

"Hiya!"

"Lushera?!"

She gripped Kaphal's hand tight and raced off, dragging Kaphal with her into the river.

A splash, swirling foam, a moment of weightlessness.

The two floated, completely soaked.

"Ah!" The cool water washed Lushera clean.

Kaphal's face popped up from the water. She looked like a wet dog, her long hair sticking to her.

"Heehee, your fragment form can't stand against me," teased Lushera.

“Hmph...”

“It’s okay, I can swim. Watch!” Lushera twirled through the flow. She kicked the water with her superhuman strength. It roared, and she shot off like a loose pole spear. She twisted, and the water opened a path for her. She slipped between the other swimmers, going faster than any of them, and she zipped a lap around the swimming area and came back. “See?” she said.

“...Okay. No worry.” Kaphal begrudgingly gave her approval. She couldn’t really complain when Lushera had shown her she could swim like a fish.

“By the way, Kaphal, can you swim?” asked Viola as she blew up a floating ring with magic. It seemed she really didn’t plan on swimming.

Now that she mentioned it, Lushera realized she assumed Kaphal would be fine since she hadn’t really said anything about herself on the topic, but they hadn’t checked if she could swim in that form.

“Easy. I okay,” said Kaphal. She plunged into the deeper area like a beast leaping into water, and then she stuck only her bottom half out of the water as she thrashed about, moving forward like she was trying to fly.

“Mom?!”

“Huh? Why xxxx?” She was able to get herself back upright, but it was only momentarily. As soon after she slipped completely underwater where she spiraled back to Lushera. She stayed deep in the water for a moment, bubbles floating up, before finally planting her feet on the river’s bottom and standing up.

“This okay,” she said.

“Mom, I wouldn’t call that swimming.”

Only her head poked out, her flame-like hair spreading on the surface of the water.

“Do dragons even ‘go swimming’? They likely don’t see bodies of water deep and vast enough for that, other than the blue dragons, who live in the oceans,” said Viola, her glasses gleaming as she floated gently by on her large blow-up ring.

“First time swim in water,” said Kaphal. “Before, swim in lava.”

“*L-Lava...?* Your scales must be out of this world...” said Lushera, recoiling in horror slightly despite Kaphal seeming quite happy as she explained.

For a moment Lushera had thought she was better than Kaphal at something, but that moment was brief as she was reminded of the fundamental difference between humans and dragons. She felt a chill, a brief flash of something colder than the water. She would be trying to prove she was equal to these beings who live by an entirely different scale.

“Ho-ho, how interesting! Red dragons clean themselves with fire...” said Viola.

“Yes, sometimes use lava to clean off,” said Kaphal.

Well, even if they did bathe in lava, that didn’t mean they went and did a butterfly stroke in pools of lava. It made sense that Kaphal wouldn’t know how to *swim*.

“Guess I have to teach you how to swim like a human,” said Lushera.

“...Okay.” Kaphal’s expression changed at least three times in one blink of an eye. It went from frustrated, “I can’t believe I can’t do this,” to sorrow, “We came to spend time together, and I can’t...,” to a new mindset of, “Well, it’ll be fun to learn how to swim from Lushera anyway.”

Lushera cut smoothly through the water using a breaststroke. This fragment form of Kaphal’s was capable, meaning she could probably pick up this swimming technique with a demonstration and a few tips.

“This is the breaststroke. It’s the first swimming style the Guild teaches since it’s easy to float while doing and doesn’t require much strength,” explained Lushera.

“There more than one swimming style?”

“Yeah, there are loads.”

They looked around. There weren’t just people playing in the water, there were some doing some hardcore swimming. Either they just enjoyed swimming, or they were using it for exercise.

“What that style?” asked Kaphal, pointing to a small child in the shallows,

holding a paddleboard and kicking with their feet.

“The flutter kick. It’s pretty easy to do, so most children probably learn that one first.”

“That style?” This time she pointed to a man in the deep area with impressive upper body muscles cutting through the water with beautiful form.

“A front crawl. It’s fast, but hard to swim like that when you’re wearing clothes or carrying things.”

“That style?” This time she pointed to a hand sticking out of the water as if waving goodbye with all its strength, fountains of water splashing up as it sank farther and farther, disappearing beneath the water’s surface.

“No, they’re drowning!”

“Lushera?!”

She immediately dove under and darted forward like an arrow. All the people formed a forest of legs underwater. Amongst them, in the area where an adult would even struggle to touch the ground, a boy sank down, his arm still reaching towards the sun. Of particular danger when drowning was panicking, as it shortened the time you had left. Huge bubbles floated up from the boy.

Lushera grasped his outstretched hand, then swirled to face the other direction. One hand and her legs were enough to move through the water.

The boy did nothing but let himself be dragged. The Guild taught that one of the most dangerous things when saving someone was when the victim thrashed in panic, but even if the boy had been thrashing, Lushera would have been strong enough to pull him along without issue. She actually pushed on even faster because he was so still.

She hauled him up onto the sand then checked how he was. He was unconscious and not breathing. The only silver lining here was that it just happened. They should be able to save him if they immediately administered first aid.

“Leo? Leo! Say something!” A woman, perhaps the boy’s mother, came rushing over, desperately calling his name. She wasn’t wearing a swimsuit. It

seemed she'd been watching her child swim from beneath one of the umbrellas. Maybe she lost sight of him in the crowd, or maybe she only realized he was drowning when Lushera saved him.

"Call a priest!" she shouted.

"Wait, first... Mom, can you use healing magic on him?" Lushera asked.

"Can."

"You keep him alive! I'll get the water out of him while you do that..."

Kaphal cast a spell without an incantation or even forming a symbol. She held her hands over Leo, and warm light flowed out of them towards him. That would keep him stable for the time being.

He would have inhaled water. Water in the lungs was stopping him from breathing. Lushera did have general emergency first aid knowledge, but what she had now was an even faster and more effective solution.

First, she needed to clear the airways. She looked at the boy's limp form and imagined the structures inside a human body. Then she pulled on the power of heat, something within the realm of her breath attack.

"*Hagh!*"

Steam spewed from his nose and mouth, almost like he was a steam-powered machine. Lushera had evaporated the water he inhaled, forcing him to exhale it. The steam burned his airways, but that was immediately healed by Kaphal's healing spell. He twitched, like he'd been brought back to life.

"*Agh! Gah! Ah! ...Ah, huh? Mom?*"

"Leo! Thank the heavens!"

Leo sat up and let out several dry coughs. His mom pulled him into an embrace, then she took Lushera and Kaphal's hands and gave a firm handshake. "Thank you. You saved his life!"

"It was nothing."

"Was that a spell you used just now? That's incredible, I never knew there was a spell like that." Leo's mom was thoroughly impressed, but it wasn't a spell

Lushera used. She'd used the power of a dragon that let her control the fundamental energies that formed the world. Though, they were probably the same thing to a normal person.

"Leo, make sure you thank these kind people. This girl pulled you out of the water when you were drowning, and they healed you."

"...Th-Thank you..." said Leo falteringly when his mother prodded him. He looked to be about the same age as Lushera's new body, and the kind of boy bursting with energy, fast on his feet, and popular with the girls at the temple school. "Did you, uh...do...mouth-to-mouth...?"

"I...didn't, no..." Lushera hesitated.

"Oh..." There was a whirlpool of complex emotions in his eyes, then he suddenly leaped to his feet and rushed away. "I-I'm gonna go swimming again!"

"Leo, wait! You just nearly drowned!"

He didn't even give his mother time to stop him. Was Kaphal's spell particularly effective, or was this boy always like this? He dove into the river with such vigor it was hard to believe he almost died a moment ago.

"Ah the bittersweet moments of youth," commented Viola, seemingly enjoying herself for some reason.

Leo's mother, left behind, let out a heavy sigh. "Boys. All they want is to be adventurers... No matter how many hearts he has, it won't be enough if he keeps breaking them."

"Y-You no stop him? He drowned..." said Kaphal. Leo's mother was upset about the situation, but Kaphal was the one most bothered by it. She seemed to want to drag Leo back right that moment, but Leo's mother thought for a moment.

"I...won't stop him from swimming. I think he knows now to be careful. I trust him, he'll be all right." Her explanation was an expression in words of the common sense she had, *her* common sense. That was probably closer to what was average for humans than whatever Kaphal thought. "Really though...my only option is to give in and trust him, in the end. I can't keep an eye on him forever. I do wish I could just keep him safe at home all the time, but...he's like

a wild horse. It must be nice... You don't seem to have these troubles in your family... *Sigh...*"

But even so, she didn't seem entirely unconcerned. She also sounded somewhat resigned, as if she'd been forced to do a lot.

"Oh my word! Leeeeoooo! I told you before, that area's deep!"

"I wonder if he'll really be okay..." murmured Lushera.

The woman's shouts carried over the ruckus as Leo headed towards the area where there were fewer people and it would be easier to swim. There was a strength in her.



SOME swimming wasn't enough to wear down Lushera's current endurance, but it was still pleasant to rest in the evening after returning from a day out.

Timm and Weyne were at the Guild. They'd been requested to report what they knew about the events on the mountain and Kaphal in advance of the meeting between the King and her.

The two men came to meet the ladies at the beach once they were done swimming, but the report meeting that started in the afternoon turned into a strategy meeting, dragging on, and pulling Viola into it as well, leaving Kaphal and Lushera to return to their lodging alone.

Once back, Mira forced her way in to prepare dinner, like she had every day.

"How are you liking Alhyura, Ms. Dragon?" she asked, holding out chilled glasses filled with iced tea to the two of them. A pot simmered gently in the kitchen.

"Many people. Many parents and many children," said Kaphal.

"Ahaha, I suppose you're right."

Kaphal's impression might be as simple as a child's, but there were far fewer dragons in the world than humans. She must have been surprised at how different it was from dragon society, with all the people and how it seemed so normal for people to have children.

Mira laughed cheerfully. She was quite brave to be able to interact with a dragon this casually.

“You parent,” said Kaphal.

“Hm? Oh, yes. I am.”

“Anything you think?”

“What do you mean?”

“Humans die fast. Many parents let child fight?”

“Mom...” said Lushera. “I’m not sure that’s a good way to ask...”

Mira was taken aback by Kaphal’s question, which she still lacked the skill with the language to express properly. Lushera winced.

She could guess what Kaphal was trying to say based on her blunt question and the events that took place on their way to the capital.

“Um, adding on to what Mom said, I imagine it’s not really that dangerous for a dragon parent to let their child fight. Just being alive makes a dragon one of the most powerful things in the world, other than when they’re new hatchlings. But humans are weaker than dragons. They can easily die if they fight. I think Mom wants to know what it feels like to be a human parent whose child has a job that involves fighting....”

“That. Ask that,” said Kaphal.

“I see...” hummed Mira.

It looked like Lushera’s guess was on the mark. Kaphal must wonder about that because she sensed the fragility of a human life, as easy to die as a newly hatched dragon.

“I can’t speak for everyone,” said Mira. “There are some parents who just swallow back the tears because they can’t stop their children. There are some who are proud of their children. There are some who worry, there are some who brush it off, certain that nothing would happen to *their* child. There are even some who don’t care at all that their child died. So...I’ll just tell you about me and Timm.”

She poured herself a cup of tea, settled into a chair, and got ready to tell their story.

To be honest, Lushera had wondered about this too. There were many adventurers who either didn't have parents or whose parents were unreliable. Adventurers who did have normal, stable parents had to have some other abnormal situation to spur them into the business.

"Timm told us he was going to become an adventurer when my husband lost a lot of money after being conned by an old friend. That friend was arrested, but we never got the money back... Timm said he'd help make money for the family. It was quite popular at the time amongst the youngsters of Alhyura to take the adventurers exam to try and get their skills noticed. I think people told Timm good things."

"Were you opposed?" asked Lushera.

"Of course I was! Both me and my husband were completely against it. We told him, if he wanted to help, he just needed to lend us a hand in the shop, he didn't need to gamble on a dangerous and unstable job like adventuring!"

There were many people who talked about adventuring with a certain sort of adoration, and there were many people who yearned for adventure. It was the name of the job, after all. The best of the adventurers did earn riches. They were heroes.

But it was also said to be a job for those who had nothing to offer beyond their strength, a job where you took disproportionate risks for some cash in hand now, a job that had no future once you grew old and your skills faded. There was some truth to all of that. Many parents would be against their child making a career of that if they were aware.

"Timm brought all sorts of things to convince us," said Mira. "He told us the average income for a fully established, full-time adventurer, told us that there was a low death rate for adventurers who did jobs that aligned with the Guild's threat level system... In the end, he even brought his adventuring director to come and convince us. He wore us down."

She didn't sound worn down though. There was admiration in her voice.

"You thought of Timm die?" asked Kaphal.

"Of course I thought about that! Even now, there'll be moments where it just hits me, and I worry about him... Even if no one else is worrying, a parent has to worry about their son. The fact that he chose adventuring for his job means that if something goes wrong...he dies. I can never know what'll happen."

Timm was the leader of the top party in Kugut'hulm. The simple phrase, "the strongest adventurer," could mean a lot of different things, but he was without a doubt one of the strongest adventurers in the kingdom of Setrayu. Just like with any master of martial arts, long years of training and battle experience had strengthened the flow of magic through his body, giving him superhuman power.

But even so. Mira said it wasn't just before he became an adventurer that she worried about him, she still did even now. This wasn't a matter of worrying before because he had been weak or not needing to worry now because he was strong.

"If Timm had listened to me and given up on becoming an adventurer... nothing would have happened," said Mira. "He's saved so many people. As much as I hate to admit it, he saved us too."

Worry. Mira spoke of her worry for him, but how even with that worry, she approved of Timm walking the path of an adventurer.

"You know," she continued, "when your child talks about their crazy dreams, it's a normal part of parental love to grieve. But there's hope in the fact that children want to do what their parents never even imagined for them. It's normal for parents and children to have different ways of thinking, to be able to do different things. You don't always just dote on them... Haha, actually, I want to tell him how good a job he did making his case back then," she said happily then drained the glass of iced tea she hadn't touched yet.

Mira had the composed dignity of a mother. Lushera and Kaphal couldn't help admiring her. Lushera had never been a parent, and Mira was far more experienced in that department than Kaphal, despite Kaphal's 200 years of life.

At one point, Timm stood up and promised to save the family he loved. He convinced Mira, who was opposed. Children... They weren't just copies of their

parents. They sometimes disagreed.

Lushera would be surprised if Kaphal developed the sort of understanding Mira had. Timm was able to convince his mother because he'd won over her faith in him. Lushera wanted that trust from Kaphal. When there was trouble, she didn't want Kaphal to do all the protecting. She wanted them to stand side by side. But if their opponents were dragons far more powerful than Kaphal herself...then Lushera didn't know what could possibly convince Kaphal to give Lushera that level of trust.

"That's...incredible. I have no other words. It's just incredible," said Lushera, expressing her honest emotions without going into the details of her own situation. Both Timm and Mira were incredible.

"You think so? ...I'll make some more tea," said Mira. Just as she stood up, a chime rang at the door. "Oh, what's that?"

"I'll get it!" Lushera waved Mira back and ran to the door. Anyone coming to visit them would almost certainly have business with the party itself, meaning this was a job for their manager.

Lushera looked through the peephole (needing to stand on her tiptoes to do so) and saw a messenger boy in uniform.

"I have a message addressed to a Miss Lushera at this address," he announced.

"For me...?"

She opened the door, and he passed her a folded message card. This wasn't something sent through a communication office, it had been left directly with the hotel's management.

"I wish to speak with you, if you would do me the pleasure of joining me in the café on the first floor. Signed, Julian Angus."

Lushera's blood went cold the moment she read the name.



WHILE the hotel the Golden Helm were staying in rented out suites containing everything their guests would need for their day-to-day lives, it also had an area

with shops selling various items of general need, providing clothes washing services, and serving food in a café. That café offered somewhat large portions of food and even served alcohol depending on the time.

They must have hired a dwarf with a modern styling sense to design the place, because the tables and chairs were all sleek and undecorated, creating a pure white and uncomplicated space. One wall was fully glass, overlooking a garden and water feature meant to resemble the royal gardens. Even Lushera thought it looked like an accurate representation, and she had just come back not long ago from seeing the real thing, nearly ten times the size.

“Good evening, and my apologies for disturbing you,” said Julian. He was a gallant-looking man in his mid-twenties, and he brought only one guard with him to this café, though there were few other customers.

He was tall, and his brisk movements implied that he was a warrior. His top was a white so pure it could nearly blind you, accented with an abundance of decorative buttons. Lushera was aware this was the current popular fashion with Martgarz’s upper class. Despite the hot and humid weather of Setrayu at this time of year, he wore a scarf-like cloak wrapped around his neck.

He greeted her casually. “You must be Lushera. I am Julian Angus.” He gave her a soft smile.

This was the son of the marquess who attacked Mount Kugus with Gemmel as his guide.

Ivar guessed Julian had come to Setrayu to apologize, but it seemed impossible for Lushera not to be wary of him. Though, she doubted he would try anything in a place like this, and Lushera had no intention of causing a scene.

“How do you know who I am?” she asked.

“Is there something odd about that?”

“Well...”

“The adventurers my father hired spoke of you.”

Those bastards... thought Lushera. The faces of her once-upon-a-time companions flitted through her mind, along with emotions she couldn’t hold

back.

"I have heard you are the adopted daughter of the red dragon of Mount Kugus. Is that true?" asked Julian.

"...It is." She didn't feel any need to deny something he already knew, when he clearly said it like he was just confirming.

Julian let out a sigh, a look of sorrow on his face. "Then I must apologize to you."

"Uh, what? Oh."

"I am ashamed of my father's actions. I hope that you can forgive me for his mistakes," he said, then placed a hand on his chest and lowered his head.

It was a pure apology, no excuses, simply offering himself up. Lushera both expected an apology like that and was completely surprised by it.

Reputation was the tool of trade for a royal or noble. Their apologies carried weight, but he seemed to have nothing against making this gesture. There was no hesitation. It was like he cared nothing for what he gave up in doing so, or... perhaps he had nothing left to give up.

"You came all the way here just to say that?" asked Lushera.

"Yes. I know words are not enough to compensate for what was done, but, even so, I wanted to say them. I want an everlasting peace. I hope that we can be good neighbors for eternity to Setrayu and Mount Kugus."

"That...is exactly what I pray for."

Julian smiled and held out his hand. His attitude felt as sincere as his words.

Lushera reflexively took his hand and shook it.

That handshake... Something felt wrong.

Julian shook his hand entirely at his own rate, making no effort to adjust for Lushera.

That was it. It was a tiny thing, but not something Lushera overlooked. Lushera did look like a child, but she didn't sense any consideration for that fact from Julian, even on an unconscious level.

Perhaps it was the intuition of a manager used to negotiating with requesters, but Lushera couldn't help thinking that this man was thinking of no one but himself.

That gentle demeanor, the heartfelt apology... If that was all just the façade, an act, then what was the emptiness that filled him?

"I'd rather not draw too much attention, so if you would excuse me, I believe I should be going," he said. "I hope we may meet again."

With that classy display of etiquette, he departed, Lushera left watching him go in half shock.



JULIAN smiled quietly to himself in the carriage on the way back from the hotel, no one seeing.

"How do you know who I am?" Hah. She knows nothing. How could she? If she did, she would have told the king of Setrayu long ago.

Even with the route over Mount Kugus closed, the Angus Marquessate was responsible for guarding against Setrayu.

There were those in Setrayu who cooperated with the Marquess, and he had spies in place. Even if he didn't see everything that happened in the kingdom, he had a general idea of what the court was doing.

Plans had already been laid for Monica's jaunt out a week in advance, and Julian got his hands on that information. He planned his own travels in tandem with her trip.

Her guard was exactly as the information he obtained in advance implied, a limited retinue at best. She wasn't given any particularly large guard despite being the daughter of a high-ranking public figure and carrying the blood of the dracovitae users, since Setrayu was safe inside the country (it was more common for dracovitae users to be targeted by internal threats than external ones).

Actually, there would be many who felt relieved if Monica, the cause of the scandal, were to disappear.

And yet, Julian's plan to use a golem to capture Monica failed. The Golden Helm, which Lushera was a member of, was supposed to travel directly south from Kugut'hulm to Alhyura, but she at some point circled around to the northeast side of the capital and prevented his attack (he later learned that she ran there on foot, as hard to believe as that method of transportation was).

He suspected someone leaked the information, but he'd only informed a scarce few people in his circle of the plan.

When planning a secret plot, information was less likely to slip out the fewer people you had involved. He used items and a golem that he personally had on hand and didn't even feel the need to consult others about his plan. And he was the one who carried out the attack himself. Where could the information possibly leak from?

The moment his plan failed, he set about gathering information, at which point he learned that the royal court only prepared a guard to meet Lushera once they received a report from the Guild. He confirmed just now that, not only did the court know nothing about this plan, Lushera herself didn't seem to either. If she had, she likely would have contacted the court directly, and they would have acted faster, so it wasn't unexpected that she knew nothing.

Which meant Lushera hadn't planned to interfere with his attack. It was unfortunate, but he could continue with his plan since it hadn't been revealed. He just had to change it slightly.

Everything will fall into my hands. There will not be another misfortune like that one.

Julian even knew Lushera would be staying in this hotel before she arrived in the capital. There was little he didn't see, and little he didn't believe to be out of his control.



THOUGH, to be entirely accurate, it wasn't a complete coincidence that Lushera happened to be there at the scene of Julian's attack.

Ivar chose to stay in the same inn that Julian had during his travels so that he could gather information on Julian. He asked Lushera to meet him there, and

then they traveled on to Alhyura, so it was only natural they would take the same path as Julian. However, it remained true that neither Lushera nor Ivar had any intentions of running into the attack.

There was no questioning the fact that Julian was extraordinary, but he had several personality flaws. One of those was that he was convinced he was the smartest person in the world, and he never considered the possibility that there was someone who could be equally or more intelligent than him.

Chapter 4: The Raging Hurricane

SOME time had passed since Julian left.

“Lushera, guest, what happen?”

“Mom...?”

Kaphal had come down to check on Lushera, who was sitting alone in the café thinking about what had just happened.

“Everyone came back,” said Kaphal.

“Oh... I should probably tell them all then.” She gave up on running it through her mind anymore. She wasn’t going to get anywhere on her own.

The biggest impression that was left on her from meeting Julian wasn’t that he was threatening, or an uncertain factor, it was just that something seemed... odd. Like something didn’t add up. A queasy feeling took root in her chest, like she was getting motion sickness in a carriage.

She had thought there was a chance everything was just going to work out, even when accounting for optimistic hope in the equation, but seeing Julian erased any hope of that. There was an air about him that made Lushera feel she should be ready to expect anything from him.

She knew they were prepared for the worst possible situation, but she was surprised to find how heavily this weighed on her. It looked now that in the end, the paths of fate would diverge depending on whether or not she could win the support of the dragons.

Her resolve was firm; she wouldn’t retreat even one step, but there was a limit to what resolve and optimism could compensate for. Managers often had the mindset that they were the ones to guide those adventurers who had a tendency to solve problems with sheer willpower.

Being stubborn wasn’t really in Lushera’s nature. Especially after having her

spirits doused this many times. There was also the huge difference in power between her and real dragons, whose mere existence was a matter of fact. Then there was her ridi-quest (adventuring slang for a ridiculously difficult request that went beyond your capabilities), as well as the weight on her shoulders from knowing everything depended on that same ridi-quest.

But she couldn't give up, so she had to come up with some way of winning.

"Wait, Lushera," said Kaphal, then she went right up to the café's counter.

She came back, her hands hidden behind her, then she pulled them out in a big reveal. In each hand she held a cone of some baked treat filled with a creamy paste, one of them bright red.

"Good job," said Kaphal.

"That's...ice cream? Right?" She was surprised to see that here.

Kaphal smiled happily. "I ate when Lushera go castle. It yummy."

Lushera took one of the artistically decorated ice cream cones. It felt nice and cool. "Thank you..." She looked at the small treat in her hand, her mind going back to the life she'd led.

How long has it been since I've had ice cream? Even before I became Lushera, I hadn't eaten it in a while... I was frantic just trying to keep up with working and living. And I needed every penny for Giselle, I couldn't bring myself to waste it on anything I didn't need...

She licked off some of the ice cream.

"It's sweet..."

It was really cold, but the sweetness spread through her. There were dried tart raspberries and their juice mixed in, making a flavor that gripped her chest.

"Human children ate this. Look yummy. I ask what is it," said Kaphal.

"Oh, really?"

"It yummy?"

"Yeah, it's really good."

Kaphal bit into her ice cream, a deep green color. If you described her

positively, you might say she ate with gusto. If you were going for something more negative, you might say she ate with bad manners. And if you wanted something more neutral and analytical, well, you'd just say she ate like a dragon. There was something funny about the sight though, since she was laying into ice cream, not freshly killed prey.

"Lushera smiled," she said.

"Hmph..." Lushera smiled even more as Kaphal stroked her cheek so vigorously she smushed her face about, tickling her. "Do dragons also give their children gifts to cheer them up?" she asked.

"No really. Dragons have few things. No cook much. This human way. Not just humans...humanoid people?"

"Probably, yeah."

"I learn this way, make Lushera smile."

Lushera nearly cried hearing that, knowing that was the unvarnished, honest truth.

No matter how much she struggled, Kaphal was a dragon and she refused to be anything else. But she studied humanity, learning more tools for communication. She likely did that for Lushera, and only Lushera. That was why she started studying her language, and why she learned to create this fragment form.

"I'm no match..." muttered Lushera. It wasn't just in terms of strength. She realized now how tremendous mothers were.

Lushera made a vow to stand by Kaphal as her daughter. How should she do that?

She couldn't see the future, but it was likely she would never be equal to the dragons. While children may someday grow into adults, Lushera would never grow into a dragon. But that didn't mean she couldn't learn from Kaphal.

"Hey, let's talk in Draconic," Lushera suggested.

"Hm? But no ring..."

"I don't have it, but I feel like I got an idea of how to do it when I was speaking

it with the ring. I think I can do it.”

“*Okay, I will. But why xxxx?*” Even if she did seem confused by the sudden request, Kaphal switched to Draconic.

A torrent of multi-layered meaning crashed into Lushera, all held into short, animalistic sounds. *Great! I got about half of that!*

Giselle’s Ring, the magic item that gave its wearer the ability to speak Draconic, was currently with the royal court. When she used that, Lushera knew how to use the language, almost like the knowledge came to her as a divine revelation from the heavens. Or like she had a dictionary and grammar guide that she could always flip to the exact page she wanted.

She didn’t have that now, but having the experience of speaking it once was a huge step forward. Both processing and speaking Draconic was outside what was normal for languages, but she could lean on her experience of having used it before.

If she was going to be Kaphal’s equal, she first needed to learn Draconic. It came down to her feelings in the end. It seemed shameful of her to refuse to budge, getting by with what they already had.

“No real reason,” answered Lushera. “I’ve just been thinking lately I should try. Hm. How do I say it...? Ah... Uu... Ooh...”

“*Xxxx difficult. It xxx that xxxx not xx humanoid languages.*”

Just imitating the sounds was nothing more than as if they were speaking a humanoid language. It used a form of compressed speech similar to the incantation for a spell in order to layer the meaning into the sound. It had much more utility but was also far more difficult.

“...*Mom?*” Lushera finally managed to say, and Kaphal’s eyes shone as bright as huge glittering gems.

“*So good! That xx so good, Lushera! Xxxx a genius?!*”

“Aaah, haha.”

With her ice cream still in one hand, Kaphal used her free hand to pull Lushera into a hug so she could nuzzle her face against her. Still holding Lushera, she sat

in a chair and pulled her onto her lap. Lushera just went along with it.

"This xx tea xxxx. It's xxxx, but good. XXXX to try?" She held out the cone, a quarter of it already gone from the one bite she took earlier.

Lushera licked the opposite side when Kaphal offered. "It's an odd flavor... Bitter, but sweet. I never realized tea ice cream would taste like that."

"Lushera, there's xx on your cheek."

"Really?"

"Don't move."

Lushera felt Kaphal's warm chest press against her back as she leaned over, looking at her face while she was still in her lap. Then, with a quick peck, she licked Lushera's cheek.

"Ah!"

"Got it."

Lushera nearly jumped up from shock from getting licked out of nowhere. "M-Mom, I told you before, humans don't really do that..."

"Xx saw xx human parent xx to xxxx child."

"Y-You saw a real example...? I-I guess there are some people who do it..."

Kaphal was full of confidence since she saw humans doing the same thing and decided it meant it was fine. She wasn't wrong, but Lushera wanted to add lots of additional explanations, like it really depends on the situation, and it's embarrassing to do it in front of other people.

But it was the sort of thing that you learned through feel. It was a bit too early in Kaphal's learning to expect her to know the finer points of these things, and Lushera didn't want to tell her it was never okay.

"Sigh..."

"Are you mad? Do you xxxx?"

"I'm not mad, and I don't hate it." Lushera pouted and looked the other way. She didn't hate it. Really.

Dragons probably didn't go around licking just anyone. If she were being honest, Lushera would say she could feel Kaphal's love in the action. She was able to do something like that so easily because she cared for Lushera. Thinking of it that way gave her a tickly feeling, like butterflies in her stomach.

She just didn't want anyone she knew to see it. Especially if it was someone who knew her before she was Lushera.

"So... I came 'cause there's something I wanted to talk to ya 'bout..." came a voice from a man in a suit with slicked-back hair, standing idly nearby.

Lushera froze, her heart racing.

"Never thought you'd make that face," he said.

"Wait."

"Sorry for interrupting your family moment."

"Wait."

"I mean, I know people adapt themselves to the situation, but..."

"Don't abandon me!" Lushera cried, her shout echoing futilely through the café.



IVAR must have seen his iced coffee as nothing more than fuel for his brain, because he downed it so quickly that there was no way he could savor it.

"Huh, so he came to see you...?" he said with a grim expression once Lushera told him about her encounter with Julian.

On the surface, Julian was entirely friendly. But there was something disconcerting about the whole thing. Even Ivar, who only heard about it through Lushera, felt there was something off.

"He said he wishes for peace, or something to that effect. I don't know what he really wants, though," said Lushera.

"Well. Even if there was a temporary peace, Martgarz would absolutely come after Setrayu if they saw the chance. Politics is knowin' that, knowin' peace is temporary, and still saying it's gonna last forever."

True. Even if it was a temporary peace filled with lies, it was politics that made that possible and tried to keep it alive.

But even so. Was it really okay to label that emptiness with a word as vague as “politics”?

It just...was something Lushera felt through actually meeting the man, just a vague impression she had a hard time putting into words. She didn’t feel comfortable about it. Not one bit.

“I went to see an old friend today,” said Ivar. “They didn’t seem to be up to much, to be honest. If Julian’s feeling like attacking Mount Kugus soon, he’s got to figure out how ready Setrayu would be for it, but I didn’t get the impression that’s really going on. Maybe Julian’s just not taking this whole war thing seriously.” Despite what he said, his expression was grim. He didn’t seem sure if he could simply take in that information at face value.

“What kind of person is he, Julian Angus?” Lushera asked.

“Not sure ‘bout his skill in politics, but rumor has it he’s pretty sharp. Honestly, I don’t like him one bit. Whispers say he’s the kind who doesn’t think ‘bout anyone else when he’s putting a plan into action. Maybe he really is smart, but that makes him think everyone around him’s an idiot.”

Lushera thought back to her conversation with Julian and didn’t find anything to refute Ivar’s evaluation.

“I don’t know much more than that,” he continued. “He hasn’t been on the main stage for long, after all. Normally, a lord’s eldest son would be out and about getting political experience long before this.”

Lushera shook her head slightly. “No, that’s still plenty. Thank you.”

It would be nice if, just as Julian said, he accomplished a peaceful resolution with Setrayu, which would mean Lushera wouldn’t have to interact again with the somewhat disturbing man.

“By the way, the girl that was attacked—” started Ivar.

“Lady Monica, right? I heard.”

“You heard? Huh... I know it was a big deal, but I never expected to get that

information without looking for it. Who, why, why now? I'm working on getting that information for now."

"Any clues on where the golem came from?" she asked.

"Nothing yet. They've analyzed it, but..." Ivar let out an annoyed, pained sigh and bit into his ice cream cone. "The Guild had the golem's remains for a bit, but then the court swooped in and took it. They probably want to keep the situation under their control. Then they could decide to make it public or not, depending on who it was that did it. I mean, since the Guild doesn't interfere with politics, they couldn't really say no to the court when they said they needed it to investigate an assassination attempt. But, no offense to the court, but the Guild'd be able to find the truth faster."

"Hm... Yeah..."

"Obviously the Guild kept records of what they got, so they're still looking into it from there. I'll let you know the moment I hear something."

"Thank you. If you need to, you can use my name," Lushera told him.

"Sure, 'preciate it. My name isn't as effective as the name of one of the members of the top adventuring party in the kingdom, since my adventuring license is just for show basically."

In reality, Lushera and Ivar were both involved with the incident, meaning they had a right to receive information on it from the Guild. And if that didn't work, Ivar would get the information from somewhere. Lushera was just giving him some extra fodder in case he needed it.

The rest was just waiting for information. Not even draconic power worked on specialized analysis that required expert knowledge. Their only option was to leave it with the appropriate authorities.

"Anyway, before all that, you've got your meeting with the King," said Ivar.

"Yeah. To be honest... I'm really nervous."

"I've got some interesting information on that too."

"I'm definitely buying that." Lushera passed him a gold coin, which he casually slipped into his pocket.

"The court found a Draconic interpreter. He can't speak it though, only understand it."

"Really? So, he'll act as a scribe and record it? Well, we probably don't know that. He could possibly do one-way interpreting for anyone sitting in on the meeting."

"Exactly. This means you're in effect meeting with more than just the King now."

Lushera could think of several ways the other side could use that.

While the King was the person of highest authority in the country, he likely listened to the opinions of his lords when making any important decisions. If the format involved the King only gathering the lords' opinions in advance, then meeting one-on-one with Kaphal to hammer things out, they could still come to a decision even if he couldn't meet all the lords' demands. He would just have to smooth their ruffled feathers after the fact. But if they were able to have their say during the meeting, Kaphal and Lushera would have to deal with as many demands as there were people, and that made things more difficult.

Tomorrow, the King, wearing the ring, would speak with Kaphal and decide the fate of Mount Kugus. Even if Kaphal was the one leading this, Lushera was ready to step in if she needed to. She only had a superficial understanding of Draconic, but as long as she could pick up the words, she could assist Kaphal.

"Do you know what kind of person the king of Setrayu is?" asked Lushera. This information would affect the battle.

Adventurers survived jobs by investigating what monsters might make an appearance, determining what they're likely to do, and coming up with a countermeasure. It was the same when it came to negotiating with people.

"He's got a reputation for being kind and gentle, but that's a trap, he'll catch you up. Don't let your guard down, even if he comes off as the kindly neighbor you might see anywhere."

"I won't."

She steeled her resolve. Nervousness comes hand in hand with the drive to carry out your mission. She definitely had more experience with negotiations

than Kaphal did, and she knew she'd have to protect Kaphal if it came down to it.

Ivar looked at her with a not-entirely pleasant expression and sighed. "You seriously look different from when your mom was fussing over you just now."

"She was not fussing over me! She just went and did it..."

"By the way, what does Mom think?" he asked.

Kaphal had actually never let go of Lushera, so this entire conversation took place with her still in Kaphal's lap. "Lushera cool and cute!" said Kaphal.

"Uh-huh..." said Ivar.

"Ugh..." groaned Lushera.

Kaphal seemed unable to hold back her happiness at how hard Lushera was working for her. She nuzzled against Lushera from behind, and Lushera just let her.



THE day of the meeting, the castle's courtyard was turned into what looked like the headquarters of a military encampment out in the fields.

A cloth wall of pure white with a blue line marked the boundaries of the camp, obscuring the surrounding buildings. This cloth wall was a magic item imbued with the ability to repel arrows and spells, but it was used only for appearances right now. An impressive cast of nobles in fancy, colorful clothing sat outside that line, though Lushera only knew their titles.

In front of them, further into the encampment, sat the king of Setrayu, even his chair resplendent despite being for outdoor use. He looked to be in his late forties. He had dark brown, nearly black, heavily textured hair, styled short and neat, flowing, resplendent clothing, and a cape with a vivid motif that resembled rushing water.

Lushera's first impression was that he seemed...interesting. He somewhat lacked the majesty she imagined a king to have. But he wore a crown, carried a royal scepter in hand, and sat with a dignity suited to the role. This would all be habit to him, drilled in as training from the moment he was born as the next in

the line for the throne, and polished through fifteen years of experience in that chair.

Lushera sat on the opposite side of this “meeting room” set up in the courtyard, meaning she could meet the King’s gaze as much as she wanted. But she wasn’t the main act today.

The sky was cloudy, not that they had planned that.

A light flashed in the clouds.

“What is that...?” asked one noble, as the crowd looked up.

The clouds burned, a hole opening so high in the heavens that no human could reach it. Flames consumed those clouds, tearing through them, then a shooting star plummeted from the hole.

Quivering cries of fear rose.

The fire rushed towards the ground, where the onlookers assumed it would explode. But it didn’t. It gently split in the air, around the height of the palace’s roofs, and formed in a humanoid figure.

The cries turned to gasps of awe.

Her hair was the color of raging fire, her dress like flickering flames, her elegant, unblemished skin without a single imperfection, as you would expect from something created.

She was tall, if you were using human women as a comparison, and her body had the artistic curves of a masterwork statue. Her features had a wild dignity, entirely unspoiled by the mundane world, sublimely beautiful and noble. Her expression and aura were both so different from when she doted on Lushera that she nearly screamed “Who are you?” inside her head as she looked up at the woman from the ground.

The woman descended to the center of the meeting area, wreathed in fire. She held her hand over the ground, and it warped, rising into a throne that looked sculpted from cooled lava. It was made from a spell that manipulated earth.

“Human king,” she said. “Xxx one thing I wish to make clear from xxxx. My

language does not conceal xxxx, xxx hides even less when used by someone xxxx not used to using it.”

There hadn't been much time to practice, but Lushera got Kaphal to speak only in Draconic with her so she could practice listening to it. Her mind had a hard time keeping up with processing it, since there was just so much information, but she could guess at the words she didn't know if she focused on reading the nuance. She understood it to a certain degree.

She knew that she had more experience negotiating with people than Kaphal did and she came to this meeting prepared to step in if she needed to.

“I see. How wonderful xxxx speak without concealing a xx thing,” said the King with a gentle smile in response to Kaphal's first barrage. Then, in a resounding voice, he said, *“I am Lazlo Calisto Riett Setrayu, King of Setrayu. I am overjoyed to see this day arrive.”*

“I am Kaphal. I am daughter of Shurei, leader and xx of the Flight of Mount Bermarl, and Corya, she who knows xxxx. I am she who lives on Mount Kugus.”

Lazlo stood and walked to the center point between the two thrones. Kaphal remained seated.



"...My apologies," he said. "In times like this, humans often shake xxxx as a sign of xxxx. Perhaps that xxxx doesn't suit dragons. In that case—"

"Actually," said Kaphal, standing as well. "You are human, and I am in human form. Perhaps it would be appropriate to follow human xxxx here. I just...am not familiar with xxxx things."

She walked forward as well and the two shook hands.

It wasn't just Lushera watching them as they did, every person there had their eyes glued on them.

As expected, there was also one man focused on writing. It was normal for a scribe to be present during meetings between important figures to record everything that was said, but no normal person could do that when the conversation took place in Draconic.

Once done with a sheet, he lined it up on the table with a paperweight holding it in place so it was easily read by others. With the courtyard surrounded by buildings like this, anyone at a third-floor window with magic binoculars could read the notes.

There were also several spells that let someone throw their voice. Someone would be telling the nobles sitting in rows outside the encampment what Kaphal and the King said. Then, if there was any profitable point they thought the King should focus on, they would give him some sort of signal.

Lushera was honestly impressed by how seriously they handled this. You could argue they sprang this situation on Kaphal and Lushera, but it wasn't so far as to call foul on what was expected of them. Lushera was there though to call foul if she needed to.

"I assume you heard there were xxxx in my garden," said Kaphal.

"I am aware."

"Who is right and who is wrong is something that belongs in human xxxx. It has nothing to do with me. What I want is to keep these foolish xxxx from entering my mountain."

They weren't rude to each other, but neither did they humble themselves.

Draconic expressed a lot of nuance at once, but neither Lazlo nor Kaphal were arrogant. They were simply entirely confident and composed.

"I believe you and I want very similar things. What do you think?" asked Kaphal.

"Hm. I agree. I imagine Martgarz will xxxx Mount Kugus, then xxxx to attack Setrayu. Xx, it is a xxxx speculation at this point, since Setrayu has never crossed swords with Martgarz before."

"...That is a xxxx word. Is that what you humans call xxxx?"

A lie. Setrayu supported the Guffarr Union in their war against Martgarz. Martgarz wanted to cross the mountains in order to confront Setrayu because of that. The two countries clearly did not have a peaceful relationship. But it was politics that kept them smiling and shaking hands until something decisive happened. That was better for their countries. And, behind that façade, they prepared themselves against their imaginary enemy.

"Setrayu is small, while Martgarz is vast," said Lazlo. *"Which means we must xxxx. If they xxxx Mount Kugus, we will find ourselves xxxx with teeth at xxxx. I therefore want to prevent their soldiers from entering Mount Kugus. I believe that benefits us both."* Lazlo, back to sitting with dignity, leaned forward slightly. *"And if that is the case...I wish to put my soldiers on the mountain before Martgarz does."*

They finally got to the main point.

If Julian's visit did ease tensions, then Setrayu wouldn't be able to do a large-scale mobilization of their forces until tensions rose again. There were human and economic costs involved in deploying their forces, and Setrayu wouldn't want to needlessly endanger the relationship between the countries by doing so.

They should however be able to come up with some reason for creating a defense base for protecting the kingdom's border. If they also worked with Kaphal, they could spend time building up experience until they were able to fully implement their power if the need ever arose.

Cooperate and build a defense... That was what both Setrayu and Kaphal

wanted. The problem was how it was done.

They must set up an appropriate level of cooperation. In the end, Kaphal (and Lushera) just wanted to live on Mount Kugus in peace. It was paramount that they avoided being forced to work with Setrayu more than that, so they weren't at its beck and call. Lazlo surely knew that, which was why he carefully suggested it after the long, roundabout introduction.

"Queen of Mount Kugus. You have your own soldiers, the monsters, on the mountain. If they fight alongside my soldiers and knights, we surely can repel any xxxx."

"I agree... If you are xxxx, then I will xxxx humans to enter my mountain."

"There is one other thing. I must again xxxx to the human world that Mount Kugus belongs to Setrayu. This is a xxxx from before you came to live on the mountain. I hope you understand."

Lushera couldn't see Kaphal's expression since she was sitting behind her, but she imagined she was scowling based on what was said next.

"Xxxx. Isn't it clear in the eyes of humans that the mountain is mine? I have no intention of handing it over."

"Xx, I completely agree. But we need a reason to fight. If we stake a claim on Mount Kugus, it gives us a reason to fight the xxxx. That's all this is. I don't believe it will change anything. We have no xxxx to xxxx you from the mountain." There was something threatening in Lazlo's words.

Lushera thought, *That...is the sort of thing that even when said in a humanoid language you would guess had some sort of hidden meaning, but in Draconic it's so obvious to see there's an ulterior motive!*

Taking the mountain back from Kaphal wasn't realistic, since the only way to do that would be to eliminate her, which would also eliminate the possibility of turning Mount Kugus into a bulwark against Martgarz, which was the whole point.

But, if they could go on the mountain, it meant they could use the mountain to some extent. What if they could establish their right to benefit from the mountain as a predetermined fact, making it essentially Setrayu's property?

Then they could reap the rewards of having the mountain without actually stealing it back. That was the ulterior motive Lushera saw in Lazlo's words.

Was putting that in a slip-up? Or...could he possibly have done it on purpose?

A country's leader was the representative for the country's interests, and Lazlo was no one to be trifled with, being capable of staying relaxed while giving a response like that to a dragon glaring directly at him. Not to mention the fact that, despite being unaccustomed to speaking in Draconic, he made good use of the fact that he couldn't hide anything to instead shake his opponent up with unreserved openness. Such is the man who leads an entire country.

Lushera noticed the nobles behind Lazlo shifting in odd ways. They must be using magic items or more mundane means to send him signals of some sort.

Kaphal waited in silence for a moment. Lushera could feel heat coiling almost like a slithering snake.

"...Fine," she finally said. "But I will not xxxx your soldiers destroying my garden. Keep them in check. Your soldiers' actions are your actions."

"Of course."

"And human xxxx has no power on my mountain. Any who enter the mountain will abide by my xxxx. If I say they leave, they leave. If I say they die, they die."

"But..." Lazlo's expression turned sharp and tense.

The scribe was taken aback for a moment but recovered himself quickly. He wrote down what was said, then, a moment later, the nobles behind Lazlo looked shocked. They must really have been getting the content of what was said secretly relayed to them and were unable to hide their reaction.

It was almost funny how obviously the nobles squirmed. They must be telling the King they couldn't accept what was said.

Kaphal's statement was that she would respond with force if humans used their wiles to pull cheap tricks on her. Depending on the situation, you could interpret this as a threat or an attempt to keep the other person in check, but not even Lazlo could agree to something like that.

"I must ask that you xxxx life and death to xxxx. Even if there is a xxxx reason,

my soldiers will not respond well to others being killed.”

“Did I say something odd? If my mountain is taken from me, I cannot live. That is no different from my death. If my life is xxxx, then what is wrong in asking the lives of your people to xxx?”

“That is not what I mean. There has to be a process for xxxx. I understand what you say about xxxx, but please understand our human situation.” His voice was almost pleading. *“A king cannot change what his people feel with an order. Even if there is someone who xxxx a crime, the people will xxxx angry if there is no xxxx trial. If that happens, the kingdom will xxxx, and we will be unable to defend the mountain. Some may even target you because of it.”*

Crimes must be met with appropriate punishments. That was what human society claimed. It was also one piece of humanity’s wisdom that was necessary for creating and growing a society that could be considered the barest minimum of fairness.

Kaphal was saying she would destroy that with violence. That seemed somewhat extreme as a counter to their attempt to sort out the issue regarding the claim on the mountain.

But Kaphal remained unfazed. *“If xxxx come for me, I will strike down all xxxx with my own claws until I am unable to xxxx. Even if that results in xxxx for your human kingdom, it is of no xxxx of mine.”*

Even Lushera was shocked by that. The nobles went beyond merely shaken, to being struck dumbfounded.

Lushera wouldn’t be surprised if anyone took Kaphal’s statement as an implication that she had no intention of negotiating. They might wonder if this was an attempt to push the other side off guard, or just simple stupidity. It was neither, though.

“Humanoids and dragons... We live for different times, and we must hold on to different things...” It didn’t take much for a human to die, or their kingdoms to fall, but dragons had power and long lives, and the will and confidence to continue living. That was why dragons were focused on a point far in the future. *“If you intend to take advantage of my weakness, king of humans, then let me warn you. I am here. And I am also on Mount Kugus. It is as simple as that.*

There is no difference between the humans on the other side of the mountain, and the humans on this side. If any xxxx mishandle the xxxx of flame, they will be burned. That is all there is to it. They may suffer more than just burns in my case, but...I will be lenient to those who xxx me."

She spoke quietly, yet clearly.

Her stance was so firm nothing could be done to change it, but the words she spoke in Draconic were filled with the will of a loving and protective mother. Protecting the place where she lived with Lushera...was the same as protecting Lushera.

Lushera felt the heat of a raging fire, and a jolt like lightning ran down her spine.

A firmness, refusing to be swayed by immediate gain. Bravery, no fear of death. The knowledge that this is what she is, and the supreme will to carry it through. All of those overwhelming intentions were layered into her words.

Lushera glanced at the scribe and noticed even he looked extremely moved, his mouth hanging open as he listened to Kaphal. It showed a reverence towards a way of being humans could never be, a feeling that struck like a bolt of lightning or a great wave.

Humans built walls to fend off the wind, but they could never stop the gale.

Humans built waterwheels to harness water, but they could never reason with the tide.

Humans sometimes defeated a dragon, but they could never make the dragon submit to their whims.

This...this is a dragon!

She was sometimes mischievous, sometimes a little ditzy. Sometimes she didn't act as smart as usual when it came to Lushera, but Kaphal was still a dragon. Lushera was forced to face the fact that you could not underestimate her. She didn't need to step in for Kaphal. Negotiation tricks and knowledge of humanity wouldn't accomplish anything here.

At that moment, Lushera saw what a dragon truly was.



THEY were back in the gazebo in the castle gardens that Lushera had visited the day before.

Arranged on the table was a set of beautiful, blue and white porcelain teacups, with jewel-like sweets piled on a three-tier stand.

There were three people there. Or, perhaps it was two people and one dragon. Though, depending on how you looked at it, it could be one person and two dragons.

After their long discussion, Lushera and Kaphal were invited to a “little teatime.” Perhaps it was *little*, if little only referred to the number of people there.

“I do apologize. Even if I am the king, I can’t decide everything on my own. We wouldn’t be able to have a discussion like that if it weren’t done publicly.”

Across from Lushera and Kaphal, the guests, was Lazlo, a little less resplendently dressed than during their meeting a short time ago and preparing his own tea. There weren’t even servants present. There were a few royal guards stationed around the garden, but they stayed far enough away that they couldn’t hear anything said unless one of the tea party attendees raised their voice.

“I’m the only one here now, so, please, relax. And I can finally speak, not as the king of Setrayu, but simply as Lazlo. Oh? There’s only fukretts yuksa tea? It does wonders for your throat but has quite a distinct flavor.”

“Um, i-it’s okay. I can drink it,” said Lushera.

“Well, that’s good.” Lazlo poured the tea with practiced hands, looking nearly ready to start humming.

Even Lushera, who wasn’t familiar with court etiquette, knew this sort of thing wasn’t usual. It was the sort of comportment that could, if done incorrectly, cause significant blowback from the nobles because Lazlo tarnished the kingdom’s authority, but perhaps he decided it was fine to ignore his own circumstances since he was dealing with a dragon.

After all, the tension from not long ago between him and Kaphal had been thick enough to cut with a knife, but he was now interacting with her without a care in the world. This king had courage.

Lushera wasn't so naive as to believe this was truly just teatime shared between normal people, but she did think it could be beneficial to build a relationship with Lazlo here.

"Are you sure it's all right to use our language?" asked Lazlo.

"Yes. Mom, um, Mother can't quite express herself fully, but can understand what is generally said."

"Well then, I suppose I won't hold back. Though, it was a valuable experience speaking in Draconic."

They had already returned Giselle's Ring to Lushera. Lazlo almost sounded like an energetic and curious young boy about his experience using a magic item that gave you language abilities like that. He must have left his dignified and imposing airs back in the changing room.

"Here you are," he said, handing Lushera a cup of tea.

"Th-Thank you..."

"It's a pleasure to share this tea with you."

Lushera hesitantly sipped the tea, handed to her by the King's own hands.

The cup came with a mithril stirring spoon. It was likely a utensil for detecting poison, changing color when it came in contact with any. It was common for the upper class to use mithril testing utensils when dining, but, since the cup itself was porcelain, they had to use a mithril spoon instead of a cup.

Though, both Lushera and Kaphal could likely just digest any poison if something did happen to be laced with it...

The tea was hot, but not scalding, with a strong bitter taste, the sort of thing adults would prefer. It looked like they would follow it with sweets.

Lazlo drank his own tea, watching Kaphal take a sip of hers.

"Lushera, temperature okay?" she asked.

"It's not hot," replied Lushera.

"Okay."

And just like that, Kaphal blew a narrow stream onto Lushera's tea. It wasn't her fire breath, but it was chokingly hot.

The tea in Lushera's cup leaped to a boil.

"When dragons blow on their tea it actually gets hotter?!" cried Lazlo.

"I thought 'not hot' mean 'not hot enough,'" said Kaphal.

"Th-Thank you, Mom..."

"Aha..." Lazlo laughed, unable to hold it in.

Lushera sipped her boiling tea. Any normal person who drank it would get their throat burnt raw, but it was just a little strong for Lushera. It would be an interesting experience to be able to drink this like it was nothing.

"Timm explained much of your circumstances to me, but I have to admit that I am personally rather interested in you two. Would you mind telling me about yourselves?" inquired Lazlo.

"I don't mind at all," said Lushera.

He likely heard most of what there was to know from Timm or through his own investigations through the court, but this was less about gathering or exchanging information, and more about making them feel at ease speaking together.

As asked, Lushera told Lazlo about a number of the unfortunate events that took place in the past year. How she nearly died on the mountain, how she met Kaphal, and everything that led up to this moment.

Lazlo listened intently. Perhaps he learned more details hearing it from the person herself, or perhaps it all sounded more authentic coming from her.

"As it often is, the truth is stranger than fiction... Oh, perhaps that was an inconsiderate way of putting it," said Lazlo.

"No, it's all right. I can barely believe it myself."

Lazlo's reaction seemed genuine. It took several strokes of good luck,

coincidence, and Lushera's decisions to bring her here.

"Oh, I just remembered. I haven't yet thanked you for saving Monica," he said out of the blue.

"Monica... You mean the girl attacked by the golem?" Lushera asked to confirm.

"I do. I'm certain that was her. It seems the knights who went to gather her didn't tell you anything. They aren't able to speak of matters without orders to do so. Please don't think less of them."

Lushera was surprised Lazlo would bring up Monica's name. As far as he was concerned, she wasn't a relative of his. In fact, she was the child born from his wife's adultery.

"Monica, she..." started Lushera.

"Yes, I have...done something unfortunate to her." There was sorrow in his eyes. He looked towards the grand palace on the other side of the gardens. "Many sacrifices are made for a country to operate. Lorraina couldn't bear that. In that sense, Lorraina is a victim too, of a sort. It is also my sin, as the one who bears the kingdom of Setrayu on his shoulders. They are both residents of this country, after all."

Lorraina. That was Monica's mother.

Lushera had been somewhat curious about Monica, so she researched some newspaper articles from when Monica was born. She was disgusted by how much extra information she found. The court scandal was considered a titillating incident that shook this peaceful country, turned into fodder for the masses' entertainment. No wonder everyone knew about Monica.

"I had to marry her for the kingdom's sake. Everyone approved, they celebrated, it should have all ended nicely, but... As things went in the wrong direction, I wonder if I made a mistake," he said with a sigh.

Lorraina, the former queen consort, was chosen by the duke as a pawn for this political marriage because she was the most attuned to the dracovitae. She didn't want to marry the future king, and Lazlo regretted that.

“Would you consider becoming Monica’s friend?” he asked. “This is just a simple, disgraceful request of mine.”

He lowered his head, the head of a king who took his crown off for teatime, his hair only just starting to thin.



THEY went back to their lodging, taken by a royal carriage, where they were welcomed by the aroma of roasting meat and fragrant herbs.

“Congrats on a huge job finished. I’ve pulled out all the stops today, so go ahead and nourish your spirits,” said Viola in her apron and glasses.

“Whoa.”

On the table behind her was an array of exquisite items: a giant freshwater fish, roasted while wrapped in fragrant leaves, another of the same type of fish, browned in a golden sauce, chicken stuffed with cheese, a pot of bright-red stew letting off a spicy aroma, baked pâté made from ground offal of some animal, a leafy salad with chunks of bacon as large as dice, a pie of seasonal fruit...

“I’m more shocked than excited. Viola, you really made all of this?” asked Lushera.

“Timm and Weyne lent a hand.”

“Seriously was just the one hand I lent!” said Timm.

“Viola’s a pro,” said Weyne.

Timm was still lying upside down on the sofa reading a newspaper, while Weyne was maintaining his lock picks, wires, and other thieves’ tools.

“I wasn’t busy today anyway,” said Viola. She must be an insane perfectionist to make all this for no reason other than she wasn’t busy.

Viola had shown Kaphal and Lushera a bit about cooking before, but now Lushera was realizing the menu that day had been selected as something even beginners could handle. And, with how stingy Lushera was, her first thought when she saw the food was to wonder how much it all cost.

"All right, hurry up, before it gets cold," said Viola. "You're back a little later than I expected. Did something come up?"

"I don't think there was any problem with the negotiations themselves. But we had tea afterwards, and then had to wait after that..." Lushera took out a veleted jewelry box, just about small enough to fit in her hands.

"What's this?"

"A present from the king to Lady Monica. He wants me to take it to her."

"Oh?"

After tea, Lushera and Kaphal had to wait for a little bit while this was readied, and then they were sent home with it.

Adventurers were often used to carry things for people of high station, but this gift was likely just an excuse to get Lushera to go see Monica.

"He said...he wants me to be Monica's friend," said Lushera.

"That would be nice! They say adventurers stand outside the normal social order, but they do form connections. I doubt anyone will complain, since it'll be a connection with a dragon." Viola nodded, looking triumphant. "Hey, Lushera. Don't you think sharing a meal with good friends or family is all you need to be happy?" She let out a sigh while looking at the table bursting with food, her eyes focused on something beyond that.

It came out of the blue, knocking Lushera off-balance, but she did feel the same. She wanted normal friends and a family. She understood the happiness of sharing a table with someone.

This huge amount of food set a scene, that it was made with the intention of dividing it up and sharing it with everyone. If all this were for one person...it would be luxurious, but it would also be empty. And they wouldn't be able to finish it.

"Yeah...you're right. I definitely agree," said Lushera.

"Eating alone can be relaxing, though. But anyway...it's just nice having someone to share with. You take it for granted if you have it every day, but it's not something everyone has. Let's reflect on that happiness every once in a

while."

Viola's tone was heartfelt, and there was an unexpected weight to her words.



THERE was a mansion in the high-end district of Alhyura, where lords kept extra homes for when they visited the capital, or where successful merchants lived.

Its name, Willow Mansion, was forgotten long ago. The people of the town had a harsher nickname for it: Prison Mansion. It had once belonged to the family of Duke Foster, father of Lorraina, former Queen Consort, but the court had borrowed it, so it was now jointly managed.

There was only one resident: Monica. Though, it perhaps wasn't appropriate to call her a resident. Her schedule was managed entirely by the court. She couldn't leave of her own will. It was essentially house arrest.

The only other people there were the live-in servants. No one ever visited.

To the Foster family, Monica was a symbol of their betrayal of the court's faith in them. She was a black mark in their history, one they loathed dealing with, and she wasn't even permitted to visit her mother.

The high-ranking nobles had the important duty of maintaining the bloodline of people who could wield the dracovitae through marriage into the royal family, but, whether for better or for worse, the duke's family was not so desperate in their attempts to control the family pedigree that they needed to use Monica.

From the court's perspective, which was essentially from the viewpoint of guiding a country, Monica didn't matter, so long as she didn't go off and have children where she shouldn't—unnecessarily spread the blood of those who could use the dracovitae—it was most likely true that they didn't care if the Fosters took care of the issue themselves. But there was more than one noble who said that wouldn't be enough. The situation wasn't completely disconnected from the troubles surrounding the selection of a marriage partner for (the then) Crown Prince Lazlo.

There was a gentleman's agreement that there would be meetings for

deciding the prince's wife, but the Foster Duchy advanced discussions with the court about this while holding negotiations regarding taxes on the domestic cultivation of green tea, a product that had been imported from overseas (in effect, using those negotiations as a bargaining chip for the marriage discussions). They slipped past the other noble families who had potential candidates for the marriage and forced Lorraina in as the Queen Consort.

As this was a decision made by the former king, Lazlo's father, Lazlo didn't learn of the decision until it was too late to stop it, since the king's public stance was still that the decision would be made at the aforementioned meeting.

In all honesty, considering the various families and political situation of the time, Lorraina would likely have won the position even if the Fosters had followed normal rules of engagement, but that didn't mean the losers liked having the decision made in such a ridiculous way.

Lorraina's indiscretion became fodder for these noble families to attack her image.

When Monica was born, King Lazlo (with little time on the throne) already had a daughter named Francesca with Queen Consort Lorraina, though people began to question whether or not Francesca was also another man's daughter. That was nothing more than an attempt to find fault though, as even those saying it knew it was absurd. Both Lazlo and the Fosters denied the claims.

The result was that, while she did lose her position and title of princess, Francesca was allowed freedom with the Fosters responsible for keeping an eye on her. Monica didn't get that.

She wasn't a child of the king, and she was largely abandoned by her mother's family. Under the name of "controlling the bloodline of dracovitae users," she was put under surveillance and her actions limited to prevent her from interacting with the opposite sex while she was of marriageable age (which was both a vague and very long period).

You could say she was a sacrificial victim meant to neatly tie off this scandal by giving the angry nobles a place to vent their frustration. She was constantly paraded around the capital as a display of the Fosters' mistakes.

Lazlo tried to stand against that, insisting the royal court was above lashing

out like that, and especially when the target was a girl born through no sin of her own! She might not be his own flesh and blood, but he believed this was entirely inappropriate when considering the dignity and humanity their country should have.

But it was bad timing that around then, their ally, the Guffarr Union to the northeast, went to war against the Martgarz Empire on the other side of Mount Kugus.

Setrayu was small. The country might find its ruin if steered incorrectly through the clash of two large countries. The nobles, unable to let go of their anger, pushed back. The international situation worsened. Stirring up trouble domestically at that time over one baby girl would only put all the citizens in danger...

It was a decision a young king had to make when he had only recently ascended the throne, leaving him on unstable ground and with few possible moves.



"SIGH. I'm done. Good job," said Monica, throwing her fork down on the table. It held enough extravagant food to feed ten. No one person could eat all that, but it had been laid for only one.

There were three different types of bread, two soups, river fish meunière in bean sauce, roast pheasant, cakes loaded with fresh whipped cream, and, for some reason, a basket of biscuits bought from the store.

She stood, having not touched most of the food.

The chef stood to the side, looking down, his fists clenched.

"My lady," he said. "I am confident that the food I prepared for you is of the highest quality. What could you possibly find fault with? Please, tell me. If it doesn't suit your taste, I will prepare something that does!"

"I just can't be bothered with eating. And I'd be rather put on the spot if you demand a review of the taste," she said.

She took a single premade biscuit from the basket and left the dining room

with it held in her mouth. Those biscuits were put on the table because Monica liked them. Not that she thought they were particularly delicious, just that she could bring herself to grab one of these when she didn't really feel like eating actual food.

Behind her, she heard the sound of a fist slamming against the table.

“Dammit! I’ll quit this damned job!”

The chef put in charge of this mansion’s kitchen was told he needed to make sure Monica ate properly, but getting Monica to eat properly was as difficult as getting a dragon to pass through the eye of a needle.

Monica wasn’t invested in living. Even if she was hungry and one of her favorite foods was in front of her, that didn’t mean she felt like eating. The chef might think that if he made all sorts of food, she might eat at least one dish, or that if he did it well enough, she’d eat it, but those strategies were crumbling around him.

“This again?” said Monica. “You say that a lot even though you don’t have the courage to actually go through with it.”

She went back to her room while nibbling on her biscuit, sweetness filling her mouth. It tasted just mediocre.

I’m the same. I don’t have the courage to die, but I keep thinking I want to. I hate being kept alive for no reason like this. When can I actually just die...?

No one but Monica and the servants who took care of her lived in this Prison Mansion. The halls were horribly quiet, the mansion pointlessly large for just her. It just made her feel the emptiness more. An emptiness with no one else there.

The servants were nominally employed by the court and switched out at intervals. They didn’t have time to get close with Monica. That was actually why they were switched out so often, so they couldn’t conspire with her.

Monica’s mother once tried to send her a secret letter by winning over a sympathetic caretaker named Joanna, but it was discovered, and the caretaker was fired. Things got worse after that.

She was entirely alone.

The only pastime she had was the occasional trip outside the mansion, though even then she wasn't allowed out of the carriage, and she had a guard with her, a guard that was really there to keep an eye on her. It was a little funny that they didn't even function as a guard in the end.

That's right. That one time...

A tiny breeze had rippled through the stagnant air in Monica's enclosed bottle of a life, though the hole it blew through was quickly sealed back up.

"I'm certain there's something you haven't given up on yet."

Those words from the odd girl who saved Monica still rippled through her soul.

It's nothing as grand as that... she thought.

Having reached her room, Monica made a beeline for her bed and flung herself onto it.

She was always looking out of the picture frame-like windows. The bustling streets. The people, filled with their hopes and dreams. The happy families. They were always right in front of her, and that made her think that maybe someday she could find a brilliant, glittering life. It gave her hope.

She clung pathetically to those minuscule hopes and expectations, meaning she didn't even have the courage to let go of her life.

That's all it was.

"Hm...?"

There was a quiet, secretive sound of something hitting the window. Monica pushed herself up from lying face down on the bed. This was the second story. The only thing outside the window was one large tree.

"What is that? Have the tree's branches grown all the way here? I'll have to call a gardener right away to trim—" As she moved closer to the window to check, she saw something impossible. "Ah?!"

"Um... G-Good evening." It was the crimson girl, holding on to the protruding

window frame as she hung down.



LAZLO gave Lushera one warning for her visit to Monica: do not leave the gift with someone. Make sure it goes directly to Monica.

That did make sense considering the purpose of this adventure was to bring Monica and Lushera together.

So, Lushera aimed directly for Monica. She waited until she got back to her room, then scrambled up to her window to talk to her. Normally, someone would call their guards at this point, but she had the King's permission to do this, and she'd learned by now that people let someone who looked like a little girl get away with more things than usual.

"You mean, His Majesty asked you to come here?"

"Yes."

Having at least made it into the room, Lushera told Monica about everything that led up to her coming here. Monica seemed to have a lot she wanted to say, but perhaps she decided there was no point arguing with some crazy person who came for a visit through her second-story window. She just let out a resigned sigh.

Lushera opened the bag with a pocket dimension inside that she brought and took something out.

"This is the present?" asked Monica.

"Uh, no. This is from one of my party members. Please, go ahead."

"Hmm..."

The first thing out of the bag was a small basket. It contained a fruit tart Viola made, along with a sandwich made from the leftovers of their dinner. Viola threw it together in a hurry when she heard Lushera was going over to Monica's. She made the sandwich from the cooled leftovers to prevent the bread from getting soggy while it was in the pocket dimension, but the food was still nice cold.

Monica examined the sandwich of roasted, flaked fish, then took an

unladylike bite.

“Ah, you’re not going to use a mithril utensil to check for poison or anything?” asked Lushera.

“Why? Is it poisoned?”

“W-Well, no...”

“Then I don’t need to. I wouldn’t particularly mind if it was poisoned anyway.”

Lushera thought she heard Monica murmur something like, “This is the flavor...” in a horribly weary tone.

“And... This is it,” said Lushera. Next out of the bag was the velveted box with the present from King Lazlo.

Monica opened it to find glittering gold inside. “A necklace.”

“It’s a very popular style. And Berg Brothers & Co. is the highest—”

“Hmph!”

“Ah!”

With a snort of laughter, Monica threw the jewelry box aside in the same way someone might throw a letter they made a mistake on in the fireplace.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Lushera asked.

“It’s obvious. He just thought a girl of my age would probably like a present like this. He probably spent no more than thirty seconds thinking about it before deciding. He likely didn’t even think about it himself. He had a servant choose it and he simply sent it.”

Lushera thought Monica’s action was harsh, but she couldn’t disagree with what she said. That was probably all Lazlo could do. And so, Monica was going to respond in kind, not giving any particular effort into being grateful.

“Don’t you get it? You’ve been caught,” said Monica with a glance at the box she’d tossed aside as she drew closer to Lushera. “If we know each other more, that’s another relationship His Majesty has to get to you. That essentially means he’s trapped a red dragon in his hands. Even the thinnest of threads come together to form a spider’s web. That’s the sort of person he is. If it meant

getting that, he would be willing to pretend to care about poor little Monica locked up and alone in the pretty glass house.”

Her sharp blue eyes bore into Lushera as she harshly accused her of taking this too lightly. It seemed she already knew who Lushera was.

Lushera hadn’t entirely let her guard down with Lazlo, but she hadn’t thought much of this request of his beyond it being a chance for her to check in on Monica. Monica didn’t think highly of Lazlo and felt like she was being used. It was only natural that would annoy her.

Lushera also found herself tongue-tied by Monica’s wisdom that allowed her to see through to a person’s true nature. She was likely raised to be able to do that, as people hated that she was born, and she lived her entire life surrounded by ill intentions.

“He’s pretending to be like a father so he can drag me in too,” she said. “Though maybe we should talk about whose fault it is that I can’t see my real parents.” As she spoke, she waved some sort of invitation envelope for Lushera to see.

“What’s that?”

“An invitation to a banquet. It arrived yesterday. It seems something is happening in the castle, and I was invited. I get them every once in a while, like they just randomly remembered I exist. But I’m not allowed out in public, so if I do go, I get to sit in a separate room eating while everyone else is having a grand dinner party. It’s just miserable.”

A banquet...? Oh, that’s right, because Julian came, they quickly threw together a small dinner, thought Lushera. She had heard about it.

The court entertained guests by providing food. Banquets in the court were the setting for building relationships and where negotiations were held. They also helped negotiations move along and strengthened the bonds between the attendees.

This event would be for welcoming Julian.

Lushera knew about this banquet because the Golden Helm had been invited, though she wouldn’t be attending. They were most likely invited because they

succeeded in defending Mount Kugus. Though, adventurers obviously couldn't have much direct say in international conflicts.

And this banquet was for Julian, of all people... Though, perhaps the court saw inviting the Golden Helm to this banquet as a way of keeping Julian in check, or sending a discreet warning.

But Lushera and Kaphal wouldn't be attending. Kaphal would be a guest of honor if invited, and there was talk that it was still too soon in the process to do that.

Lushera also wanted to get back to Mount Kugus with time to spare before the day Shurei had set for the test, so the other three members of the Golden Helm were going to the banquet, while Lushera was returning to Mount Kugus on her own.

Though, it looked like Monica was invited to the banquet as well.

"I said I would go this time," she said. "They mentioned I would be able to meet my half-sister, who I've never seen in my life yet, so I thought, why not go and see her? Then...His Majesty will probably scrounge a few moments here and there between work to visit. I'll count how many minutes he actually stays."

Listening to Monica, Lushera could barely breathe, like she was being strangled. She looked at Monica's cold smile and thought only, *I have to stop this.*

It might be the natural result of the life Monica had lived, but she was far too sensitive to ill intentions and deceit. Even the best of friends had disagreements or were sometimes selfish, but Monica probably wouldn't even forgive that.

It was the petty spite of the nobles that forced Monica into solitude, but she was the one trying to cut every last possible connection off.

That was definitely not good. Her self-defense was turning into self-harm.

"I think it's good for you to talk to him, even if it is for a short time," said Lushera. "His Majesty may not be a perfect person, but...I don't think he's a bad person either."

That was her honest impression.

Having imperfections and flaws was, in the end, just being human.

Lushera felt Lazlo could easily be classified as a “good person.” But...that was just the feeling she got because she was able to listen to him speaking in Draconic. It was hard to put that impression into words and explain it to others.

“Are you siding with him?” accused Monica.

“I just don’t want you to keep going like this.”

“And now *you’re* lecturing me?” There was hostility in her eyes. “You’re an adventurer, yes? You have battles where you might live or die.”

“Huh? Well, yeah.”

“You can’t possibly understand then. I have a perfectly cozy life, living in a safe city and protected by many people. And yet I still worry over living or dying. Doesn’t that sound like nothing more than an indulgent concern to you? An insignificant concern?”

Lushera’s breath caught in her throat.

Monica glared at Lushera, her back hunched like a growling animal trying to threaten an enemy away. “I will never be cut by a sword or torn to pieces by a monster. I will never even starve or freeze! I just came from rejecting practically a mountain of food! Doesn’t even a tiny part of you believe that I live the most blessed life possible?!”

“I...”

Monica plowed on, like the brakes had come off, her voice cracking as if her throat might tear. She probably wasn’t used to raising her voice.

She refused to understand and attacked her own value. What she said was an attack, an attempt to weaken her opponent by spilling her own blood. Her voice sounded as pained as someone’s dying sobs.

Lushera did feel attacked. She might look like she was younger than Monica, but she was actually older. She felt like she’d lived quite a lot, and she felt she had a duty to use that life experience to guide Monica. There was a tiny amount of arrogance in that, and Monica saw right through to it.

But if she backed down now, Monica would only sink deeper into her

isolation. She'd come this far; she had no plans of tucking her tail between her legs and running now.

"Here, put this on for a minute," she said, passing Monica the web of gold that was Giselle's Ring.

"What is it?"

"It's a ring that lets you understand Draconic. I'm going to try saying something in Draconic."

"What...?" She looked taken aback but put the ring on anyway. It was a little loose on her finger, and she flipped her hand over several times while looking at it with suspicion.

As she did, Lushera said, "*I, worried, about you.*"

"Ah?!"

In her still faltering Draconic, Lushera hit Monica with those frank words.

Monica flinched back, like she'd been shoved.

Humans listening to Draconic heard only a string of short sounds with no clear meaning, but those sounds had multidimensional meaning, expressing everything including the speaker's intent, and they had nuance, all the way to the speaker's emotions.

Just as Kaphal had said to Lazlo, this language was not suited for lying.

"I just...no can leave you," said Lushera.

There were several additional meanings added in there: that there was no doubt Monica's upbringing was tragic and horrible.

They met by chance, and Lushera felt bad for Monica, which was why she wanted to help. What was wrong with that? And those feelings weren't fake, even if Monica didn't trust them.

That's why Lushera wanted to try and express them, and Draconic was capable of expressing even your emotions without deception. She wanted to tell Monica that it was still too early to give up, that there were people in the world who worried about her. Lushera, at the very least, was one.

“Stop! Stop!”

“Ah...”



And that's when Monica spoke in Draconic.

The ring obviously didn't just give the ability to understand Draconic, it also gave the ability to speak it.

Don't give me hope. I'll just be disappointed again. Believing hurts. No, I'm so alone. Make me believe. Can you do that? Don't come near. Don't go.

It was a torrent of meaning included in those words of rejection, a dam bursting and slamming into Lushera.

Monica gasped, her face turning red as she clamped her hands over her mouth. Her thoughts finally moved to the ring she was wearing, which she tore off her finger.

"Huff... Hah..." She brought her hands to her flat chest. Lushera felt like she could hear Monica's racing heart from there. Then, still trembling, Monica locked her eyes on Lushera and said, "What...did I just say?"

"Well...if you translated it into our language, you just said 'stop,' but you sort of...admitted everything that made you think that. All the implications were included in what you said..." Lushera explained.

"Ah! Aaaaaah!" she shrieked, holding her head in her hands. It seemed she only realized what she'd said after she said it.

"Uh, I'm sorry... I just wanted to express my own feelings to you, and it's hard to lie in Draconic. There's too much information included in just a few words..."

"You, how could you, you made me, this is so embarrassing! Agh!" Her face was so red it looked like she was almost boiling, with tears now in her eyes.

Draconic wasn't good at hiding things, and...someone like Monica, who wasn't used to speaking it, couldn't even choose what to include and what to leave out. She accidentally included the things she wanted to leave out, baring her emotions.

Awkward.

"Go away! Leave! Leave right now!"

"Ah!" Lushera caught Giselle's Ring when Monica flung it at her, which was

followed by pillows, stuffed animals, and everything else in the room.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you! Goodbye! Sleep well!”

Lushera hopped out the window and ran into the dark of night.



IT was a whirlwind.

Lushera left, and the moon climbed steadily higher. Monica changed into her pajamas by herself and lay completely still on her side in bed, even the magic lamps turned off.

She was wide awake. She didn’t feel like sleeping. Her heart pounded, but not unpleasantly.

“A...*friend*? ”

She sprawled out on the bed, lifting the stuffed animal that was beside her into the air. It was a teddy bear, sent by someone for her birthday five years ago, when she was nine. She didn’t know who sent it or how it got to her, or even how it was allowed to get to her. It hadn’t come with a note.

In all honesty, it didn’t really matter who sent it. She didn’t care enough to wonder about it. And she couldn’t even bring herself to really like or dislike the present itself, but...for some reason, she couldn’t throw it out. She just left it in her room like another piece of furniture.

“Hey. Do you think I could have a friend, if it was a dragon...? ”

The teddy bear didn’t answer, of course.

This mysterious girl, the adopted daughter of the dragon of Mount Kugus. She fought a monster even though no one asked her to and saved Monica, but Monica still didn’t expect anything from her. Monica was such an unimportant thing to a girl like that, and they would never meet again. She probably didn’t even think about Monica at all.

But that wasn’t true anymore.

Monica saw her feelings. She wouldn’t let Monica give in.

Lushera didn’t think Monica was anything special, just someone she

happened to meet. And even then, she worried about Monica.

“I’m not going to just believe something like that. But...I wonder if she’ll be okay?”

The teddy bear didn’t answer, of course.

“...Stupid.”

She suddenly realized how childish her behavior was and threw the teddy bear against the wall, as if trying to hide her own embarrassment. The bear, in its fancy outfit, hit the wall with a dull thud and slid down the wall headfirst until it rested upside down on the floor.

Monica tried to sleep, but it bothered her. She got out of bed and sat the bear upright.



THE morning sun shone on Alhyura’s north gate. Timm and Weyne were there, seeing Lushera and Kaphal off in their high-speed carriage.

“You’re real busy, heading right back to Mount Kugus after handling everything here,” said Timm.

“I’m just glad we finished everything we had to when we had time,” said Lushera, her head poking out the carriage window.

The other three in the party were staying to attend the banquet, while Lushera and Kaphal went back to Mount Kugus. If they left now, they could stay one night in an inn on the road, then reach Kugut’hulm tomorrow. The day after tomorrow was the day of Shurei’s test.

“There’s really nothing we can do about this dragon test thing of yours?” Timm asked.

“I appreciate the thought, but it wouldn’t be much of a test if you could.”

“True... Well, I can at least pray for your success.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

They were worried because they had seen the dragons in person. Lushera thumped her chest in a show of bravery to reassure them.

"Well... Not like thinking this or that on our part's going to make any difference," said Timm.

"S'pose not. Give it your all, Lushera. And while you're doing that, we're going to be eating nice food here in the capital," said Weyne jokingly.

That might seem easy enough, but they were going to be interacting with some very important people, which meant they'd be doing more than just eating. That too was a job.

They wished each other good luck in their different battles, and the carriage set off towards the north.



HIGH-SPEED carriages were built with comfort in mind as well as speed, meaning you felt nearly no jolting on well-maintained roads. It was a pleasant journey at a speed close to a fast horse.

Inside the carriage, Lushera was teaching Kaphal the rules for the board game, King of the Board. The game involved several pieces on a board that you used to fight a war against your opponent. It tested your ability to process information in your head. Lushera was by no means a master of the game, but she was still amazed that Kaphal was starting to give her a run for her money after just their third match even though she had only just learned the rules.

They were at a point where one more move would decide whether she would win or lose, the view out the window glowing in the light of the setting sun. Lushera was just starting to think the magic lights in the carriage should be coming on about now when one of the slips of paper Lushera had on her burst into blue fire.

These slips of paper were a magic item known as call charms. They were quite popular as a means for adventurers to contact each other. They worked using magic formulas written on paper made with a magic catalyst. They came in sets of two, capable of connecting to the other charm that they came in a bundle with. They were one-use items since they burned up after about ten minutes.

This call charm was paired with one that Ivar had. Lushera traced the blue-white light along the surface of the paper in a predetermined pattern, activating

the charm.

“Ivar, what is it?” she asked.

“I got the results of the golem investigation. Dammit! They did their best getting rid of any telltale design decisions that would give it away, but they figured it out from the burnt-out graselm circuit! It’s almost certain it was made in Martgarz, by the military. And it’s the newest model, made in the last three months. There’s almost no way it could’ve been made with stolen parts or goods secretly sold off. It was most likely brought by Julian!”

“What?!”

The moment he started shouting through the charm, it was obvious from his voice that his face had changed color with emotion. “And you know, don’t you? What makes a golem good as a soldier?”

“They don’t fear death and they never go against orders...”

“There’s that, but something else too. Living things can’t go into magic items used for storage.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, if it’s not alive, it can go in!”

Every hair on Lushera’s body stood upright when she realized what Ivar was getting at.

“So, if you imbue a trunk with storage magic and just say, ‘this is the lord’s change of clothing,’ and they bring it in, well...they’re not really gonna check inside, are they?” he said.

“But a golem that big won’t fit into your everyday storage spell...”

“So just take it apart and put it back together when you get here! It’s a damn golem!”

In other words, golems were a fighting force that a single person could carry in. It was easier to sneak that in than bring actual people with you. And Julian could do that. A normal person might find every stitch of their clothing inspected when they went in a place like that, but Julian had the status to just slip in whenever he wanted to.

“Obviously there’s still a limit to what he could store,” continued Ivar. “He’d need a seriously suspiciously large amount of luggage to bring in enough golems to take out the kingdom, and he probably couldn’t even get that many in the first place.”

“So...what could he do with the limited number of golems he *can* bring in...?” Lushera asked.

“He’s an important person, he can get in places.”

“Places that aren’t well guarded.”

“The kind of target no one’d ever imagine someone would target.”

“At the worst possible time.”

Silence.

Inside a high-speed carriage you could barely hear the sound of the wheels rolling across the ground, or the horses’ whinnies, or even the creaking of the carriage itself. And yet, those sounds were deafening at that moment.

“But. But, wait. Why would Julian be after Monica? Lady Monica?” Lushera asked.

“No clue, but he’s not using any decent method to go for her, so I doubt his goal is decent either. The more important thing is that Julian’s in the palace right now. He might do something.”

Lushera thought of the search she underwent at the castle gate when she went in. They had checked if she had any magic items on her...

“Oh... A normal person would be suspected if they had a magic item with them, but it’s normal for people of authority to have defensive magic items on them to protect them from curses and things. Even if they check whether or not there’s magic, they still won’t know what the magic item does. He can still trick them,” she said.

“Storage items can be boxes or more like bags, it doesn’t matter. You could even work a cape or scarf to hold something. And now that I think of it, that bastard was wearing that heavy scarf.”

It all made sense, the pieces falling into place, forming the image of a puzzle

that should never be completed.

"The guard on the castle's solid, but it's got its limits!" said Ivar. "It'd take all night for them to check the asshole of every noble that walked in there, so they ignore whatever they decide couldn't be possible."

"Someone of importance doesn't usually carry out assassinations themselves, it puts their own life in danger," Lushera agreed. "And actually, they don't normally do something that'd be guaranteed to bring on a political breakdown."

"And it's rude to be suspicious of your guest of honor, and the guest won't prod too hard since the favor goes both ways."

They don't normally do that. Normally. Everything changed when you were talking about someone abnormal.

Lushera accepted the hypothesis that Julian had some plot in mind. If he did bring in a golem force, how much of a fight could they put up?

There would be a point to the plan if he could capture the kingdom of Setrayu, but Lushera doubted the country would collapse just because someone assassinated the King and some nobles.

And actually, doing that would turn public opinion in all the countries watching the war between Martgarz and Guffarr, making them criticize Martgarz or even discuss joining the war. Julian would lose more than he gained.

But Lushera remembered the impression she had of Julian when they met in the café, that niggling, threatening, elusive feeling of emptiness.

What if that man had nothing he had to protect and nothing to lose? And...an even more terrifying thought...what if this was a rampage by Julian alone, with not even Martgarz in on the plot?

If that were the case, there was nothing that could stop him.

"This...is bad."

"This is real bad."

Lushera clenched her tense hands. "Mom, I'm going back to the capital!"



THE palace had massive ballrooms capable of hosting ceremonies with attendees in the hundreds, but using that sort of room for a small event would make for a dull, stingy event.

The banquet that night was held in a dining room that snugly fit just one long table. There weren't many in attendance for tonight's event, as the guest of honor, Julian, came so suddenly it was difficult for many to arrange their schedules for it, and the court still didn't want to make everything too public just yet.

The court dignitaries and nobles came dressed in formalwear that was elegant without being pompous. There were only two empty seats, meant for two adventurers who didn't come for some reason.

The guests nibbled hors d'oeuvres while engaging in pleasant conversation, which included political negotiations. The guest of honor arrived, and that's when the night's peace ended.

"Eeeeek!"

"Attack!"

The not-very-large room became crowded with golems, swords fused to their arms, looking like skeletons with metal plates of armor slapped on their bones. Each was about as tall as a human man.

They were made with reduced overall volume to work well with storage spells and magic items, but they still had both the dexterity and strength of movement to rival a high-level adventurer.

The royal guard—stationed as perfunctory security as prominent as a wall decoration—was silenced in the opening surprise attack.

One unlucky noblewoman who was too slow to flee was sliced in half through the torso with a massive blade, and her body collapsed in a pool of blood.

The gentlemen invited to the banquet were knights, and in that capacity, they had been trained how to wield a weapon, but none had seen combat in a long time. Besides, they were unarmed. They had no better choice than to run in a

panic from the relentless golem onslaught.

But while they did—

“Haaaaah!”

One attendee used superhuman strength to fling the long table at the golems. It didn't matter what the situation was, he would deal with any enemy that came to attack. Handling a surprise situation was where adventurers truly shone.

“Dammit, really wish I had my armor right 'bout now!”

Timm pulled off the outer layer of his dress clothes, his boulder-like muscles bursting through his shirt as they flexed.

He swung a ceremonial sword dropped by one of the royal guard (the sort of weapon that sacrificed cutting ability and durability for beauty), striking out at a golem who evaded his table attack.

The golem met Timm with surprising agility, and they exchanged two rapid blows. It was a high-class golem with proper sword-fighting skills.

But that was until a fork Weyne threw pierced into the golem's one, glass-like eye. Dinner had yet to be served, but the table was already set, and the utensils were now on the floor.

Weyne juggled five knives as he gathered them up, all of them mithril utensils for detecting poison. Mithril was light, sturdy, and easy to work with. It was a standard material for weapons.

He bolted towards the golem like lightning and plunged the knives into the golem's joints so quickly his hands were a blur. It still stood, with rattling convulsions, but Weyne delivered a handstand kick to the back of its head, then snatched the magic lantern from the wall.

There was a long cord that ran from outside the room, coiled in a corner and connected to all the illumination in the room. It was a magic cable that supplied magic drawn from belowground to the lighting.

Weyne jerked that out from the lantern. He ducked below the sword tip of a golem coming at them, slipped around its back while holding the end of the

cable, catching the golem in the rope and tying it up, locking its joints.

Then he stuck the end of the magic cable into a gap in the golem's armor. There was a brief flash of blue-white light, the golem spasmed, and then it collapsed to the ground like a marionette whose strings were cut.

"Huh, never knew you could use a magic cable like that..." Timm remarked.

"You can overload the drive mechanism to destroy it. Lucky for us that sort of thing works on this type," said Weyne.

The golems Timm had knocked over with the table climbed to their feet then surrounded the two, their steps in time with each other. They seemed more cautious, likely having determined Timm and Weyne to be a threat now that the golems were fewer in number.

The nobles who were too slow to flee were pressed against the wall, with the two adventurers protecting them.

Weyne kicked up another one of the royal guard's swords and grabbed it, but he didn't normally use swords. He would have a hard time handling a golem with the ability to stand against a head-on assault from Timm.

But they were right in the middle of the palace. If they could buy some time, more royal knights or the elite guard would gather here, crushing these measly ten-ish golems. The problem was the "buying some time" part.

That's when sharp clacking footfalls came running down the hall. "I'm late! Timm! Weyne! Are you okay?!"

"Viola, should you be here?!" shouted Timm.

"This isn't the time to argue about that!" she said. She wore a gown both the color and shape of a blue rose, her shoulders bared, running into the room with grace despite the heels she wore. And she still had her glass bottle bottom-glasses on even with that elegant outfit.

She waved the wand she had tucked under her arm and quickly incanted, "Narrow path beneath the azure sky. I who rush, who race, who dedicate. Heaven's vengeance, far of reach and sure of strike, draft of lamentation, thy name endless though imbibed and measured..."

The golems obviously reacted to this and moved to interrupt her incantation, but Timm and Weyne already knew what to do. They quickly moved in to intercept the golems.

And that was enough to get the seconds they needed until the incantation was complete. That's all they needed: a few seconds. They locked swords, kicked away golems, and even threw their swords at the end to delay the machines just a little more.

Then they dove to either side, opening a line of fire for Viola.

“Dance to the end, Honorless King! Tremendous Thunder!”

Light so bright it turned the room to the two shades of white and black leaped from Viola's wand. Thunder roared, loud enough to leave your ears ringing. All the glass in every window of the room shattered, the gentle, warm breeze coming in from the night sky.

A colossal bolt of lightning leaped towards the golems, striking them head-on. The golem in front exploded into a rain of scrap metal. The lightning carried on, mowing down the golems behind the first, frying their internal circuits while flinging them away like pieces of lint.

One golem tried to stand back up after all that. Timm held it down with his foot, picked up the sword he threw a moment earlier, and brought the blade down on its neck. It jerked, and then moved no more.

“All right, now we hold out till the guard comes!” he declared.

“Yeah!”

“Yes, sir!”

The golems that survived clamored to their feet like zombies, black smoke rising from them.



AROUND that same time.

“What's that sound? What's happening?”

Monica was in a room not that far from the center of the ruckus in a dining

room that looked like a shrunken down version of the room where the real banquet was taking place.

She waited there alone, wearing a navy gown that almost looked like something you would wear to a funeral.

The building shook. A decorative plate on the wall fell and shattered. Screams echoed from somewhere.

This was the palace. How could this be happening?

“Who are you?! You can’t— *Gah!*” Then a scream came from nearby, followed by a heavy thud as something hit the ground.

“Ah?!” cried Monica.

Outside the room was a royal guard who was either her protector or her jailkeeper, it was hard to tell, but the door opened and someone who shouldn’t be in there pushed their way in.

He was a young man in his mid-twenties, tall with manly features. He wore a pure white tunic top loaded with decorative buttons and a cloak wrapped around his neck like a scarf, and was accompanied by a mechanical humanoid with a dark gleam. The sword fused to the golem’s arm was coated in fresh blood.

“What a wondrous occasion. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Julian Angus, Marquess Angus of the Martgarz Empire. And you are Lady Monica, I presume?”

Monica couldn’t even breathe while Julian gave a bow and introduction, superficially polite and perfect in execution, but nothing else.

Monica knew he’d been invited to the banquet, but little more. How did he know Monica was here? Why did he come himself to see her? And why did he bring a dangerous combat golem to a place like this? What were the screams Monica had just heard?

“Please come with me,” he said. “And please do refrain from resisting. I will have to hurt you somewhat if you do.”

“Stay away!” Monica backed away, refusing, and Julian quickly threw away his

superficially polite attitude.

"You really haven't been trained well, despite being the daughter of a bitch. ... Capture her."

"Ah!"

In response to Julian's order, the golem reached towards Monica with a merciless, mechanical, and blood-covered hand. It pinned her down with quick yet unnatural movements.

"Agh, gah!" Monica gasped out choked sobs, not yet understanding what was happening to her.

The golem pressed her to the ground, almost like it was going to shove her right into it, leaving her unable to move an inch.

Julian crouched before her, looking down at her with a cold gaze. "Hmph. This is suited to the daughter of a bitch."

In his hand was a leather collar gleaming with smooth, dark wickedness.



BELOW the Setrayuan castle was a space large enough that a dragon might be able to sleep there. At the base of the huge, stone dome was a channel of water, an unending vortex from which rose several waterfalls, defying gravity to flow towards the surface. This was the birthplace of all the water that flowed through the capital city.

In the center was a five-tiered dais with lavishly decorated stone carvings.

This was the resting place of the Hurricane of Insight, Setrayu's dracovitae. Normally. But not now. Ten knights stood in front of the pedestal, one of them wielding the Hurricane as a weapon.

The Hurricane of Insight... It was the dracovitae that calmed the lands in Setrayu.

Dracovitae were capable of changing form for various situations, but currently, the Hurricane of Insight's weapon form was a mask covering the right half of the knight's face, along with heavy armor on the same arm, fused with a staff.

The texture brought to mind the overlapping scales of a dragon's hide, while the color was the blue of a deep, dark ocean.

Julian stood facing the knights, along with a single golem carrying a squirming sack.

"Are you after the dracovitae? Martgarz bastard. Have you lost your mind? That is a one-way trip down a road leading to a precipice. It leads straight to our destruction."

"Oh really? Perhaps you only see the senile country of old, not me, right here in front of you," said Julian. "How foolish. But I will let your slight pass as water under the bridge, along with your life."

He was fully confident, despite having not only this many knights to his single golem, but the dracovitae turned against him, a weapon that could wipe out entire squads of troops.

The commander of the knight unit protecting the dracovitae was a man named Severo. He felt a faint chill seeing Julian like that.

"Honored son of Lord Tobal. If my information is correct, you have a 67 percent compatibility with Setrayu's Hurricane of Insight on the Morris Scale," said Julian.

Severo was taken aback.

Anyone born with royal blood was tested the moment they were born to see what their compatibility with the dracovitae was, and that determined the rest of their life. The higher the compatibility, the more power they could draw from the dracovitae's weapon form, and the more likely they could produce children with high compatibility. Too many and too few dracovitae users were both a problem, meaning they must avoid spreading their bloodline too much, while maintaining its purity.

Managing the bloodline was a duty of the rulers of any country with a dracovitae, and any individual's compatibility rating was a state secret.

And yet, Julian, the noble of another country, knew that information.

"H-How do you know that...?" stammered Severo.

"The guardian of the dracovitae requires all four of these characteristics: compatibility, high rank, strength, and devotion to their country. One might be selected even if their compatibility is only middling if all the other traits are excellent. And in a small country like this where you can't even select bloodlines that effectively, perhaps this is the best you can get." Julian sneered at Severo and waved casually at the golem. "But I have 79 percent compatibility at the ready."

"What...?"

The golem dropped the sack it carried and pulled out what was inside, a girl in a dark blue dress. Her long, beautiful blonde hair was in disarray, a collar that glinted with a slick evil around her slender neck.

She looked around, frightened, despair filling her eyes as she finally realized what was going on.

"What in the...? Who is that?" asked Severo.

"Now, Monica. Take the dracovitae from him. It is more suited to your hands," said Julian.

"No!" Severo realized what was happening, remembering having heard Monica's name at some point. He was hit by a sense of helplessness and loss, like he'd been stripped naked.

The massive power that had been linked to his soul disappeared.

"What in the—?!"

The Hurricane of Insight disassembled into tiny pieces that flew off his body, flowing through the air like iron drawn by a magnet, reforming on Monica, covering her right side from her arm to her face.

"Dracovitae, return to me! Dracovitae!"

"It's pointless."

Despite Severo's cries, the dracovitae didn't separate from Monica. Of course it wouldn't. If what Julian said was accurate, then Monica's blood was more in tune with the dracovitae than Severo's. There was no opening for him to get in to separate them.

"Hm... This sort of thing can happen during fights over a dracovitae," said Julian. "This was over the moment you all thought the dracovitae was sealed safely below the castle. Setrayu, dulled by peace, resting on your laurels of domestic stability so that you fail to prepare for this."

Julian looked down his nose and laughed.

When Martgarz was at peace, its four dracovitae were sealed away in four different strongholds built in the wilderness in the middle of nowhere. Anyone who went near the strongholds was killed with no questions asked, even if they were nobility. Even if they were royalty. The measure was to ensure the entire country didn't get wiped off the map.

Their dracovitae were currently on the eastern warfront, but even the number of dracovitae users deployed to the area was subject to careful planning.

Severo did know some of that, as the guardian of his country's dracovitae, but Setrayu wasn't capable of doing the same thing. It lacked the resources necessary. It didn't have the money or territory of a large country like Martgarz.

With a lower population, there were fewer nobles to rule over them, and fewer families that could help maintain the dracovitae bloodline. Most importantly, the lower the denominator that is "population," the lower the number of superhumanly powerful people who could defend things like the dracovitae or the castle.

Severo was a trained warrior, powerful enough to stand toe-to-toe with a pseudo-dragon in fight, but he was one of the few knights of his caliber.

They couldn't neglect to defend either the castle or the dracovitae, so it made sense considering their lack of manpower to protect them both together. The flip side of that was that they had to carefully maintain internal peace to prevent any noble who might be able to steal the dracovitae from pulling any tricks, but that was a necessary cost to be paid.

But they hadn't anticipated a situation like this. At least not now, anyway.

Martgarz was the enemy of Setrayu's ally, and the relationship between the two countries was strained, but there was no way they should have been

allowed to go straight for the dracovitae, and certainly not with someone inside Setrayu who carried the blood of a dracovitae user.

This was an absurd rampage of might and decisiveness that passed over the restraints of politics.

Setrayu didn't have the capacity to prepare for something like that during times of peace.

"This should make a nice warm-up, Monica. Use the power of the dracovitae and kill them," ordered Julian in a tone that sounded like he was speaking to a child that didn't understand.

"Ah..." She raised the Hurricane of Insight, though her face was twisted in terror. "Run!" she cried.

The torrent surrounding the dais roiled.

The Hurricane of Insight's usual duty was to calm the lands of Setrayu of the tyranny of water inherent in the region, allowing humanoids to live there.

But what if that power was used in battle? Indeed, what if it was used for nothing more than a petty battle?

Several rivers of water rose, like gigantic serpents lifting their heads. They turned into torrents rushing into the air, advancing as they spiraled.

And then they closed in on the knights from all sides.



A white mist hung over the area.

"It wasn't particularly beautiful, but I suppose there was no real need to make their deaths appealing."

The flows of water were frozen, still crossed where they exploded. It was still, streams of biting, frozen water burst out like the spines of a curled-up hedgehog.

Inside the huge mass of water were the knights' corpses...smashed by the water, torn apart, pierced, both their armor and their limbs torn to pieces and trapped inside.

The blood they shed mixed with the water as it froze, creating a pattern of red stripes.

As they were the guards of the dracovitae, you could assume they were quite powerful themselves. They could take one or two shots from a spell without dying, but even people as powerful as them were squashed like ants below foot.

Julian lost interest in the dead encased within the ice.

Having seen the might of the attack, he turned on his heel. "All right. Let's go back to Martgarz. I can't stand how much this tiny country reeks of poverty. I fear it may rub off on me."

"Urgh, ah, *aaaaah...*" Monica covered her tear-stained face, trembling as she sank to the floor and soiled herself. She was reeling from the terror and shock of having killed people with her own hands.

"Stand," ordered Julian, and she couldn't resist. She stood.

That was the power of the magic item around her neck, a Collar of Slavery. This evil item had powerful manipulative abilities that forced the wearer to obey all commands given by the master. While Monica did have a high compatibility with the dracovitae, she was otherwise a powerless, little girl. She couldn't fight against the collar's spell.

There were several other nobles at tonight's banquet who could wield the dracovitae, other than Monica. If targeting Monica had been too difficult this time, Julian would have several other candidates to choose from. It was practically a wish come true for him that the court brought together so many. He had only targeted Monica before with the giant golem (which was blocked by Lushera) because she was a convenient target he'd set his sights on in advance. But, now that his strategy had changed to procuring his dracovitae user at the banquet, there was no absolute need to use Monica.

And yet he targeted her again, and that was because he determined that would have a higher chance of succeeding, since he could do that while the other attack occurred. The other reason was that she was a weak target, one who would have no possible chance of fighting against the Collar of Slavery.

Monica also had one other use that went beyond having her wield the dracovitae, which would be good for the future.

The sound of several people approaching broke the silence of the altar now that the water was all frozen.

“The dracovitae?!”

“Hmph, have they caught up with us?” said Julian, as the royal knights who finally heard the noise down here pushed into the altar room. The guards in the altar room hadn’t guessed what Julian was up to and got there before him, they were just at their normal stations. Julian was one step ahead of the royal guard.

“K-Kill them! Take back the dracovitae!” shouted the commander.

“You’re in my way. Monica, destroy everything. Blow them away along with the palace,” ordered Julian.

“No!” Monica pointed the staff at the knights as they ran to attack. “Aah, *aaaaaaaah!*”

The ground shuddered from an impact as if something was awakening, and the knights stumbled.

Cracks ran through the stone of the floor. Those cracks turned to fissures, and from those fissures burst water, like a fountain, several fountains. The floor buckled, growing from below, and then it burst.

“*Gaaaah!*”

That explosion of water swept everything away. The knights’ screams were swallowed up on the other side of the falling rubble.

Moonlight streamed in.

Julian and the golem carrying Monica were encased in a protective wall of foamy water, repelling the hail of shattered wood and stone and pushing them upward to the surface from the collapsing underground altar.

The explosion cut into the castle’s buildings, and the three of them passed through the gaping hole up into the night sky.

“What the?!” someone shouted from the ground.

Julian looked on with contempt, seeing two people of bright crimson. “Hm, I thought you went back north... Did you turn back? How are you? I, for one, am doing incredibly well.”

“A collar...?” Lushera looked at Monica who the golem held around the waist, then glared at Julian with an expression of burning rage. “A Collar of Slavery?! You’d use something like that to steal the dracovitae?! Do you have any idea what you’re doing?! You’re going to ruin the world!”

“Then stop me. Or you could try to return the favor on Martgarz.”

“What?!”

Laughter bubbled from the pit of Julian’s stomach as he watched her desperately howling. Even someone as powerful as her was so foolish.

“You can’t,” he said. “Weak, weak, weak! You have no intelligence, no resolve! Fools like you build only a tepid world! Some rule idly, some subjugate ignorantly! How pathetic! Those without the resolve to change the world will accomplish nothing! You’ll do nothing but blame others for your failings...”

The moon shone.

The half-destroyed castle, the fleeing nobles, the soldiers looking up from the castle walls, the knights, gathered to fight but unable to do anything, the draconic mother and daughter.

“Leave no trace behind as you die!” he shouted. “Monica!”

“L-Lushera, run!” Monica cried.

Overflowing water enveloped it all, crushing it.

Chapter 5: The Dragon Test

JULIAN Angus visited the court of Setrayu where he used Monica, the misbegotten daughter of former Queen Consort Lorraina, to steal Setrayu's dracovitae, the Hurricane of Insight.

That information raced through international channels, as fast and as shocking as lightning.

Julian unleashed golems onto the banquet, causing chaos he used as a diversion to kidnap Monica, placing her under his control with a Collar of Slavery, where he proceeded to steal the dracovitae.

After that, Julian murdered the knights on guard, destroyed half the castle, and fled. He needed to escape quickly since there would be dracovitae users in the castle with a higher compatibility rate who would try to steal it back.

Dawn broke the next morning.



“**JULIAN**, are you insane?!” howled an old man. He resembled a sort of mountain ascetic wearing something akin to a toga.

“Watch your tongue. I am no longer your student.” Julian waved his hand in annoyance as he was sitting in his new chair, sinking deep into the leather made from the skin of a type of pseudo-dragon known as a dragon snake. He felt the chair his father used was a rather sad piece of furniture and quickly ordered this to make the audience room his own.

The man who came barging into the audience room to shout at Julian was named Demetrius. He was a human already over ninety, but his hips and legs hadn't failed him yet.

Demetrius was an academic of politics who taught even the current emperor of Martgarz. He was a wise man whose name was known throughout the Empire. Julian's father, Kenneth, had called on several different teachers for

Julian's benefit, and Demetrius was one of them.

There was a good reason for the change in color of Demetrius's face. Going after another country's dracovitae was an absolutely forbidden act.

A country that lost its dracovitae would no longer be able to quell the raging power of the earth, making the land uninhabitable to humanoids. Stealing a dracovitae was synonymous with slaughtering an entire country's worth of people, as it destroyed the country's territory.

Humanoids may fight each other, but the people were valuable if conquered, not to mention the moral issues surrounding killing them all. And if something were to happen and war broke out between humanoids, the dragons, and the monsterfolk, the humanoid races would have to band together in order to survive. There were some lines that couldn't be crossed because they lived under the constant threat of monsters and still carried the memory of the dragon war.

And while humanoids still found one reason or another to fight each other, there were some unwritten rules on how the dracovitae must be treated. You could only target a dracovitae deployed to a combat zone. The logic was that it would end up worse to use something that valuable in war, because of the risk of it being targeted (though the dracovitae were so powerful a war without them would not be possible).

If a dracovitae was stolen, the side that lost it was meant to quickly surrender in order to guarantee the safety of their people, and the side that stole the dracovitae would return it without complaint.

These rules of war were maintained through the constant vigilance of all the humanoid countries. If mediation made little progress, the surrounding countries would come together to pressure the participating countries for peace. If that broke down, the only thing that awaited was destruction, after all.

"It's simple. All I have to do is use the power of the dracovitae to break through at Mount Kugus and conquer Setrayu," said Julian like it was nothing. "The dracovitae will be used under my supervision to control the lands of Setrayu. Once it's clear the people will be safe, there will be fewer of those losing dogs who bark about the rules. It's not exactly easy to punish the winner,

after all.”

Demetrius’s eyes grew wide in his heavily wrinkled face. Something similar had happened in a past war, but that dracovitae had been stolen during battle, and the attackers moved swiftly after laying political groundwork with the rulers.

That meant it was very different from what Julian did, stealing the dracovitae directly from the court without consulting anyone in advance, and Julian had realized that was the limit of what he could do as just a single lord.

There was a chance he would succeed, so he saw value in trying. He didn’t care what Martgarz thought about it. He also didn’t care if a thousand, even ten thousand Setrayuans died.

“And, if I kill all the current wielders of the dracovitae and have this girl carry my children, I will be the king of Setrayu in both name and fact,” said Julian with a pompous wave towards the girl sitting on the floor with her back against the wall. “Any who dare to oppose me would then be a threat to the people of Setrayu and an enemy of the world. Haha... Well, the crown of such a tiny country is hardly worthy of me, but being king wouldn’t be so bad. Even that backwater country could become something greater with me as its ruler.”

Monica’s head hung low beneath the weight of her despair, the Collar of Slavery around her neck along with a heavy neck guard to defend it.

The Hurricane of Insight was beside her, but she couldn’t wield it as she saw fit. Monica was now nothing more than a tool for using it when ordered to.

Demetrius grimaced. “Have you considered what would happen if you fail? What if the surrounding countries side with Setrayu? If you can’t put yourself on even footing with them instantly—”

“Just think of the future, a little. Setrayu will collapse after the loss of its dracovitae. It will no longer be able to support the Guffarr Union, and the Union too will be unable to stand. At that point, who exactly could criticize our country?”

“The entire humanoid world would lose trust in the Empire, and their children and their children’s children would curse us!”

“Between people and between countries, there are those who rule and those who are ruled over. Nothing else is possible. ‘Trust’ and ‘Friendship’ are nothing more than pretty mottos, just attempts to rename what is really happening. What is important is how does one rule in a way that cannot be resisted? And how does one soothe discontent, how does one force others to accept his rule?”

Julian stood from his chair, businesslike yet as opulent as a throne. Outside the window were rows of hundreds of roofs. Brilliant sunlight slanted in, illuminating his face.

“My country is strong. If the Union disappears and is no longer in the way, my country will become even stronger. No one will be able to destroy it. If they did, it would mean the end of the humanoid world. Freedom is only obtained once you have power and control. I...I want freedom.”

“What?!” said Demetrius. Julian turned around, and Demetrius was grinding his teeth so hard he seemed likely to crack a molar. “Julian, I was asked by the Marquess—”

“I am the Marquess now!”

“...I was asked by your father to teach you because he believed making this country powerful and peaceful was for the good of the people. It is not in order to turn the world into a blood-soaked battleground where people tear into each other like wolves! Those who rule and those who are ruled over? Fine! But didn’t I tell you that the rulers must have dignity?!” shouted Demetrius in defiance as he sat blocking the audience room’s door. “Let’s have a supplemental lesson! I will not move from this spot until you pass. If you insist on doing things as you are, then cut me down!”

“I see.” Julian drew the gem-studded sword placed as decoration. Just as he’d learned in sword lessons, he stepped quickly forward and slashed the old man in half as he sat defenseless.

“Ugh...gah...”

“You’re preventing me from doing my work. Get out of the way. ...Tsk. Killing is dirtier than I anticipated,” remarked Julian.

Demetrius groaned, blood foaming from his mouth as he turned into nothing more than slabs of meat.

There was the rank smell of scattered organs, the dirtied carpet, Julian's formal clothes for audiences now stained with blood spatter.

He couldn't help clicking his tongue in frustration that his straightening things out would again require a cleanup.

The first time Julian killed a person through orders was when he threw his giant golem at Monica (and her guards) from a distance. He hadn't felt anything then.

Now, he'd killed someone for the first time with his own hands, and still, he felt nothing.

"M-My lord, I heard a— Ah!"

"Clean this up. And get me a change of clothes."

The servant who'd heard the scream rushed away, trembling as he went to get the tools for cleaning.

Julian watched emotionlessly, then looked at Monica.

"This girl is rather lacking in terms of body. Her chest is utterly flat. She may not quite be a penniless daughter of a merchant standing on the street at night, but...I lose any desire to impregnate her when I look at her... Is there anything I can do about that...?"

Monica sat in a haze, no further shock from seeing another person die before her, perhaps because she believed she was already at rock bottom. Her eyes were dry of all tears of fear at this point, and, if you listened very closely, you could hear her singing a lullaby in a faint voice.

It was the sort of song a mother sang to their baby in a crib... Julian felt there was a memory deep inside of hearing that grating lullaby.



"**AND** he's not thinking about the state of things at all, that Julian bastard," hissed Ivar, wrapping up the conversation with a sigh of contempt.

There was a row of tents set up to administer first aid to the people near the castle who had been caught in Julian's attack. People used magic and brute strength to shift the rubble, pulling out people buried alive, and Viola and Kaphal had been casting life-saving healing magic on people for a long time.

Dawn came before they knew it, and the members of the Golden Helm sat on a fragment of broken wall along with Kaphal to take a rest. Ivar joined them there, having come from a full night of information gathering and analysis.

As long as Julian could hobble Setrayu, it didn't matter what happened afterwards...

That was what Ivar suspected Julian's strategy was, and that was enough to leave everyone speechless.

"But, he can't possibly..." started Lushera.

"You sure? This guy's got a couple dozen screws loose in his noggin, 'cause he snatched a dracovitae user, then picked up the dracovitae itself in the middle of a banquet meant for him. Anything can happen so long as it's physically possible."

Lushera couldn't refute Ivar's hypothesis.

If someone was a completely ignorant moron, or so coldhearted with nothing to lose that they couldn't understand the subtleties of the human heart, then perhaps they would come up with this plan. Julian didn't seem like a moron, and the rest seemed to align with Lushera's impression of him.

"I was so close to her!" cried Viola as she punched a piece of rubble with an expression of burning regret that Lushera had never seen from her.

"Calm down, Viola. Same goes for all three of us," said Timm.

"Indeed. This is my fault for failing to anticipate his plans," came the voice of someone joining the conversation. It was King Lazlo accompanied by a knight, a bloodied bandage wrapped around his torso beneath his overcoat.

"Your Majesty! Should you not be resting?" asked Timm.

"No need to worry, Timm. I was the first to receive treatment from the priests. Ah, everyone, please don't worry about decorum here. No need to bow

to me, save as many people as you can,” he said to the knights and priests who froze in surprise at the sight of him, pausing their hurried bustling, then resuming it on his command.

Lazlo went to sit on a piece of rubble facing the rest of them, causing the knight with him to dart off like an arrow to bring a folding chair from nearby.

“Just now, I contacted Martgarz directly regarding last night’s events using long-distance communication to get an explanation. I was told the imperial court was not involved, but nothing else as it was still ‘under investigation.’ They also refused to commit to any handling of Julian,” he explained.

“They’re...buying time?” guessed Lushera.

“Most likely. As they did issue a statement saying they were not involved, I believe that to be true. However...this is a rare opportunity for them. They’re trying to take advantage of the situation.”

Everyone groaned.

Countries rarely lied to each other, but they often used obfuscation to justify their actions. Lazlo’s reaction implied it was unlikely they could expect the imperial court to handle Julian in good faith regarding Setrayu.

“Martgarz is powerful. They may, for example, step in once Marquess Angus takes Mount Kugus, officially punish Julian, then return the dracovitae to us to show they have laws as a humanoid country would, which would lessen criticisms...” said Lazlo.

“You gotta be kidding me,” said Timm. “Once they make a road through Mount Kugus, even without the dracovitae, they can just...”

“Swallow us whole. And if that happened, Martgarz needn’t even invade. We would lose any war, meaning we would essentially become a vassal state of the Empire. The Union would likely negotiate a peace treaty with the Empire at that point, as they would be in a disadvantageous situation.”

The result of that was far too appealing for Martgarz. They could bring an end to this stalemate of a war that had dragged on for fourteen years. They probably couldn’t resist that temptation.

At the moment, they had just about enough wiggle room to use the excuse that Julian was out of control, and they couldn't stop him, and if the entire situation ended with peace, then they might avoid the surrounding countries developing a horrible impression of the Empire. It wasn't even the worst possible outcome for Setrayu...in that it didn't involve being invaded, large numbers of its citizens killed, and its territory occupied.

"And this means the imperial court doesn't even have to get its hands dirty! Dammit to hell!" shouted Weyne, kicking a cracked paving stone.

"Well, even if the imperial court wishes to end this at an appropriate moment, we don't know if Julian will stop there," said Lazlo. "We have to be prepared for the possibility that things will go far worse than even what the imperial court is aiming for."

"But, if this situation keeps going, Martgarz won't get off scot-free...will they?" said Lushera, and Ivar nodded.

"That's why it's a race against time for them," he said. "I bet Julian understands that too. I give it a 90 percent probability that Julian's gonna come for Mount Kugus in the next few days with Lady Monica. He'll only use his military. The imperial court isn't that on board. Which means Setrayu can probably fight back, at least in terms of military numbers..."

Lushera knew what the problem with that was. The dracovitae were powerful enough to rival a dragon. Some even said they were more powerful. Even if both Kaphal and Lushera joined the battle, winning wasn't going to be an easy feat.

"Is there any way to stop the dracovitae?" asked Lushera.

"Quickest way is to kill the user," answered Ivar.

"But—!" That heartless comment left Lushera struggling to find both her breath and her words. "...I can't do that."

"Didn't think so," he said. "But winning gets a lot harder if you won't kill her. And more dangerous for you. I won't stop you if you still wanna do it even knowing that. Not that I know what Setrayu's feelings are on this."

Ivar must have been conscious of his own standing because he didn't directly

address Lazlo. It was like he was indirectly asking the King a question while talking to Lushera.

Everyone looked at Lazlo. The wounded king of Setrayu stared into the distance as uneasiness marred his face. “If winning is possible without taking that measure, then I would like to avoid it.”

No one said anything else.

Lazlo would do it, if it meant exchanging the life of one person, Monica, for the entire country. That’s what he should do, as king. No one could blame him either, as it was far better than a gamble that had no chance of succeeding.

At the same time, Lushera just couldn’t accept that ending.

“The next best option is stealing the dracovitae back,” said Ivar. “Since every country monitors the dracovitae user bloodline, this isn’t something you see often in normal battles, but it’s something we can do this time. If we get a dracovitae user who’s got a higher compatibility rate than Monica, we can directly steal back control of it.”

“Countries generally operate like that,” said Weyne. “Since they don’t exactly have the capacity to fix a dracovitae if it breaks while they were trying to stop someone with it.”

“Which means we’re goin’ in full force,” said Timm. “Lushera’s a member of our party, both on paper and in fact. And if it means gettin’ back the dracovitae in the process, I don’t think even the Guild’s gonna complain about it being political interference.”

That reassured Lushera. All three of her companions looked filled with utter conviction, each of them wanting to protect something important to them. They had to stop Julian.

Lushera felt the same. This was so she could live together with Kaphal.

And even though her connection with Monica was barely more than them brushing shoulders in passing, Lushera heard Monica’s true feelings (even if it was 99 percent by accident) and she wanted to protect her.

“The bastard’s going to know the flaws in his own plan,” said Ivar. “He’ll have

Lady Monica heavily protected, and since she's under his control, she'll come to attack you."

"Even so, I'm going to save her," said Lushera.

"...In any case, pretty sure you're gonna need to get the dragons' help in protecting the mountain."

"Yeah..."

That had turned into an absolute need at this point. She didn't know if they would be able to protect Mount Kugus even if they did get the dragons' help and increased the number of variants on the mountain. That was just how big a deal it was that their enemy had a dracovitae.

Everything rested on Lushera. She was oddly calm, though, even thinking about that.

"The test thing's tomorrow, right? You okay to make it?" asked Ivar.

"That, at least, you need not worry about," said Lazlo calmly. Being spoken to like that calmed people down, even without reason, it settled unease. The fact that he could say that with such composure without preparation was testament to the fact that, at the end of the day, Lazlo was a man suited to be king. "We know the situation. And with things what they are, I permit you use of the kingdom's teleportation circles. You will be able to reach Kugut'hulm in half an hour if you jump through several of those."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Lushera.

"No need to thank me. I do this for my kingdom." He smiled softly, but then his expression turned serious and concerned. "It may be selfish of me to say this, but I pray for your success."

"I swear I will succeed."



LUSHERA sensed something had changed the moment she stepped foot on Mount Kugus. There was a pressure, like being bound head to toe. A tension, like having a blade to her throat.

Lightning filled the sky, and it almost felt like it was aiming for Lushera's back.

It wasn't just that the entire mountain was brimming with dragon aura, it felt like one chain binding the mountain had been undone.

With the mountain located between Setrayu and Martgarz, the power naturally present here was normally held back by the dracovitae in both countries, but something was different now.

Something terrifying coiled beneath the ever-so-thin layer of earth. Lushera felt she might just melt and disappear if her footsteps broke through.

Far up the mountain, near Kaphal's nest, was what looked very similar to an arena. It was a bowl-shaped space with stone shored up around it to form "spectator" seats, with figures of red and blue arranged there, human in shape only.

"You came. I wondered if you might run," said Shurei as Lushera approached, his teeth bared in a grin.

"I'm not running."

Shurei may look like an old man, but there was nothing frail about him. There was something filling this human-sized body to near bursting, something that concentrated the power filling the mountain even more.

The princely human form of the blue dragon stood beside Shurei, looking as displeased as ever.

His two attendant-like dragons in human form sat in the spectator seats, while Kaphal's main body sat curled around and clinging to a jutting shard of rock as she watched Lushera uneasily.

"We of the Flight of Shilneer Ocean have made a contract with the leader of the Flight of Mount Bermarl. If the Flight of Mount Bermarl acknowledges you as one of their own, then we will help," said the princely blue dragon curtly. *"What happens after that is none of our concern. So long as Kaphal doesn't give meaning to your name, you will have no connection to us. This is a favor we do for the leader of the Bermarl dragons, and whatever happens after is for them to deal with."*

In the end, the deal was made with Shurei. The prince spoke with such finality that she knew he gave her no further thought.

But apparently that wasn't enough for him. He stepped closer to Lushera, looking down at her with eyes shining tumultuously like a swirling tide. *"I expected you to come in with some superficial scheme, but perhaps you have nothing."*

He must not have sensed any change in Lushera even after eyeing her up and down. It wasn't like she was going to get stronger in just seven days. Lushera herself knew there wasn't suddenly some bright light just over the horizon now, but even so, she wasn't the same Lushera she was seven days ago.

"I've made my progress," she said.

"Hmph... You seem to believe that, at least. Then show me what you're made of. I hope you don't embarrass the Bermarl king for his kindness."

He seemed wary and indifferent. He wasn't expecting much from her. Perhaps that was a fair assessment of the Lushera of seven days ago, she was just someone trying to be more than she was.

"That's enough, Blue," said Shurei. *"The mountain is going to become busy soon. We can't stay long here."*

"I know." The blue prince backed down, once stepping back, leaving a ripple in the air.

The next thing Lushera knew, he was sitting high atop an outcropping, looking down at her.

"...So, what do I have to do for the test?" she asked.

"Right. First, take off your clothing."

"What?!" Lushera wrapped her arms around herself, as if to defend her body. What he said wasn't a joke though. He was entirely businesslike. *"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-why do I have to be naked?!"*

"I will never understand humans and how embarrassed they get when removing a single piece of cloth."

"But why?!"

"That's armor, isn't it? Even if it is, it's pointless in the test I'm about to give you. And as a dragon with his pride, I would be pained to see an item of such

great value lost for no reason. Put it somewhere safe."

What he said wasn't some clever justification. He was utterly serious.

Lushera wore her adventuring outfit to this test. Shurei didn't seem to like that.

Dragons were more intelligent than people, or so it was said, but that didn't mean they were without their own desires. In particular, they had an incredibly powerful drive to collect and hoard treasure, and that was a general trait that all dragons shared. They had an eye for discerning what was valuable and rare, and they loved those items.

They even lamented the loss of something valuable even if it wasn't their own, almost like they hoped to meet again someday in their long lives.

"A-Ah... I appreciate your concern," she said.

"The ring too. You don't often see a ring that grants you the ability to speak Draconic. Take it off."

Lushera didn't remember mentioning the ring to him. Maybe Kaphal told him...

Or really, he probably just guessed based on Lushera's actions. She shouldn't underestimate his insight.

She really didn't want to get undressed with people watching, but she gritted her teeth and started removing the armor. She threw it all in a pile and placed it at the edge of the rink, then set Giselle's Ring on top.

This armor is incredibly sturdy...but even it might end up destroyed in this test?

The adventuring outfit with its eye-catching red was made from the pelts of variants from the mountain. It might look like some unconventional, inexplicable costume, but it held great power. It would take an attack of great strength to even scratch it. It was without a doubt one of the most powerful sets of armor in the entire world.

And Shurei just said it might be lost for no reason.

Early summer sun and a hot breeze brimming with dragon aura hit Lushera. She felt them on her bare skin. The day was warm.

Or rather...it was hot.

It felt like an abnormal heat rose from the earth, like the soles of her feet would burn as if walking across sun-scorched sands. Lushera had an abnormal resistance to heat and fire, so how was she feeling this?

Shurei looked at the clothing and ring Lushera set down and waved a finger. An invisible force picked them up, pulling them towards the stones encircling the area. It was like where she put them was still too dangerous.

“Shall we begin?” he said.

“Ah!”

With just his short statement, the ground roared. The earth puckered and roiled, like a cursed swamp releasing noxious fumes. It came with a raging heat that seemed likely to burn Lushera’s very soul.

“The humanoid races are inferior creatures who must use the power of these so-called dracovitae to calm the strength of heaven and earth to survive. Dragons are different. Crimson lava continues to flow in great rivers in lands brimming with the power of fire. In our flight, you are only considered an adult when you bathe yourself in lava. That same lava would take the life of a hatchling whose scales and plating are not yet developed.”

Red light spilled out, filling the area. The ground sunk slowly into glowing lava, transforming the area into a burning pool. Only the ground where she stood remained, so small she couldn’t take a single step.

“It will be painful for your human body, but survive,” said Shurei, and the ground beneath Lushera cracked, dumping her into the lava.



LUSHERA sank up to her shoulders in the red, white, glowing substance.

Her skin and even the inside of her mouth dried to parching, incredible heat pushing down on her from all sides, tormenting her.

“Agh...”

She felt like she was going to breathe out fire every time she exhaled. She focused everything on the energy running through her body, circulating it all the

way to the tips of her fingers and toes.

She knew that her body was abnormally resistant to heat and fire, but she also suspected this lake of lava would burn her alive if she relaxed her focus for even a moment.

It's denser than normal fire...and...it's not just the temperature. There's something else...

There was a moment when her mind suddenly moved away from her body, as if it were seeing the world unfolding before her without end. In a horrifying nightmare of nothing but swirling fire, she was plummeting into the abyss.

The lava here was just a tiny sliver of the raging power in the world, no more than the tip of her fingernail. The heat that attacked her now was connected to the world, and she felt like the entire world was trying to swallow her whole.

But that was just a primitive fear felt by a living creature when faced with something great.

"You are really giving it your all," said Shurei.

He sat floating in midair above the pool of lava with a nonchalant smile.

Lushera lifted one arm from the lava and looked at it. The skin smoked, covered in painful burns, but immediately healed itself.

Her body was surviving at the bare minimum of functionality.

As she was physically destroyed and reformed, the magic inside her—or perhaps it was more accurate to call it the dragon aura—circulated, somehow wicking the damage away to maintain the fact of her existence. There was a difficult to endure pain, like she was being slowly whittled down.

"How...does this end...?" she asked.

"Hm, I'm not really sure."

"What?!"

Shurei put on a thinking face, playing dumb. Lushera forgot her pain for just a moment as she let out a hysterical cry.

"I've heard dragons value their contracts, does that mean they can do

whatever they want to someone they don't have an agreement with?" she asked.

"Do you think you're equal to us? And here I thought just giving you a chance was already a huge concession on my part."

"I came here not even knowing what would happen. This started before I could even...agh...before I could even ask any questions. Ahhh... I know it's late for this, but can we agree on the rules now...?"

Going into a job not knowing what you needed to do or what you would get in return was asking for something bad to happen. Lushera knew it was a mistake to get swept up by the situation and thrown in a pool of lava before clarifying the details.

Lushera and Shurei would never be equal. Lushera had gone beyond being a mere human, becoming closer to being a dragon, but she would never actually be a dragon.

Lava bathing might be just a method of washing to red dragons like Kaphal, but to Lushera, it was a test that could take her life.

And what about it?

She glared right back at Shurei, refusing to look away from his burning eyes.

"All right," he said. "I will accept you if you survive until the sun rises."

"But, Father!" cried Kaphal as she watched the proceedings.

That was nearly a whole day from now.

"Are you trying to kill me...?" asked Lushera.

"Are you already whining?"

"I... I think I have a pretty good idea of just how strong I am. Generally..."

Since this was the first time Lushera had ever experienced raging primeval flames gnawing away at her body, she didn't have a completely clear picture of what her limit was, but she could estimate.

Would she survive until the sun set? If she pushed herself to her limits, grit her teeth and forced herself through on sheer willpower and determination...

she wouldn't make it to see the next sunrise. That's what she sensed.

And she knew she wasn't the only one who knew it.

"You know it too," she said.

"Hm?"

"You gave that target knowing it would be impossible. Which means you must have something else in mind," she said, looking up at him.

She knew she couldn't take this old man lightly, not in any way. He probably knew exactly how strong she was with one look. At least an hour had passed since the start of this "test," and he probably measured how much it drained her. He must have some reason for throwing an impossible task at her, so impossible even she knew she couldn't do it.

"If you're using my language out of consideration, don't," she said. "Speak to me in Draconic. Or would...doing that be a problem for you? Since it's not a language suited for hiding things..."

When Shurei suddenly switched to her language, she assumed it was out of consideration for the fact that she was no longer wearing Giselle's Ring, but what if there was some other motive behind that? Draconic wasn't good at concealing anything.

"...Such an insolent whelp," he said. *"If you were right, what of it?"*

His eyes followed his words. He stared at her, as if seeing into her.

This conversation was part of the test.

"I can't do anything. I'm just...in a position of trying to be accepted. But if...the purpose of this 'test' is just to toy with me and kill me...then...I have to try and think of what to do. I would really appreciate it...if you told me...if that's not the purpose."

"If I did intend to kill you, do you think you could stop me?"

"No," she said firmly. Managing that wouldn't even just be a one-in-a-thousand chance. It'd be wishful thinking to imagine she even had a one-in-a-million chance. She knew that much at least. "I don't think I could stop you, but I'd still fight. Because if that happened...the best hope I had would be...to give it

everything I had to convince you to work with us."

"To me, you look just like you're xxx trying to find a way to xxx survive."

"I am. If it means my survival, I'll face any fight without cowardice. I'm not... trying to be cool and claim I'd be happy giving my life for this... I've learned that...only tragedy waits for those who don't value themselves..."

It frustrated her that she couldn't express these words in Draconic. She was willing to give her soul for this conviction. She just learned when it was already too late for it to matter exactly how much of a sin it was to forsake yourself. She wasn't about to do that again, and she wouldn't let Kaphal do it.

That feeling, that conviction was firm. What could a person, the world, a dragon king even do?

"Was it wrong to call this a test?" she asked. "If so, then let me say this again: If you plan to take my life, I will find a way to defeat you, and to make you work with me."

Lushera had learned from Kaphal's example. Purpose is power. With unwavering will that no one can stop, the dragon roars!

"I determined live with Mom!" she exclaimed in draconic.

"Lushera!" Kaphal cried emotionally as she watched with bated breath.

Shurei remained unmoved. Or so Lushera thought for a moment, but then his face split into a grin that went from ear to ear. *"How amusing! I was planning to watch you suffer until you were on the xxxx of death, but I've changed my mind!"*

Lushera didn't even have time to feel shocked by his reaction. The sea of lava encasing her pulsed then swirled upwards.

"Uwaah!"

It soared, like a vortex leaping into the sky. Heat struck Lushera, nearly sending her falling.

The pool of lava disappeared without a trace. The heat tormenting her body faded, the early summer breeze caressing her skin, feeling as cold as winter snow in comparison to the lava.

That lava that defied gravity slowly split into two streams and fell. The giant flows fell between Shurei and Lushera then turned into small objects. The glow of fire faded, leaving long, rugged lumps of stone pierced into the ground.

“Swords?” asked Lushera, evaluating the objects in front of her, covering her naked body whose sensations of anything other than pain felt undefined.

The objects were two lumps of stone shaped into crude swords.

“If you can land one strike on me with that sword, I will acknowledge that your xxxx is more than just xxxx, that it is true conviction.”

Shurei took his sword and fell into an odd stance, the puppet controlled by a red dragon king baring its teeth in laughter.

Lushera felt as tense as if a thousand swords pierced into her from every direction.

“Now then, come at me. No need for xxxx.”

Shurei was completely normal as he stood with his sword, but what was this pressure she felt?

Lushera was a complete beginner when it came to swordplay so she couldn't read her opponent that well, but she got the feeling Shurei was confident he could handle any attack from any direction.

She drew her sword from the ground and rushed towards him. “Haaaaaaah!”

She couldn't use any techniques requiring finesse. All she could do was swing her sword hard and fast.

Shurei stood there, waiting, unmoving. Four more steps, three, two...

“Agh!”

A gust of heat, or an explosion hit her.

Energy crashed into her, penetrating to the very marrow of her bones. She screamed as she was flung back.

What was that? He didn't even move!

Pain racked her body. Patches of her white, delicate skin were singed to the point of turning black. A normal person on the receiving end of that would likely

have died instantly, even their bones turned to charcoal.

"I said I would change the content of the test. I never said it would be easier," said Shurei, looking at her with the same brown eyes with vertical pupils that she and Kaphal had. That gaze pierced her like a spear, pinning her to the ground.

"I'm just standing here," he said. *"Why don't you try attacking me from behind?"*

"Huh...?"

Shurei gave her a thin, ferocious smile and slowly turned so his back faced her as if trying to tell her something.

Even if he was a dragon, so long as he was in human form, it wouldn't be easy to deal with an attack from behind. The body wasn't built for it.

The fact that he said that means he's completely confident he can handle it. I don't like falling for his lure, but my first step is figuring him out!

Again, Lushera rushed towards him, closing in on the back of the old man who, despite looking like a human, didn't seem very humanlike.

She closed the last step.

"Ah!"

"Oh, seems you saw it better that time than the first."

She nearly thought a dragon wreathed in fire flew past her, skimming the tip of her nose.

Fire!

Lushera sensed power swirling around Shurei. She must have missed it before because Shurei himself contained immense energy. This power responded to his will, turning into fire to strike Lushera away.

This fire was far sharper and refined a weapon than the lava from before which had existed like it was nothing.

"It is xxx, dragon aura released from this measly human form that cannot contain it. Break through it. Even one lucky strike does it. I think this is far more

xxx than waiting in a pool of lava until tomorrow morning.”

What he said sounded like a clever and provoking joke. *He doesn’t look like he’s about to accept a lucky hit.*

Hitting this dragon king through sheer good luck was a possibility as small as the hole in a needle. It wasn’t entirely hopeless, so it would be worth trying it when she really was out of options. A logical adventuring manager didn’t rely on luck from the start, though.

As Lushera observed Shurei, the wind began to howl, a pressure so great it made her shudder as it passed by her. There was a trail burnt into the ground.

“If you’re going to be so meek, then I shall xxxx.”

“Gah!”

Shurei wasn’t going to give her the time to think carefully.

There’s got to be a reason he changed the test. There’s got to be a way through this!

Lushera raised her sword and locked her eyes onto Shurei so she didn’t miss a single step, then went at him.



LUSHERA leaned against her sword, pierced into the ground, her chest heaving.

“Huff, huff...”

“...You can still stand?”

Even after attacking several times, she couldn’t even get Shurei to raise his sword to block her. He just glanced at each attack and intercepted it with fire.

He simply stood there, like always.

I’m starting to get a feel for it... thought Lushera. The theory should be the same as how the dracovitae hold back the power of the natural world... It’s the same as how my fire breath makes flowing fire. I just need to pierce into that flow of dragon aura and pull it open.

She was learning. While she was pushed back by the cloak of fire protecting

Shurei, she was starting to get a feel for its flow. A strategy was forming.

But, did I burn myself out too much? How many more times can I handle attacking?!

In exchange, Lushera was battered and bruised. She tried to fight while evading a direct hit as much as possible, but it wasn't easy. There were burns all over her body.

She did her best not to look directly at the painful wounds. She could immediately heal minor damage by making the energy flow through her body, but these injuries were worse than they looked.

She no longer had the extra capacity to feel pain. Her mind wavered, like a flickering candle flame. She couldn't steady her arms and legs.

"Father! Lushera's going to die if you keep going like this!" cried Kaphal, unable to stand by any longer.

The blue prince looked at her out of the corner of his eye and sneered. *"Is this all then? If so, it means that the human you picked up really is a pathetic creature without worth."*

"I still fight!" said Lushera. Looking up at this point was a grueling task, but she looked towards Kaphal, who seemed uneasy. *"Mom... Watch, little longer..."*

"Lushera..."

It's okay. I don't plan on dying. I can still fight.

Shurei still had his sword up in an easy stance, but looked at Kaphal for some reason, like he found something amusing. *"Kaphal. What do you think a parent can do for their child?"*

"What...?"

He started talking to her instead, all of a sudden, though he still faced Lushera. The blue dragons seemed to question what Shurei was on about now.

"Children do not grow up as their parents want them to! They do everything you should stop them from doing! They refuse everything you try to give them!"

There was the weight of experience in what he said, the anger of many years

packed into his short statement. He looked resentful as he vented his frustration, but then his expression softened.

"The act of raising a child is far from xxx. You can't raise them how you imagined, but you can raise the child you have. Then, all that's left for you to do is to accept the child you have, acknowledge them for who they are."

Lushera was also starting to wonder what she was listening to, but Shurei looked serious. This wasn't some random lecture of his. He was saying it here and now because it was necessary.

While dragons lived so long, they very rarely had children. That's why raising their young was far more important to them than it was to humanoids.

"A year...that's xxx for us dragons. It's not even that long in human terms. I imagine you still want to keep her in your nest, doting on her. But you can't."

He wasn't talking to Lushera, his opponent. He was addressing Kaphal.

Lushera saw the gentleness of a father watching his daughter grow.

There is no such thing as a perfect mother. And growth isn't limited to only children.

"Even this dragon king says to xxx in order to live together! Force yourself through! But what are you so afraid of? Are your eyes still clouded? Why won't you acknowledge the dragon aura contained within that name!" roared Shurei.

Kaphal's eyes lit, like the sun climbing up from the other side of the mountain. "Lushera!" she cried, and the world rumbled.

For the first time, Lushera could see *meaning* when Kaphal said her name: Daughter of Luja, our beloved child, a piece of this world!

Draconic's meaning was multilayered, multidimensional. What Kaphal said now was Lushera's name with its real meaning included.

The name Lushera didn't have that meaning inherently. It wasn't a true dragon name until that meaning had been added to the name. And that's what Kaphal cried now. She gave Lushera her name.

Strength filled her beaten body. When Lushera received a name of mere sounds from Kaphal, she'd also received the form of a girl and inhuman

strength. A similar change was happening now.

Lushera connected to the power flowing through the world, connected to a portion of the massive cycle. It came, and it went, more powerful than the gushing well of fire.

Deep and blue!

One drop, rain skimming Lushera's nose. The clear blue sky slowly darkened, clouds covering it like thick blankets.

There was a roaring, a howling deep in her ears. Mount Kugus was rich with water. It received a lot of rain, and that rain turned into rivers. Those rivers grew in power.

She felt odd, like her arm was going to burst. She swung her sword of cooled lava and droplets sprayed from it.

"But that's—!"

The blue dragons of course realized what the change was immediately.

An odd rain fell from the heavy clouds. It swirled like a whirlwind, gaining aim, flowing into a single stream.

Lushera ran. The rain had barely wet the ground, but Lushera's footsteps sent droplets flying, like she'd jumped into a puddle of water.

Shurei was encased in flames, the wall blocking her way.

I'll break it down!

Her sword was heavy. She ran, as if dragging the heavens with her. What she held was no longer just a sword of cooled lava. It was a storming blade, as tall as Kaphal's real body, a huge flow swirling as it fell from the sky.

"Hiyaaaaa!"

She spun herself around and struck.

Water collided, exploding, then silence.

Shurei's barrier of fire had been broken down, and there was a slash across the chest of his human puppet. There was even a gigantic gash in the stone behind him left by the high water pressure, dripping wet.

"That...was an impressive water breath," he said.

"I never realized Lushera had this power..." said Kaphal.

The soaking-wet red dragon king smiled gently and fell to his knees.



SEVERAL wyverns flew through the sky cleared of rain. One of them carried two figures, one red, one blue.

"I'm happy you are satisfied with the outcome," Shurei said teasingly while he steered his variant mount.

The wound in his chest had already healed. It was nothing to heal this fake body so long as he still had the energy left to do so.

Riding with him was the blue prince. He sighed with an expression that said he'd been had. *"How could I not be satisfied after seeing that! You planned it to go that way from the beginning."*

"Ah-haha! I have no idea what you're talking about." Shurei roared with laughter.

Shurei never wanted to abandon his bungling daughter or her adopted child, but he was well aware of what the Flight of the Shilneer Ocean thought, and there were some concessions he couldn't make as a dragon king.

He considered several options, but what he could do depended entirely on Lushera. And it turned out perhaps as good as it possibly could have. He was relieved it didn't end with him killing her.

She showed them a dignity that brought pride in the name of the dragons. It was an iron will that made the natural world do as you commanded, something which came naturally to those with power, to dragons, but perhaps too much for a human to handle.

In the end, he just gave the girl a little push on the back. With how she turned out, she shouldn't sully the name of the Shilneer flight either.

With that, the Flight of the Shilneer Ocean agreed to help. The rest they could leave to Kaphal.

A flight couldn't take part in a battle between humanoids. More than anything, they had to prevent a second coming of that tragic war, the Human-Dragon War, where humanoids and dragons killed each other for rule of the world.

Both humanoids and dragons shared that goal of preventing such a war again. Humanoids are strictly forbidden from targeting dragon flights, and dragon flights don't fight humanoids. The only dragons that fought humanoids were those who had left a flight, even if only temporarily.

The only thing Shurei could do for his daughter was give her a small gift and pray that everything went well. For both her, and his adopted granddaughter.

“The king of Bermarl seems to have mellowed, looking so happy to be liked by a human of all things,” said the blue prince with venom. He could be so frank because they were so close.

“What about you? Are you sure you don’t want to reveal who you are? Blue, making yourself appear young,” said Shurei in retaliation, a cutting criticism towards his passenger who never even introduced himself to Lushera. *“Perhaps she would have started calling you ‘Grandpa.’”*

“For the love of—!” The blue prince, really Togul, the king of the Shilneer dragons, looked as shocked as if someone had forced a spear down his throat. He must have imagined something so overwhelmingly menacing that he was left speechless. *“You’re a crafty bastard even after all these years!”*

“Aaah-hahaha!”

The blue dragon king looked away, as if trying to hide his feelings, and the red dragon king burst into laughter. The guffaws, as bright as the sun, echoed all the way to the ground, scaring the birds flying towards the first signs of the setting sun.



IT was impossible to know Kenneth Angus's true intentions for the things he accomplished now that he was dead, but it was possible to guess.

Kenneth was born as the heir of the Marquess title. Once he inherited the title and the territory, he was chosen as the person to lead the people. He

didn't question this fact, and he didn't hate it either. He had a strong sense of responsibility, and believed it was only natural that he would risk himself for the good of his people.

After becoming lord, there wasn't any obvious change, but he governed his territory well, and was liked by his people. He was satisfied with his work, seeing the people at peace, and their appreciation of him.

But his rule was not forever.

He believed his people must remain secure even after he had gone, which was why he raised his son and heir, Julian, to be a splendid lord. Like his father, he had a strong sense of responsibility and believed it was natural to give himself for the people.

But Julian had a naturally weak and indecisive nature.

Kenneth felt uneasy. He worried his people and his territory wouldn't fare well if he passed them on to Julian as he was.

Age made Kenneth panic. Every morning he found getting out of bed a little harder, every day he looked in the mirror and saw more wrinkles on his face.

He gathered the greatest tutors from across the country for Julian's education, believing it to be an investment for the people. Sometimes Julian's education was harsh, sometimes...it was even harsher.

It was effective. Julian grew strong, hardy, clever, but Kenneth still wasn't satisfied. He worried because his son grew rebellious towards him, and he wondered if he truly thought of the people.

His worries ended with his death.

"Is this all it takes to rule? It's simple so long as you've learned how to do it," said Julian, sitting in his throne-like chair in his audience chamber. He snorted, looking at the mountain of paperwork that was essentially complete.

The harsh studies day and night had done him some good. If you knew geography, you knew what to do with the land. If you knew about the flow of money, you knew how to make the region prosperous. The work he took over from his father was so easy it made him yawn.

This was the fruits of his father's labor... No, no it wasn't. Julian was certain he could have attained these heights by learning on his own even if his father hadn't forced him to.

The most important responsibility for a lord was making political decisions. Some things had broken down with Kenneth's sudden death, like when goods fell out of a packed carriage when it screeches to a halt, but Julian came to decisions without hesitation for every problem he tackled head-on.

"Hm? Hey, Dekis!" He suddenly scowled as he continued reading a document, then called for the retainer that served as his secretary. "Get me a call charm and connect to the Chief Justice."

"Yes, my lord."

Julian continued working on different paperwork while he waited. A few minutes later, Dekis returned with a slip of paper with magic symbols placed carefully on a tray. When quickly contacting someone in the same city, these were better than using a communication facility.

Call charms could be used to communicate between the set of two charms. On the other end of this charm was the Chief Justice, already connected and waiting for Julian. The Chief Justice was a man named Simon, viscount and vassal for the Angus Marquessate.

Julian traced the pattern on the charm and shouted into it with obvious irritation. "Am I talking to Chief Justice Simon?"

"Yes, my lord. What can I do for you?" The hoarse voice that came back was from an old man.

Viscount Simon had held the position of Chief Justice in the Angus Marquessate for the past twenty years after a career in the justice system.

In Martgarz (and in most countries), justice was carried out by the lords. This usually involved the guard gathering evidence which a judge (a position filled by either someone elected by the people or a noble, it varied) examined and made a decision. Particularly great crimes, or serious political crimes, were tried directly under the name of the lord. These were heard in the Lord's Court.

"I just received the decision about the trial in the Lord's Court. What is this?"

said Julian. “The leader is getting life imprisonment and the others are only serving a term? Why give them such a soft sentence? They’re bandits. They’ve likely killed many people.”

“They were originally farmers and are citizens of the marquessate. They fell to stealing as a means of survival after the poor harvest two years ago. We are at fault for failing to help them and we should give them the opportunity to change their lives...according to your father’s opinion.”

Julian listened to the Chief Justice speaking irritably slowly, an inexplicable rage boiling up inside him. “People who have killed others get to use a reason like that to save their own lives? No. Sentence them to death. All of them.”

“Ah... My lord, they never killed anyone unnecessarily during their thefts...”

“Besides, even among farmers struggling to find food, there are people scraping by. There are possibly even some who bravely choose death by starvation rather than committing crimes. Even beggars are better than bandits. There are all those people out there choosing other paths, but these ones chose a life of crime. What justice is served by taking pity on them? And by removing their heads, we’ll be reducing food rations. It’s only logical.”

The call charm remained silent, as if the person on the other end couldn’t find anything to say in response.

“I’ve come to see that all of you and my father ruled relying on ‘feelings’ and ‘mood.’ But from now on, you’re going to do things my way. Don’t worry, everything will turn out great.”

Julian ran a finger across the charm, ending the call, then slammed his “Veto” stamp onto the decision document.

“My lord...are you finished?” said Dekis with significant hesitation, having listened to the conversation from the side.

“Do you disagree?”

“It’s not that, my lord... I have something else to report. Preparations for the attack force for Mount Kugus have been completed, just now...”

“It seems we managed to make it before the court stepped in. Ha, I was

getting nervous," replied Julian quietly. Then he quietly stood.

Everything was just a simple calculation, just the labor of overwriting the incorrect things with the correct things.

But for Julian, there was no greater joy than forging his own path as he saw fit.

Chapter 6: The Battle with Water Behind

HAMMERING echoed across Mount Kugus.

More humans were on the mountain now than had been in the past several decades. The royal court requested the Foster Duchy to prepare a defensive force and dispatch it to the mountain, where they began building a military base.

Lushera looked at the map rolled out on top of a large tree stump. It was an old map, drafted before Kaphal came to live on the mountain. The facilities and roads had disappeared since then, but the landscape was largely the same.

On the other side of the map was a man around forty years old. He was a knight wearing relatively light armor and a flowing, robe-like surcoat. He had the trained physique of a warrior, but still had a bony, angular look, likely a natural physical characteristic.

He was Viscount Cristophe Murdeux.

The exact meaning of a lord varied somewhat between countries, but there were some commonalities across the world since the humanoid alliance that existed during the Human-Dragon War took time to break apart.

Generally, a family was given a title relative to their status, and that title was passed down through the generations.

Those lords who ruled over lands given to them directly by the monarch were the high nobility, called either duke, marquess, or count depending on their status. Then there were the lower nobles, viscounts or barons, who were vassals to a high noble and given responsibility of a city or small region. The monarchs generally included these lower nobles as part of the peerage ranking, but also gave the high nobles free rein to grant these titles to their vassals as they saw fit.

There was also a non-hereditary title, a lord or lady knight, which was given to common folk employed by nobles in important governmental or military

positions.

Kugut'hulm was within the Foster Duchy, with the family overseeing it and Mount Kugus (the part in Setrayu, anyway).

Cristophe was a vassal of the Foster Duchy, though the Duchy hadn't given him Mount Kugus as a territory. The land he was given responsibility of was a town farther to the south, but he was dispatched by the Duchy to lead the defense forces on the mountain.

Lushera had been on edge, wondering what kind of man he was, but he thankfully turned out to be someone worthy of respect.

"Variants aren't really dragon servants," she was explaining. "They don't really listen to what the dragon says. Actually, it's more likely they would eat the dragon if they got the chance."

"I see. Then how does one control them?"

"Normally all you can do is let them loose, but in this case...we use this." Lushera took out a blackened stone to show Cristophe. It had a very particular and odd smell. "Kaphal roasted this stone for a long time with her fire breath. Even humans can smell it, but monsters are even more sensitive to it. Variants generally don't go near places that a dragon claimed as its own territory, so, if we place these in the right spots, we can section off a set territory for us."

Dragon breath had a very particular smell to it. A dragon's prey was generally dead before it could smell this, but it was sort of a general "dragon scent" that pervaded their entire body.

Kaphal had burned several trees around the nest with her breath, burning in this scent to lay down a boundary line and keep the variants away from Lushera.

Apparently, the scent came from their saliva. Crystallized pieces of the components of that saliva were called "dragon stones," and used in high-end perfumes, or as valuable alchemical materials.

The variants the blue dragons brought knew the smell of a dragon and how powerful they were, just like the variants originally on the mountain. They could limit where the variants went by using that knowledge.

“Once the enemy comes, we can scatter attractants and stimulants to get the monsters worked up, making them attack,” said Lushera. “We’ve already tested that one. Basically, all we can do is make them stay where we want them until we use them, then point them in the right direction when we need them.”

“That should be plenty. I want them stationed today, if possible,” he said.

“I think we can manage.”

Powerful wingbeats overlapped the sky, cutting in front of the sun.

Lushera looked up to see Kaphal, a giant wolf-headed octopus grasped in her foreclaws. She was placing the variants herself, since they were clearly too much for humans to handle.

“How is the fort?” asked Lushera.

“Incredible, three times the size I had in mind. Since the mountain queen was kind enough to create the fort for us, all we have to do is prepare the fencing. Our information sources say the earliest Martgarz can make their move is in two days... I sincerely regret our lack of power which prevents us from confirming that information, but I am using it as a general target, making sure we’ll be ready by then,” said Cristophe, his feelings of shame showing through in his grimace as he rubbed his forehead between his brows.

It wasn’t healthy to rely on external human resources, ones you weren’t sure you could trust. Even Ivar himself said it wasn’t good, because Cristophe must consider the possibility that Ivar was feeding them false information. If Setrayu succeeded in overcoming this emergency, they would have to rethink how they did things.

Cristophe followed a road on the old map with his finger. “This was a trade route through the mountains before the dragon came to live here. I imagine Marquess Angus’s military will trace its remaining path. The road itself has already been swallowed by the mountain, but it is still geographically the easiest route to move an army through. And he wants to make a road through the mountain.”

They were currently in the process of rushing to make blockades along that route. Just like when Kaphal used magic to build their “house,” she created a

stone building blocking the route, which the military used as a base structure to turn into a fort. This was the same method the military normally used for making impromptu bases, but having Kaphal's help meant it was much larger and stronger than anything they could make with human magic.

"If I'm being entirely honest, it seems a waste to use the lumber from this mountain for something as mundane as a defense barrier, but we have no choice," said Cristophe. "Our engineers should be able to take this incredible material and turn it into the best work they can."

"Thank you."

"Mm-hm. Ah, but...this won't counter the dracovitae either." His expression was tense, knowing there wasn't a minute to spare now, while there were no enemy soldiers in sight. "We fight, putting our lives on the line for the Kingdom of Setrayu and all its people. But in order to win this battle, we must stop the dracovitae. Not just stop it. We must take it back. And to do that..."

"Yes." Lushera nodded, not putting it all into words.

Most battles where there wasn't an equal number of dracovitae on either side were eventually one-sided. Turning the tables in that situation required a power that went beyond normal human understanding.

Meaning Kaphal. Or, even if her strength paled in comparison to Kaphal's, Lushera.

Kaphal and Lushera might not be able to defend the mountain without the knights' assistance, but the reverse was even more true.

"As this is a battle in the mountains, it will be difficult for our opponent to form proper military formations. The basic strategy is to force them to stop at our stronghold, throw the variants at them to throw them off-balance, then send in your group, the anti-dracovitae squad, to take back the dracovitae. I would like to ask the mountain queen to assist from the skies. Having her cover defense from the dracovitae means the soldiers on the ground can act without reservation so long as she gives no room for an attack from the dracovitae."

"Wonder if it'll really go all that well..." said Weyne as he was passing by, sounding unconvinced. He and Timm were helping with construction work, the

two carrying a massive, felled tree trunk between them.

Lushera had similar thoughts to what Weyne had said.

It seemed that Cristophe was building his strategy off the assumption that Marquess Angus would come straight for them, a simple attack. Not even monsters did what you thought they would beforehand, that surely applied even more to human armies, right?

"We cannot know for sure," said Cristophe. "But that's why the overall framework of the strategy should remain simple. It reduces the probability that we'll make a fatal error and allows us to respond to our enemy's tricks if we have the capacity to do so. And the exact same can be said by our enemy. I believe they will come for a head-on attack, because they have the dracovitae and that's where they can put it to the best use."

He looked grim as he carefully explained his expectations, but he wasn't stating anything as certain. He was considering the situation, agonizing even more over the details, and making his decisions while still having his doubts.

"In addition to this strategy, I have been considering scenarios in which they don't come for a head-on assault, and contemplating how we would handle those, planning a goal that will get us through this even if the worst were to happen. However...no matter what happens, no victory we achieve will be gained without the loss of life. We can only pray we settle this as best we possibly can."

Hammering echoed across Mount Kugus.

Kaphal crisscrossed the sky in a hurry, not a cloud in sight as if the heavens mocked the gloom on the ground.



THREE days later, at the northern base of Mount Kugus.

"So, they managed to prepare in time as well? Impudent bastards," grumbled Julian to himself as he looked up at the mountain.

A cluster of buildings looking as if they were made from sheets of solid stone jutted up from the lush mountain. It was obviously a defensive fort built using

magic as quickly as possible.

“My lord, the mountain’s monsters are coming this way,” reported a knight as he knelt.

Several monsters rushed their way in a desperate frenzy, almost like they were being chased by something horrifying. They didn’t appear to be variants, but these crazed monsters fleeing from their death were going fast enough to mow down the humans in their path.

“What a lukewarm opening volley to this battle,” said Julian. “Give me the power of the dracovitae, dog.”

Monica was beside Julian. She floated next to him, as if crucified in air, the dracovitae in weapon form in her hand.

She stared at the ground, her eyes clouded with despair, but the Collar of Slavery around her neck made her act in accordance with Julian’s commands, even if she didn’t want to.

Julian heard a sound like gentle ripples, then a light like the sun reflecting off the sea surrounded him. He thought he might explode. Overwhelming power flowed into him.

Dracovitae could be used in battle, but its users were generally royals and high-ranking nobles. That meant that fighting with a dracovitae meant putting someone important at the frontlines, someone it would be particularly bad if they died (sometimes even a king).

For that reason, most dracovitae had the ability to give the right to use it to someone else, a function made with battle in mind. The dracovitae user still had to be on the battlefield, but they could maintain a relatively safe distance from danger that way.

What was more important in this situation was that, by Julian borrowing the dracovitae, he could wield it himself rather than having to use the interface that was Monica.

“First, an attack,” he said. He formed in his mind the will to attack, and everything immediately went as he wanted it to.

Water gushed from the ground, pushing out in waves that tore down both grass and tree. It slammed into the approaching monsters, becoming surging waves of slaughter.

A great flood born of the earth, water droplets mixed with blood, flesh torn to pieces like chipped wood. The monsters were wiped out in one second, with one attack.

“We move. I will forge a path, all you have to do is move through it.”

The unit moved at Julian’s command.

At the head was Julian and Monica, along with elite knights to defend them, close combat soldiers, and magic users making a total of about 80 soldiers.

The army following them numbered nearly 2,000, with a rearguard in reserve of about 5,000.

It might look like an unbalanced formation, but the crux of this strategy was on Monica (Julian, in other words) and the dracovitae. He would use the dracovitae to cut a path through the mountain, wiping out any who stood in their way, and that achieved their first goal.

The only thing on the battlefield that could stop the dracovitae was the red dragon. But the reverse was also true: only Julian could stop the red dragon. The rest was normal military combat, which meant things came down to numbers.

He could deploy the reserve forces once it got to that point. A straight-on attack wasn’t very effective in this mountainous terrain, and there were only so many incredibly powerful people who could handle a variant, and even less so in this situation.

“Hah!”

There was a roar and water surged from nowhere. Julian only needed to wish it to happen and water, one of the prime sources of this world, would attack with ferocity, changing the landscape in front of him.

Even these trees, as strong as steel after growing within the dragon aura filling the mountain, were toppled by the advancing water brought forth by the

dracovitae. Julian hadn't cared much about any soldiers or traps lying in wait, and a surprise attack would be even more difficult under these circumstances. The army simply continued moving forward. There was no enemy.

Are they not planning on attacking again until we reach the fort? That can't be. They'll come at us to wear us down, using the terrain to their advantage. Like here.

The former road ran up a gently sloping valley. Just as Julian and his vanguard began climbing the long stretch, a large number of figures appeared at the top.

"An attack!"

Bowstrings strummed in rapid succession, the enemy archers lying in hiding raining arrows down on them.

Out of the attack methods regularly used on the battlefield, the one with the longest range was the cannon. Second was the bow. Magic became most threatening in mid-range battles, but bows ruled over anything farther than that.

The literal hail of arrows arched up, increasing their range.

This wasn't very threatening.

The elite knights wore armor made of mithril or orichalcum, strengthened even more through magic imburement. Punching through that sturdy armor, and causing significant damage to the inhumanly powerful bodies inside, would require the archers to use abnormally powerful bows and fire the arrows directly rather than relying on gravity. In a fight between inhumanly powerful opponents, a bow's effective range was shorter than its full range. Only a few of the normal cannon fodder soldiers would die from these arched shots.

But that changed if there was something special about the arrows.

The rain of arrows left trails of lightning in its wake, hurtling down like meteorites. They were magic arrows with lightning imbued in the arrowheads that activated once fired.

"This is trivial!" roared Julian. A freezing burst of wind cut towards the arrows, shattering them all so they fell in pieces.

But the volley was a decoy.

The moment he swept aside the arrows, a pink color settled around the squad.

It was a colored breeze moving in from the flank. Julian's freezing whirlwind sucked in that pink-colored wind, inviting it in, applying blush to the world around them.

"What the hell is this pink powder...?"

"Poison?!"

The knights readied for an attack, the magic users prepared healing and defensive spells, but it wasn't poison. In some ways, this was harder to deal with than poison.

It was a monster attractant and stimulant that used pheromones from paralyzing bees. Attractants were used to draw out monsters to capture or exterminate them, but the goal in this case was obviously different.

"Uraaaaaar!"

"Rooooooar!"

The cloyingly sweet smell filled the air, and monster roars immediately reverberated from nearby.

"Variants!"

There was a cow with more than ten horns sprouting from various spots on its body, a bird running across the ground on overgrown legs and talons, and several other oddly shaped beasts coming for a sudden attack.

Julian immediately went to deal with them, but—

"Groaaaaaaaar!"

It wasn't just the variants coming at them.

Everyone froze at that roar that seemed likely to bury the heavens in rage, attacked by an overwhelming presence, so set apart from other things that it made all living creatures present aware of how small their existence was. Some soldiers fell, their knees giving out, leaving them trembling and unable to do

anything but raise their shields above them.

A shadow far darker than the clouds plummeted to the earth, a form of pure crimson appearing with a powerful beat of her wings.

The red dragon flew through the sky, glaring down at all the humans on the ground.

“It’s here, the dragon! If you stand in my way, I will make you a stone in the foundation of my glory!” cried Julian, even then grinning fearlessly.



“Graaah!”

The sky burned.

Kaphal struck the Marquess’s army with her fire breath from the air.

Dragons could manipulate their breath more naturally than humans could control their exhalations, at least. They could spread it across a wide area, or they could hold it in one place, sweeping everything in its range away.

Kaphal’s breath attack came out in a direct line, similar to a laser spell. The fire formed into a single point like the tip of a spear with enough force to break the mountain. She fired a shot at Julian in an attempt to kill him.

Lushera was on pins and needles as she watched from afar. Monica was with Julian. If it struck directly, she’d be dead.

But she didn’t need to worry. Water came from around the area where Julian probably was and surged upward to the sky to strike a counter at Kaphal’s breath. That was an attack from the Hurricane of Insight.

Fire and water collided.

The two elements met head-on, pushing at each other in an explosive burst of steam. The two attacks seemed equally matched at first, but the spurt of water from the ground slowly pushed the fire back.

As implied by the name, a dragon’s breath attack was applied to their exhaled breath. Even with a dragon’s incredible lung capacity, they couldn’t maintain a burst forever.

Seeing she was on the losing side, Kaphal flapped her wings powerfully to turn and gave up on the deadlocked cross of breath attacks. She dodged the follow-up attack from the dracovitae, sucked in a deep breath, and aimed her next shot at the ground.

Julian of course intercepted it. Steam rose. The water from the attack that missed Kaphal fell back down, wetting the ground, forming a rainbow in the sky.

It's incredibly powerful. Mom's breath attack is losing to it. This is the strength of a dracovitae...

Lushera was about halfway up the mountain, much farther than Julian's vanguard, watching the battle from the roof of the quickly made fort.

If she looked through a pair of magic binoculars that magnified everything it saw, she could see even Monica, floating in the air in the middle of the formation as if crucified.

"Use the overwhelming power of the dracovitae to fend off the enemy, while the soldiers cause further damage and protect the dracovitae... A textbook strategy, but it is strong." Cristophe was beside her, using magic binoculars like her and calmly analyzing the enemy's movements. "Little dragon," he said.

"You can just call me Lushera."

"Ah. Then, Lushera, I'd like to tell you what my impression is. I believe, having seen what I have so far, that we can win."

"...Why?"

Cristophe's eyes glinted from within his face with its pointed nose and sharp features. He didn't look at her, he continued to stare at the battlefield. "He's excited. He's like a fledgling bird exhilarated by the heat of his first battle. In that state, it doesn't matter how intelligent a man he is at his desk, he won't be able to use his head effectively."

"You can tell that from this far away?" Lushera asked.

"I can."

In front of them was the map of the mountain and many call charms. Both the map and charms were held down by paperweights so they didn't blow away in

the wind.

Cristophe lowered his binoculars and swiped along all the charms to activate them like someone just going down a line. Each one of them connected to the commanders in charge of the various squads on the frontline.

“First, draw him in. They are fighting against time. Retreat is not an option for them! Reserve your own strength as you wear them down. Use the variants to our advantage. Remain vigilant in case any of their forces are moving separately!”

“Yes, sir!” came the courageous responses from each of the charms.



THERE was the red dragon’s breath and the pseudo breath created by the power of the dracovitae that Julian borrowed.

While those two abnormal powers struggled against each other, the Setrayuan soldiers defending the mountain attacked the Marquess’s army, forcing them to fight both Setrayuan knights and variants at the same time.

But then the attacks stopped.

“The enemy forces and the red dragon are retreating!”

The decision to retreat was quick.

Julian watched the red dragon flee to the sky, took a breath, and looked around to check the status of his men.

Those who could use healing magic were helping the injured on the ground. Perhaps it was the variants that did it, but there were some whose mithril armor was half melted, some with half their bodies squashed flat, armor and all. The only thing they could do for them was offer a prayer after they confirmed they’d died.

Resurrection magic did exist, but there were many conditions that had to be met. They had to be at a ceremonial location (such as a temple), the body had to be in good condition, they had to use large amounts of magic components, have a magic user of enough skill, and, lastly, they had to have luck.

Even if many people died, they could only attempt resurrection on a few at a

time. There was no getting around the fact that the vast majority of people who died here were going to stay dead.

"They ran the moment their variants were wiped out? Then they'll prepare their next attack at the next line of defense..."

Julian wasn't emotionally impacted at all that his retainers or even his knights were dying. He did at least understand it wasn't a good thing that his fighting force was shrinking.

The knights protecting the dracovitae (and therefore Julian and Monica) were a step above your average soldier in terms of strength. They were all the sort of incredibly strong people who could punch mithril and leave an indent of their fist.

Many of these elite warriors were killed on Mount Kugus not long ago, along with Kenneth Angus. The ones there now were the result of Julian scraping whatever was left back together. They lacked both numbers and skill, and there were no replacements if they died.

They aren't holding back with the variants. Where were they hiding them? he wondered.

It was obvious that the only goal of the variant attack was to weaken the defenses around the dracovitae. Meaning they were pawns meant to be sacrificed. Julian anticipated an attack like that, but the enemy seemed bolder about using them and throwing them away than he expected.

Was it our intelligence gathering or the analysis that was wrong? It was quite possibly both.

Julian had received information that there were monsters with odd movements carrying things to Mount Kugus in the night. The analysis determined Setrayu was using monster-mounted knights to haul military supplies to the mountain. What Julian didn't know was that the dragons were using pack monsters to also haul in variants.

But it didn't matter if there'd been a miscalculation. Retreat was not an option now.

It wasn't necessary either.

Julian looked up at the fort on the side of the mountain and checked the map. There were several places along the route to the fort that seemed likely spots the enemy would attack. He believed their strategy was going to be to throw variants at them at each of those locations, wearing down his men until he was exposed.

“It’s amusing how cautious they are. Well, if that’s the case, I have an idea of my own.” Julian looked over at Monica.

She followed after him, kept aloft in the air by the power of the dracovitae. She didn’t even react to the raging battle around her, possibly because her emotions had been entirely taken over with despair, rendering her unable to move. She just stared down at the ground.

“Wield the dracovitae for me, dog. Cast off all the shackles on the land of Setrayu.”

Anyone looking at her might have questioned her sanity with the way her head drooped, but it snapped up then. For the first time in a long time, fragments of fear lingered deep in her clouded eyes.



THE color of the world around them changed, as if someone splashed dye across everything. That’s the feeling Lushera had.

“What the...?” Cristophe let out a cry of shock, which was very unlike him.

It wasn’t just Lushera who felt it, then—he did too.

It was like stepping out of a cozy room warmed by a fire to a freezing wind lashing you. There was a feeling of cold, cruel helplessness, the feeling of your life being threatened.

Some fatal something rippled out from the battlefield, rewriting the world.

“Things feel different! Is this—?”

“The worst possible situation. He did it. He actually did it!” Cristophe scowled, his teeth bared like a beast. “The bastard! Does he really intend on destroying everything?!”

Any land that was freed of the control of its dracovitae would eventually

regain its power and run wild, turning into a place where humans couldn't survive. Setrayu had lost the dracovitae's suppression and was slowly reverting back to its uncontained state.

What Julian did now was spur that destructive change on. He used the Hurricane of Insight to manipulate the world, further breaking the shackles that were already on the verge of falling off.

If he just wanted to cause cataclysms on the battlefield, all he had to do was use the dracovitae's power. Doing this meant he was trying to throw them off-balance by putting the entire country of Setrayu in danger and forcing them to deal with that threat.

It was a strategy as evil as joining hands with a devil.

Martgarz couldn't get away anymore with just calling this Julian's little rampage of one. Even if they used him as a scapegoat, Setrayu would demand some sort of recompense for this. But that wasn't necessarily a good outcome for Setrayu either, as they would become Martgarz's enemy.

If you throw a stone in a pond, it may sink to the bottom, out of sight, but the ripples it causes spread even farther.

There would be chaos in the humanoid world. As stories of the Human-Dragon War turned to legends, they still maintained a certain level of stability, but Julian was trying to plunge that into disarray.

And yet, the people there at that moment couldn't worry about the repercussions on international peace that might come from this. This moment would decide if they lived or died—if every person who lived in the kingdom of Setrayu lived or died.

In times of peace, the dracovitae were constantly used to arrange the chains that bound the world, calming it. These powerful binds, layered upon each other, were not so weak that they would be broken simply by an equal force applied in the opposite direction. Theoretically.

But the power of the world that had been held back was pushing, helping undo the seals, and it had already been a few days since Setrayu lost its lock, the Hurricane of Insight, meaning the chains were already beginning to rust.

They could only guess how long it would hold. There had never been a similar event to base their estimates on.

“*Grrrrrr...*”

“Mom!”

Kaphal wheeled in the sky, growling as she passed over the mountain to its south side.

Dark, heavy clouds began to spread across the previously blue sky. They started above the battlefield and steadily spread south.

It was like a drop of ink in clear water.

Kaphal turned towards those clouds.

“*Groooooar!*”

Fire exploded. The sky lit up, like there were two suns in the sky, Kaphal’s spray of fire breath burning the rain clouds.

This wasn’t just brushing aside the clouds by launching flames at them. Dragons by their very nature were connected to the world, their power was made of the same thing as a dracovitae’s power. Or rather, a dracovitae was made with the intent of imitating a dragon’s power, allowing human will to manipulate it.

Kaphal was canceling out the power emitted by the Hurricane of Insight, wiping it out.

It was just to buy time. Without it though, the closest town to the mountain, Kugut’hulm, would be swallowed by storms, resulting in the deaths of several thousand people or more.

“Not even the dracovitae’s power can immediately spread to the whole country... How long can she hold it back?” asked Cristophe.

“I have no idea!” Lushera responded.

Even this, Cristophe had anticipated and planned for, though it was the worst possible situation that he had hoped wouldn’t come. Kaphal was the only one who could defend against the dracovitae, buying time, but that meant they had

to take back the dracovitae without Kaphal's help.

"Attack! The enemy can't retreat now. Take the high ground! Make no mistakes when leading the variants!"

Cristophe's expression as he issued orders through the charms wasn't without hope, but it was grim. Every single one of his decisions had life-altering effects on a lot of people, not even just the people there. Anyone with a decent conscience would feel pressure in that situation.

"We will all give our lives if need be to stop the dracovitae. But that does mean..." he trailed off.

"I know." Lushera gritted her teeth.

What he said, he didn't say lightly. With the situation as dire as it was, they couldn't be picky about their methods if it meant protecting the entire country of Setrayu.

And what was the easiest way to stop a dracovitae?

"Before we do that, please just let me try once. I don't want it to end like this," said Lushera.

She still hadn't given up, though.



PEOPLE used the dracovitae to wrestle down the raging power of the natural world, changing the land into a territory they could live in.

The location Julian stood at now was at the very edge of what the Hurricane of Insight could maintain control over. The world's energy spreads out through a conduit known as ground veins, sort of like the tips of blood vessels.

That was why the power of the Hurricane of Insight could run to the entire country of Setrayu. The dracovitae's power to undo the chains would spread throughout the country eventually if there wasn't the dragon's interference.

It did seem that the first place to see its influence was where Julian stood. Dark clouds filled the sky and cold, stinging rain fell.

"The red dragon is flying to the south!"

"That's their only option," said Julian. "It's actually boring how everything keeps happening exactly as I expect it to."

Julian and his guard had been at the lead previously, but now the soldiers following them slogged up to them and formed a defensive position.

The pikemen created a line of spears, the heavily armored soldiers placed their shields side by side, the archers settled in to watch for enemy archers and return any fire, the item operators stood at the ready to activate the defensive barrier in response to any cannon fire or large-scale spells, the magic users used earth elemental spells to create standard walls and ditches to block an advance by the enemy.

The entire population of the country of Setrayu had been taken hostage against the forces defending Mount Kugus. They had no option but to come at them and end this quickly, which meant the Angus army just had to prepare for that assault.

Getting the dragon away from the battlefield and drawing out Setrayu's army was a much better battle for them than climbing up the mountain.

If they stood their ground and prepared to defend, Setrayu would fall in the end. No one would be able to stop Martgarz. An end would come to this disgusting peace that Julian didn't understand, where people clung to the whims and goodwill of other countries and avoided fighting. The world would become what it should be.

It didn't matter to Julian which way things fell from here.

And no matter what did happen, Julian would have his own personal dracovitae at his disposal.

Julian hadn't consulted with anyone about this strategy of targeting Setrayu directly, not until the last minute. Or rather, he didn't consult with anyone at all. He didn't feel any need to ask for the opinions of fools.

Even now, the majority of the forces had no idea what was going on. The only people who did know were Julian and those surrounding him.

There were a few of his vassals that resolutely tried to stop his attack on Setrayu, but he started by eliminating the three most stubborn (and therefore

the three most foolish), and the rest of them fell quiet.

“The threat from the sky is gone. Dispatch all aerial knights. I will shoot down any flying enemies,” ordered Julian and the knights leaped up into the rain-filled sky.

They were hippogriff riders.

The dracovitae’s incredible power wasn’t well-suited to a ground-based melee because you might accidentally hit your own soldiers. It was much easier to provide support by targeting enemies in the sky since both its range and power were excellent.

By robbing the enemy of an opportunity to take the fight to the sky, Julian basically secured a win. Aerial knights could disrupt formations and deliver severe blows as they raced through the air. An army that lost the ability to fight in the skies could only hope they could bring down their opponent with bows or magic shots.

That was his optimistic take, anyway, but he tensed the moment he saw how the enemy was moving.

They brought a magic cannon out on a ridge that kept Julian and his encampment just at the very edge of its range. They must have put the entire cannon into a high-quality storage item and carried it there to set it up. Julian looked through a pair of magic binoculars and saw the engineer operating the cannon as well as a formation of defensive magic users.

That happened too fast.

They aren’t uncertain of how to act... Did they actually anticipate a battle right here? Impudent fools! No matter. Knowing doesn’t mean they can stop me!

Julian felt somewhat irritated because having his thought processes be read so easily seemed to contradict his genius, but once he calmed, he realized it didn’t matter. The strongest and most clever person was the one who won in the end.

After some time, there was a rapid twanging of bowstrings and a black rain of arrows fell towards them from rises around them.

Their own archers responded, then an awning of light appeared above their formation, blocking most of the falling arrows. If two arrows were lucky enough to strike the same place in a row, the second could break through the magic barrier and whoever was unlucky enough to be standing below died.

But this volley wasn't meant to kill many. Its purpose was likely to force them to put up their barrier, preventing them from countering.

Just as the arrows came, a battle cry rang out across the mountain. Mounted knights plunged down the gentle slope towards the Marquess's troops. Leading them was a girl of vivid crimson, running faster than the galloping horses.

She gives off enough power to stir up the dragon aura... No! She's the source of it. Such a powerful presence!

Julian was struck by the raging tide of that aura, making him feel nauseated. It wasn't normal to feel such a powerful presence from this far away.

"My lord!"

"I know. She's finally come."

At any point, Julian could pause his work to undo the bonds of Setrayu and rejoin the battle. The people of this advance would die a pointless death.

That's why they prepared.

While this little dragon girl may be far inferior to the red dragon, she still manipulated the power of the world.

The front guard of Julian's formation consisted of a line of pikemen that would tear apart the enemy's formation, allowing the heavily armed soldiers to move in from the left and right flanks to crush them.

The frontlines of the formation were thick, with Julian far back from the very first line, but the red figure plunged straight forward, not seeming to care.

"Are they hoping to break through the front with those numbers?" asked one of Julian's knights.

"It might be possible. She isn't normal. No normal soldier can stand against me." Julian twisted his hand around and the rain moved.

Like a waterfall, pounding down, like a leviathan capturing its prey, it turned to a cruel blade and struck at Setrayu's defensive troops.

But the water dispersed, not taking a single life. A burning glow leaped from the broken earth and struck the water, turning into a burst of steam that the approaching knights pierced through.

Army collided with army with no care that their shields, armor, spears, and bodies perished. Battle cries, or perhaps desperate rally cries, roared from both sides, mixed with the clash of weapons and armor smashing together.

It immediately descended into a chaotic melee, with the girl of crimson shining within.

She leaped above soldiers' heads with inhuman feats of strength, slipping past their swords and spears, wreaking explosions of fire around her. Swords, shields, and helms clattered to the ground as they burned with the blackened dirt.

Julian struck the moment the hole opened in his squad's formation, giving him a clear shot. A wicked spear of water that could skewer the ground slammed into the swirling wall of flame, but...the girl was no longer there.

The girl rushed into the formation, splitting the cloud of steam. Julian's side launched wind spells to intercept, but the fierce fire she threw at them crushed the wind, roasting several tens of people alive instantly.

"M-My lord, at this rate—" One of Julian's personal guards was shaken by the small dragon's force.

"Stand firm. Have the aerial troops focus on countering variants."

"My lord?!" The guard gaped.

"With the red dragon out of the picture, if we stop that girl, there will be no one left on the battlefield who can stop the dracovitae. Stopping her means victory. Even if she were as powerful as a dragon, we have enough soldiers to wear her down and perhaps inflict some damage. Then I will use the dracovitae to finish her off."

"B-But the number of soldiers we'll lose..."

“There is no way to protect all the lowly soldiers here. Combat is dangerous, or didn’t you know that?” Julian furrowed his brow at the man in contempt for his foolishness. “I’ve anticipated all of this. If I use the dracovitae to attack, I’ll have to pause my efforts to undo the shackles on Setrayu, and the red dragon will return. Which means I must only use it as a counter and to deliver the final blow. I put this army together for this purpose. Follow my orders and carry out your duty. That will result in the fewest deaths and our victory.

“And any who believe my strategy to be flawed, I will allow you to speak now, but only now. Tell me a way that will result in fewer deaths, that will defeat her for certain. But if you’re simply resisting me because you fear the danger in front of you...”

He glared into the eyes of each of his personal guards.

Everyone around him was of outstanding strength, but the closest to him were handpicked by him, people who would become his trusted servants, chosen without concern for their station at birth or rank during his father’s rule.

“There is a fool here that threatens the lives of every soldier who fights for our cause and the prosperity of our country. I will eliminate her before she can kill us,” he said.

Some of them stood frozen in shock, but about half of them, particularly the young or those Julian chose specifically for their abilities, seemed deeply moved, admiration and respect bordering on worship in their eyes.

None disagreed with him. And there was no more time to listen to them anyway.

The roar of battle surged towards them at an impossible rate.

The crimson girl approached alone, destroying their formations, flying forward like a meteorite in the night sky.

There were only about ten elite warriors between her and Julian.

That wasn’t a big problem though. *This* was where it would go down, now was the time they determined who would win and who would lose.

“Come! Attack me! Do, and I will finish you!” he shouted.

The knights moved as one to strike at the girl.

Fire erupted to swallow several of them at once, but, if they knew the attack was coming, they could defend, prepare. These warriors with their high-quality equipment, powerful bodies, and trained skill might be harmed by a dragon's hellfire, but they wouldn't die instantly. That was important.

The magic users cast healing and support spells one after another, and the knights hung in there. One knight swung his sword at the girl while inside the swirling flames.

She jumped out of the way, kicked his helm, and flipped. From midair, she swept the area with waves of fire. As she landed, she thrust her arms to the sides, smashing through armor with her palm strikes, sending two knights flying.

"Now!"

For a moment, she was still, and in that moment, Julian struck with the Hurricane of Insight.

Just like a dragon's breath attack, an attack from a dracovitae was a primeval power that used the mechanisms of the world itself to directly wipe out your enemy. Because of that, it gave little forewarning, like magic did. It was vicious and it was instant.

Chilled air so cold it might freeze your very soul rose from the ground, then a huge, spear-like icicle that rivaled a dragon in size erupted from the ground.

The crimson girl no longer moved, surrounded by ice reflecting a myriad of lights.



GOING back in time, to before the battle began...

"There's this phrase adventurers use: first-sight death. Sometimes people call it a 'clueless death' too."

In the fort up the mountainside, Cristophe and the members of the Golden Helm were having a strategy meeting in a simple room that had nothing but a plain table, a result of their hasty preparations.

"There are some monsters you can't tell how strong they are just by looking

at them,” Timm was saying. “They got the strength to kill ya, but they hide it, getting close enough to you take ya out by surprise. Gettin’ killed by one of these monsters is called a first-sight death, since it was your first time seeing it and you don’t know how strong it is. Sometimes the monsters that are good at doling out first-sight deaths are called a first-sight death themselves. But anyway.”

Cristophe was listening intently to what Timm said.

Knights were warriors, soldiers. Their job entailed battles that were many versus many, and, to an extent, the best strategy was figuring out how to take standardized units and best apply them.

Adventurers, on the other hand, needed to be able to respond to any situation, to monsters with unbelievable abilities. It was just a little better for them to think about how to use abnormal strengths.

“I think it’s good to assume they’ve got a general idea of what Lushera can do, but just having more variants is already throwing their calculations off. And Lushera’s got a brand-new skill,” continued Timm.

“The Hurricane of Insight is a water-based dracovitae,” said Lushera. “I’m certain the dracovitae is more powerful than me, but I should be able to divert its weapon-form attacks with my pseudo-tidal breath. I’m sure we can make an opening if we make them think I can only use fire breath. And in terms of how that ties in with our victory...”

“You have a plan for this too?” asked Cristophe.

“I do.” She nodded. “I’ll need Mom’s help.”

Kaphal’s large eye peeked in through the window, watching the strategy meeting.



IF Julian had just a bit more experience in combat, or if he’d accepted the advice of those more experienced than him, maybe he would have realized.

Maybe he would have felt it, the niggling sense that there was something off because, even though the crimson girl wiped out all those soldiers, she herself

received no injuries, not even a scratch, not a single fleck of grime or blood on her, as beautiful and perfect as a picture.

If you run through a battlefield, you would be dirtied by dust and mud, but she wasn't yet good enough at creating her crimson puppets to replicate that level of physical features.

In the middle of the battlefield was the gigantic icicle block, but the crimson girl wasn't inside anymore.

Julian thought for a moment that she'd disappeared, but in her place knelt a beautiful woman with long, fiery locks.

"What in the—?!"

"...Deceiving hard," she said, then disappeared. The red dragon roared on the other side of the mountain.

They said dragons could turn into people. And because they could do that, they could also create a puppet form that could act independently of their main body. Dragons who weren't very skilled at the technique couldn't actually turn their real selves into a person, they could only create and move this puppet.

The dragon was also capable of deciding the appearance of that puppet to be whatever they wanted it to be. Kaphal, for example, created a form that matched Lushera in style, that looked like it could be her mother.

Looking at that in reverse, it meant Kaphal could change the appearance of her puppet, even make one that looked just like Lushera.

These puppets were far weaker than the real dragon body, but they weren't *weak*. They emitted a dragon aura, could use magic, and were far stronger than a human.

But they didn't have the power to rewrite the world, a power dragons naturally had. They weren't powerful enough to stand against a dracovitae. That was why even Julian was convinced the puppet was Lushera when he looked at it.

"It was a fake! Th-Then where's the real one?!" shouted Julian as he scanned around him.

Kaphal's main form was on the other side of the mountain, constantly using her fire breath to stop the dracovitae. There was no way she could use her full draconic powers on this battlefield.

Which meant that, even if that was a fake Lushera, the real Lushera should be nearby to use her abilities. It was the only logical conclusion.

Those Setrayuan knights that charged with the fake Lushera... Amongst them, was one knight performing particularly admirably, a small knight, wielding their giant war axe from atop their horse to slice down enemy soldiers.

You couldn't tell who it was, since they were hidden by full armor and a helmet, but the normal assumption would be they were a female dwarf. Dwarf women stopped growing at what humans thought looked to be their mid-teens, but their bodies became as strong as their male counterparts, and being small on a battlefield was beneficial as it actually meant you were a harder target to hit, and a lighter load for your mount to carry. There was nothing abnormal about a female dwarf being here. The fact that they were wielding a dwarf's preferred weapon, an axe, was even more supporting evidence for the lie.

"Hiyaaaaaa!"

"Gah!"

"Agh!"

With a full swing of her hellfire-wreathed axe, she cut down soldiers like wheat before a scythe.

The dwarven knight, no, the real Lushera, who had put on armor made for a dwarven woman and mixed in with the knights, smashed through their formations, closing in on the center.

She darted straight through on the side towards Monica, where defenses had worn thin.

When the fake Lushera came, Julian was forced to send his elite knights, which were also his guard, to deal with her. It was the obvious move as it could have turned the tide in their favor, but it also left their defenses weak.

"You!" Julian of course noticed her.

With Kaphal's puppet gone, there was only one powerful presence here. Any warrior would notice it. That much draconic power with that much of a presence was overwhelming even in a chaotic battle filled with fighting energy, and Lushera had no way of hiding her aura now that she was in fight mode.

Water erupted from out of thin air. It swirled, spraying out droplets, turning into an undulating snakelike spear that launched right at Lushera to pierce her, tear her apart, crush her, and in the end, freeze her. This attack didn't care if it took out allies as well. It would absolutely kill Lushera if it struck dead-on.

But Lushera finally smiled beneath her helmet when she saw it. "Thanks. I'll be taking all that water!"

"What?!"

Just as Julian thought the water flow pierced through Lushera, it was caught in an invisible vortex swirling around her and spun around her with a roar.

It's hard to hold! But better than canceling it out head-on with fire breath, she thought.

Lushera still felt a pressure that might crush her, even if she had avoided a direct hit. She felt like the blood vessels in her fingers were bursting, a huge weight pressing down on her from every direction, like being buried in stone, even though she wasn't directly touching the water.

Her sturdy mithril armor caved in, bent, and eventually tore off her. Beneath she wore her combat outfit, the belt, skirt, and her hair dancing in the pressure.

But she stood firm.

Water, one of the root powers of the world. She now used that as her own.

She couldn't directly take on the dracovitae's explosive power, but if she could redirect its flow, parry it!

"Haaaaaaaaah!"

Lushera took the swirling water and released it around her. The water, a giant, multiheaded snake, cut into the ground as it shot out, shearing down the knights.

"Ack!" A newly created wall of water protected Julian from the flow Lushera

launched.

He was at his limits just protecting himself and his source of power, Monica. And that was even considering Lushera was careful not to catch Monica up in the attack.

Something strange flew at Julian.

His reaction was slowed because his focus was on the incredible display of pseudo-tidal breath. By the time he realized it was there, the object was already bouncing at his feet, emitting a pink smoke.

“Ack, gah, agh!”

“Thank you for using our delivery service. We’ll send the bill to the imperial court!”

“You!”

“Uh-oh! Gotta book it!”

With a nostalgic, old-fashioned hand catapult in his hands, Weyne, dressed like a militia man in the Marquess’s army, stripped off his disguise and bolted like a rabbit with miraculous dexterity.

“Now! Release all the remaining variants!” Cristophe’s voice shouted from the call charm in Lushera’s breast pocket. It sounded like he activated every call charm he had to give the order to the entire army.

As he did, monster roars came from all different locations, overlapping each other.

What Weyne launched at Julian was a monster attractant. All the variants fighting here and there across the battlefield rushed towards him.

That wasn’t all either. They had four bird-type pseudo-dragon variants in reserve that they released at once. They flew right over the mixed melee of friend and foe, homing in on Julian.

While he was dealing with those variants, Julian wouldn’t be able to return the dracovitae’s power to Monica. And while she was under orders through the Collar of Slavery, she couldn’t fight back.

Less than a minute after that, there was nothing between Lushera and Monica.

Lushera pulled out a small rug, about the size of a couch pillow, that had a teleportation circle woven into it.



WEAPONS echoed against other weapons. Cannons roared. Magic exploded.

My punishment.

Shrieks, screams, groans.

This is my punishment for being born, for living.

Monica had no power of her own. She couldn't even fight against the evil collar of bondage around her neck. But, just because that's what the blood she received from her mother was, the Hurricane of Insight did as she commanded. Her will, that wasn't her own will, wielded an incredible power, snuffing out countless lives.

But I thought that if my life was a crime, I would be the only one punished for it...

She felt something, like just waving her arm crushed a life and sent it away. By now, she was nothing more than a tool for killing.

I didn't choose whether I wanted to live or not...but I did choose if I would die. I knew it, I should have died a long time ago!

Monica had killed herself several times over in her mind, but her body still lived. And it would continue to live, so long as Julian needed it.

The only thing she had left was the despair of knowing she was just a wellspring of suffering. This wasn't a problem just for her or her mother. First, it would be put on Setrayu, and then after that...

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Monica. You've worked so hard."

Monica heard a voice calling her name. "Who...?"

She looked up and saw a woman, she looked like a magic user.

I don't know this person.

She spoke to her like they were close, but Monica didn't know her. But her short, neatly trimmed hair was the same golden color as Monica's. She took off her glasses, like the bottoms of glass bottles, and looked at Monica with eyes of the same azure that Monica saw in the mirror.



“Just leave the rest to your big sis!”

She gently laid her hand over Monica, and that alone was enough to make her feel like her body was lighter.

The weapon form of the dracovitae covering her right arm and face peeled off in pieces.

The power from the dracovitae holding her up disappeared and she fell, but a crimson shadow smaller than even Monica caught her firmly.

The Hurricane of Insight, which had come off her, flowed through the air towards the magic user woman, drawn like iron to a magnet as it covered her right arm.

This dracovitae, the Hurricane of Insight, was said to be made during the Human-Dragon War from the bodies of ten blue dragons. Its weapon form looked like a dragon’s scales and carapace, overlapping, taking the form of a staff and armor that covered the right arm and right half of the face.

It looked like that when Monica had it, and its shape didn’t change now, but it was somehow different from before. The scales glittered, the carapace pulsed.

To Monica, it looked like a dragon came back to life.

“My body is chains. My heart is shackles. My hand is the key! Dream, Hurricane of Insight!” cried the woman, now with the dracovitae, in a clear voice that rang across the battlefield. “Fill your sight! Sweep your eyes open! Now, once again! Be once again the bonds on this land of pure flowing water! I, your master, Francesca viol etor Setrayu, command thee!”



FRANCESCA viol etor Setrayu was the eldest daughter born between the current king of Setrayu, Lazlo, and the former queen consort, Lorraina. And, while this is normally something that would never be capable of happening, she was already removed from the line of inheritance, and had left the capital, meaning she should officially be calling herself Francesca viol Foster.

She lost her political standing because of her mother’s indiscretions. False accusations that she, in addition to her younger sister Monica, was also not the

king's daughter forced her to leave the capital, though even those saying it didn't believe it to be true.

She was, however, allowed to work as an adventurer under the Duchy's supervision as "combat training." She managed to grasp a certain level of freedom as the King and Duchy defended her. She changed her name, hid her face behind tacky magic glasses, and formed a party with Timm, an adventurer specializing in protection, having him act as the leader for convenience's sake. With experience, she grew into a top-class adventurer.

Her compatibility with the dracovitae was greater even than her father's at 99.7 percent. As a result of both the bloodline management and pure chance, she was born with a rate that rivaled the first generation of dracovitae users.

It would be a shame to discard that talent, and many believed there might be use for her someday. Perhaps there would be a time they found themselves truly pushed to the brink and would want their most powerful dracovitae user, or perhaps they would need her to steal back the dracovitae when another user betrayed the country. That was why she was allowed her "combat training."

Francesca, a.k.a. Viola, raised the azure staff, glittering like flowing water. Ripples cut through the clouds of destruction overhead, and rays of light streamed through the breaks to illuminate the rain-soaked battlefield. The divine sight left everyone breathless, nearly weak in the knees, forgetting the battle at hand.

"Sigh... I wish you had just told me about this from the beginning," said Lushera, a little exasperated.

"It was bad timing," said Timm, disguised as a Setrayuan knight and deployed in the formation, but appearing now at Lushera's side out of nowhere. "You had your negotiations with the King, and Viola herself said she didn't want to drag that down just 'cause everyone was being too conscientious of her. We decided to wait till everything was over."

"That's a bit of a weak excuse."

"Eh, it is what it is."

Lushera only learned of Viola's true identity while they were setting up the

plan for defending Mount Kugus. She was surprised, but there were some things that made sense now that she looked back on them. She had made that joke asking which was rarer, an adopted daughter of a dragon or a princess who lost her rank and became an adventurer.

“For Setrayu! Follow Her Highness the Princess!”

“Aaah!”

A battle cry as fierce as a dragon’s roar rose from all directions and echoed across the mountain.

The core of the defensive squad were soldiers under the command of the Foster Duchy, which governed the region around Mount Kugus. They still saw Francesca as their princess.

The sight of their princess standing on the frontline, delivering that decisive blow, gave knights and soldiers alike a morale boost that blurred the lines between life and death. Joy and zeal allowed them to fight to the very moment their bodies could no longer physically move, and they would die.

Marquess Angus’s formation broke like a piece of paper torn to shreds. The Setrayuan soldiers had a clear advantage, like they’d suddenly doubled in number. It was a turning point in the battle that you could see with your eyes, feel on your skin.

“Attack! The red dragon needs time to return. She can’t use the dracovitae right now! There are only three of them! What are you afraid of?! Everyone attack, crush them to death!” howled Julian, only louder now that he lost the dracovitae. It was a clear, carrying voice that managed to cut through the clamor of combat.

Now that Lushera thought about it, she remembered his father having a nice voice as well. Julian likely inherited it from him, it also being the reward gained from training his voice to be used to command soldiers in battle.

But the Martgarz knights stood frozen, despondent.

“We might win if we do that...but I’d probably die...” muttered someone.

It was a relatively quiet sound, but it rang across the battlefield like a bell.

Julian was clearly taken aback. "How dare you! Your lord is commanding you! We will win if you do as I say! Why do you not understand that?!"

"Protect our lord!"

"Follow me!"

Several of the younger knights responded to Julian's temper-tantrum-like orders. They rushed Lushera, eyes bloodshot, feeling no concern for their own lives.

Lushera held her hand out over the ground. It melted to red and rose up. The lava lifted, then quickly cooled as water spiraled around it, letting off a mildly disturbing hiss of steam.

It was the same sword of cooled lava Shurei had given her.

She bolted forward like lightning and swung the sword, a mass of stone longer than she was tall.

"*Gyah!*"

"*Argh!*"

Armor crunched apart and several knights went flying at once.

But it was only those few who had acted. The rest of the knights remained standing still, looking weary.

There were no others who moved to attack Lushera.

"We have not yet lost! I have not yet lost! This is nothing more than a temporary setback! Do as I command! Do you want to be destroyed? If we lose but you survive, I'll put all your heads on the chopping block!"

Julian screamed like a dog with its tail on fire. Perhaps this had even been part of his plan, to drag the knights into this act of violence and threaten them with a choice between victory and death, meaning they had no option but to fight.

And yet, the knights still didn't move. Even if the only future awaiting them after defeat was the death sentence, they still gave up fighting, refusing to move as ordered like a marionette whose strings were cut, leaving it lying still on the floor.

Lushera stepped forward, and the knights pulled back in a wave. The fear they felt towards her was palpable.

Some of them even looked at Julian with disgust and frustration. Lushera could feel their emotions, how they loathed the idea of dying for a man like him.

Julian gripped the hilt of his sword with a trembling hand. It shook so much he couldn't draw it. "Wh-Wh-What do I do now? Why didn't you teach me what I should do, Father?!"

Lushera took another step forward, her giant sword of lava resting on her shoulder.

And a red flower bloomed. Hundreds of them already existed on this battlefield, and now another joined them. It was exactly the same as all the others, no larger or smaller, no more noble or lowly. Just a flower exactly the size of one life's worth of blood.

"Ask him in hell," Lushera spat.

"*Gah...*"

The shard of lava, roughly in the shape of a sword, pierced directly through Julian, straight through armor and all. Despite being cooled into a solid shape, it glowed red again, melting and burning, turning Julian's innards to ash with primeval flame.



Epilogue

THE imperial family, or more specifically the emperor, of Martgarz was powerful. They excelled at creating administration systems for a country as well as instating standards, and the nobles were one piece of their vertical system of rule.

This of course had both its merits and demerits, but one significant positive of it was that there was a system in place for automatically determining who was now in command of an army should its current commander fall, and the entire army shifted to following the new commander's orders, whether that meant continuing the battle, or stopping it.

"I am Baron Paulos Greylain, a vassal to Marquess Angus. All officers of higher rank have been killed in combat, therefore I now hold the authority to command the entire army of Marquess Angus. We surrender."

Paulos was one of the knights in the core formation protecting Julian and was using a call charm Lushera had to contact Cristophe.

The battle had turned into a one-sided slaughter.

The forward defensive line was hemmed in on several sides, taking attacks, the collapsed formation no longer capable of attacking back or even defending. The only reason they hadn't broken ranks and fled yet was because they were blocked from doing so from behind. The soldiers, unable to retreat, fought panicked by their impending doom, only to die pointlessly. The rearguard unit was already retreating, having lost its commander.

It's sometimes said that most casualties of war occur after victory or defeat has been decided while one of the armies retreats and the other chases. That could be stopped with a declaration of surrender from the commander or the country itself.

"I am Cristophe Murdeux, commander of the Mount Kugus Defense Army. I

respect your wise decision. Are you in a position to raise a signal flare? If so, please fire the customary five whites. Once that is confirmed, we will raise a white signal and I will order my entire army to stand down."

"Understood. I am grateful for your show of mercy. I know the spell for firing signals. I'll do so immediately." Paulos raised a hand to the sky, soldiers scrambling over each other to escape past him.

A magic bullet fired from his fingertip, leaving a trail of light behind as it raced up into the cloud-cleared skies and exploded in a puff of white light and smoke. He did that five times, a sign to both his and the enemy's army that they had declared surrender.

After a short moment, one shot of the same sort of signal fired from the fort on the mountainside, the sign that the surrender was accepted.

"All units, cease attacking! You may only strike those who resist," came Cristophe's voice from the call charms of every squad in the army. The sounds of screams and weapon against weapon dropped in volume, then the remaining faint noise slowly faded.

The armies had mixed in the confusion of melee combat, but the Setrayuan soldiers pulled back a short distance while maintaining their formations.

There were no more roars from the magic cannon raining down, either.

Instead, the groans of the injured were audible.

And with that, the battle ended.

"...Okay. That was the human settlement," said Lushera. "Would you tell me why the hell you went along with something like this? I don't care if you've surrendered, if I don't like your answer, I'll burn you all with my fire breath until only your bones are left." She glared around at the Martgarz soldiers, either standing still or sitting down on the ground out of sheer exhaustion.

"Lushera..." said Timm, shocked and trying to stop Lushera's violence, but she didn't listen.

If you surrender, the battle stops, a resolution left to international negotiations, each individual judged by the order of the humanoid world. But

there, they would only be charged with crimes against other people.

And it was therefore Lushera's thinking that any who trespassed on dragon territory should undergo a dragon's trial. It wasn't justice or fairness that belonged here, but fear.

Paulos thought for a while. Lushera couldn't see his expression, since his face was entirely concealed behind a helmet.

"I did this because I believed it was best. Or, rather, that it was...appropriate. It was loyalty to my country and my lord. For the peace of my people. For political stability. For my gain. For my personal status and life... There are far too many considerations. Essentially, I believed there was a relatively large benefit to be had should we win, and a relatively small loss should we lose. If I refused to follow orders, I, my family, and my people would be nothing but traitors. And I would die. My only option...was to continue down the path that had some possibility of gain, and retaining my life. Life doesn't generally go completely as you had intended. At least this way, I could be like the leaf slipping between the waves..."

His voice tapered and trembled. His uncertainty, which he had boxed away, came close to breaking loose, but he stamped it down and continued.

"Did I have any other options...? I was thrown into a labyrinth with no way out. And at the end of it, there was...this...this..." He held his head in hands clad in roughened silver gauntlets. "If I were as powerful as a dragon, perhaps I wouldn't have these worries..." he said.

"...Dragons have their own worries," said Lushera.

"Of course, my apologies." He let out a long sigh.

The fact that he'd had no other options was separate from whether or not Lushera should forgive him, but she didn't sense any attempt to deceive, and that left her with a good impression of the man.

What she needed right now was for them to feel the fear and terror of knowing that, when facing a dragon, there was nothing that could protect them. She didn't think she needed to make anyone else a warning after having just killed Julian.

“Do you forgive me?” asked Paulos.

“No. But I’ll leave the rest to be handled in the human way. I hope you spend your remaining time with no regrets.”

“Thank you...”

This incident was huge and could threaten the very existence of the humanoid world. The Church might even step in. While she wasn’t certain about the soldiers, any knights in a command position would likely face the death penalty and be dishonored as betrayers of the humanoid world.

Though, Setrayu would likely aim for compensation rather than that.

Lushera shook her head, and, with that, it was over. She didn’t have to bother with what happened after.

“Viola, how are you doing?” she asked.

Viola still stood in the middle of the battlefield, staff raised. Timm and Lushera remained on guard in case any crazed soldiers attacked, but even the soldiers fleeing hesitated to go near her.

At this point, there weren’t any enemies they needed to be cautious of. Instead, they were approached by knights from the Setrayuan defense force, slipping through the milling Marquess troops as they ran. These knights were most likely vassals of the Foster Duchy.

“I don’t really know for sure, since this is the first time I’ve ever used the dracovitae,” said Viola. “But it seems okay. Just look at that beautiful sight.”

There wasn’t a single wisp of cloud remaining, a rainbow bridge arching through the clear blue sky.

Lushera heard powerful wingbeats. Kaphal was coming back from the other side of the mountain, which meant things over there had calmed down.

Seeing that, Viola lowered the dracovitae. The overstated arm armor encasing her folded up, returning to the single staff form the Hurricane of Insight took when enshrined.

“S-Sister...?” Monica was still on the ground, peering up at Viola in a daze like she hadn’t quite kept pace with everything happening.

The Collar of Slavery was still around her neck, but it was only in effect when something or someone issued orders. With Julian dead, she was freed from all his commands.

Viola crouched in front of her, meeting her eyes. "Yes. My name is Francesca. I'm your sister. I normally conceal my identity and go by the name Viola while I work as an adventurer. These glasses are a magic item called Glasses of the Masses. They stop people from recognizing me and make me look like another person. Though, we've never met, so that's irrelevant! You know what, did you ever get that teddy bear I sent you?"

"Viola," said Timm, cutting in because Viola was veering off topic in her excitement.

"Why...are you here?" asked Monica, like she couldn't imagine even a single explanation for why Viola would be here.

"To save you."

And Monica still looked like she never even considered that immediate response.

Viola wrapped her arms around Monica, tightly, oh so tightly, like she would never let go of the confused girl.

"I'm sorry," said Viola. "I've wanted to do this for so long, but I made you wait forever..."

"Eh... Ah, w-waaaaah!"

Monica eventually broke into loud, unsightly sobs.

She trembled, like a chick freezing after having fallen from its nest, and buried her face in Viola's chest.



"EVERYTHING taken care of?"

The voice came without warning from behind Lushera as she rested in a room in the fort. She turned to see a man with a sharp build and the sort of air that made you keep your guard up. "Ivar, why are you here?"

"To remind the commanding officer to give me my reward. And work related to the captured Martgarz soldiers. They need an intermediary to help them pay their bail to go home, right? They're rushing this 'cause the faster they do it, the more money they get."

Viola's face popped out from behind Ivar's back, the azure staff still in her hand. "I think he was just worried about you, yeaaah?"

"...What a wonderful personality this princess has," he said.

"Thank you for all your help, Ivar," said Lushera.

"Don't make it sound like this is the end. We're gonna keep this going. You got hard stuff coming up, and I got work." He said it rather casually, but he was so right that Lushera hesitated to even give it a wry smile.

For the time being at least, they avoided the destruction that came for them, but that didn't mean everything was going to be a happily ever after. Chaos was likely to strike the humanoid world at large after this, and Kaphal and Lushera would get dragged into it whether they wanted to be or not.

"Welp, I don't wanna be a buttinsky, so I'll make myself scarce," said Ivar.

"Okay. Wait... A buttinsky?"

His business done, Ivar left (with a word Lushera wasn't exactly familiar with).

"You can come in now, Monica," called Viola out into the hallway on the opposite side of the room from where Ivar left. Footsteps came closer and Monica eventually showed her face, peering into the room like a small, wary animal.

Viola made her change into a set of Viola's own adventuring clothes, forcing them to be a matching pair. Monica's skirt was rolled up and only her fingers poked out from the end of the sleeves.

But, seeing them like that standing next to each other, it was obvious they were sisters. Their blonde hair and blue eyes were the same color, most likely inherited from their mother, but the biggest thing was there was just a general air about them that felt the same. Almost like they were the sort of troublesome people who never did as you wanted them to.

"Monica, how are you doing, physically?" asked Lushera.

"What? It's not like I was injured," she said.

Lushera had no idea what Julian had done to her, and she had been bound, so she was worried about her, but Monica's response basically slapped back her words.

"Monica," said Viola. "At times like this, we say 'thank you.' She's worried about you. She's not going to take advantage of you if you show weakness. It's just that she's hurt as well if you're hurt."

"Uh, ah, oh..." Monica shuffled about in confusion.

Monica hadn't said what she did with any malice or ill intent, it was just her natural way of responding. She'd lived her life without a single ally. She was like an abandoned dog, not able to do anything but growl, not knowing anything else.

But even she understood by now that she couldn't be like that anymore.

"U-Um," she said.

"Yes," replied Lushera.

Monica looked right, then she looked left. She reached out her hands a little, they hovered with uncertainty in the air, then she lunged at Lushera, like she was attacking, and wrapped them around her in a hug.

"Ah!"

She was warm and smelled slightly of the beautiful scent of soil.

"This...I...understand better," she said, as if making an excuse as she squeezed Lushera tightly, like Viola had done for her. She was too inexperienced and too uncertain of herself to figure out how to express that warmth in words, so she used the only method she knew would express it for sure, something she only just learned.

"Should I use that ring again?" she asked.

"No, I think I understand."

"It's okay, Monica, you can just slowly start to get used to these things," said

Viola. "I'm going to be able to see you whenever, today, tomorrow, the day after." She watched them with a smile of pure joy, then, as if she decided she too would join the fray, she wrapped her arms around the both of them together.

Though, Monica still didn't seem to fully understand the true meaning of what Viola said, or the situation she was in now.

"...Yeah."

That's all she could say.



MOST of the damage to the country in the attack with the dracovitae was prevented by the red dragon buying time, followed by the quick retrieval of the dracovitae.

But only most, as the region closest to Mount Kugus and the battlefield did sustain damage. Abnormally concentrated rainstorms and rising groundwater went beyond the limits of what the flood control system could handle. The rivers flooded, washing up on Kugut'hulm.

Thankfully, not many people died as a result, just a few who were washed away as they were evacuating. But it wasn't no one.

Once the waters receded, the people of the city were left with the economic damages and the work of repairing the mud-coated buildings.

"Dammit. It's all ruined. Gotta just throw it all out."

"You were still thinking of selling it?"

"Well, you're fine, you're not sellin' fresh veg, and your storage's on the second floor. But in my place, there's nowhere to put anything but down below. It's a disaster down there."

Two men in aprons were cleaning up inside a mud-covered greengrocer. They scooped the water from the underground cellar, pulled out the vegetables soaked with muddy water, and piled them out in front of the shop.

There was a waterline on the wall around the height of an adult's waist.

The dirty water of floods also brought disease. They wouldn't be able to reopen shop unless they thoroughly cleaned the building after tidying it up.

"We're lucky just to be alive," said one.

"Yeah, I s'pose..."

With beads of sweat on their brows, they massaged their aching backs and wiped away the sweat with rags.

That's when they heard it.

"Rooooooooar!"

"Agh!"

"That sound..."

A huge roar that rumbled in the pit of your stomach came from high in the sky, echoing through the city streets.

The men abandoned their cleanup tasks and rushed out to the street.

The red dragon flew above the city, her massive wings spread wide. She was the red dragon living on Mount Kugus. Everyone living in Kugut'hulm was familiar with her flying figure.

But this was a little different from the normal everyday sighting of her.

The early summer sun shone even more brightly in a sky without a single cloud.

Setrayuan summers were generally hot and humid, but today's breeze was dry. Items basking in the sunlight dried miraculously quickly, puddles disappeared from the once-flooded streets, leaving only a thin layer of dried mud.

A dragon was powerful enough to manipulate the weather in a localized area. Red dragons, with their affinity with fire, could make the sun shine and the air dry. The violence of nature sometimes took lives without difficulty, and sometimes it was a blessing.

"Graaaaaaaar!"

The dragon spit fire into the sky, as if in salute.

The people, having paused their work, waved up at her.

“Thank you!”

“Setrayu’s guardian goddess!”

“Long live the dragon!”

“Rooooaar!”

Thunderous cheers rang up to the dragon who protected the city and the country.

She flew amongst those voices, gliding like a seagull on a breeze.



THE sunlight was blindingly bright, but Lushera actually felt cool riding on Kaphal’s back, being struck by the merciless wind. She was at a point where she could sleep perfectly comfortably in a sauna or exposed to the harsh winter of a mountain, though, so this was nothing more than moderately uncomfortable.

Kaphal was helping the city recover by drying it out. The sun grew stronger, its rays striking the earth, whisking water away, cleansing with heat.

Lushera clung tightly to Kaphal’s mane as she looked down at the ground, the people down there having stopped cleaning to cheer Kaphal on.

“They’re all making a big fuss. Well...that’s not surprising,” Lushera said, smiling awkwardly. This was her first time basking in cheers like this. Obviously, everyone was looking at Kaphal, not her. They probably didn’t even see her riding on Kaphal’s back.

When Julian went forward with his plan of destroying the shackles that held the entire kingdom’s lands in a calm state, Kaphal tried to stop the effects, buying time until the battle was over. Many people saw her raging against the heavens when the rains of destruction fell on Kugut’hulm.

Thankfully, the battle ended quickly, and Viola was able to stop the damage the water did when she took back the dracovitae. Without Kaphal’s fierce battle, though, the city of Kugut’hulm would have been washed away, wiped clean from the map.

Kaphal only did what she did as part of military tactics. The alliance with Setrayu was beneficial to her too. If the kingdom was harmed, it would make it more difficult to protect her mountain.

But even so, the people of the city already saw her as a hero for putting herself at risk to protect them.

“Bad to overdo it,” said Lushera. *“If too hot, humans collapse.”*

“Okay,” said Kaphal and she stopped firing her breath into the sky.

The people down below returned to the task of cleaning.

The wind and sound of wingbeats rushed around her. The birds didn’t even dare come close, making this a time just for Kaphal and Lushera, floating together in the sky.

Lushera put on Giselle’s Ring. Her Draconic skills weren’t yet good enough that she could understand everything and fully express herself, so she made sure to use the ring for the important conversations.

“Hey, Mom,” she said.

“Hey, Lushera,” said Kaphal at exactly the same time. They laughed.

“...Ahaha.”

“Hmhm.”

Kaphal’s wingbeats slipped out of sync, though there was no way she’d let the wind cause that.

Feeling a little awkward, Lushera held on tightly to Kaphal’s mane as she rolled over on Kaphal’s back. *“So, I know that no matter how strong I get, I’ll never be a real dragon... That’s...okay...right? Being together...”*

“Of course it’s okay!”

Of course. Lushera was certain Kaphal would answer that way, but she was still happy to hear it. *“Okay, then promise me you’ll actually talk to me about the important things. You saw how if you don’t, you don’t even know what I might be able to do.”*

“...You’re right. I promise I will.”

Kaphal did seem to have an idea of what Lushera was talking about.

Lushera couldn't let Kaphal just decide everything when it came to her, especially if it meant Kaphal was going to sacrifice herself. She wanted to stand beside her, moving forward together... That wasn't just pride anymore, saying that. She now had the confidence that she could, and that she should. Lushera believed that Kaphal also believed in her now, and that was why she gave her a true name.

Even if Lushera wasn't quite human, she wasn't a dragon either. She wanted to be equal to Kaphal, but she understood she wasn't. That was fine. The important thing was being together. She would do everything in her power for that.

But she also didn't want to make Kaphal worry because of that. Which was why she thought of one other promise that should be made.

"And don't worry, Mom, I promise I'll ask for your help when I need it!"

"Oh my... Looks like I might be busy then."

The sun shone gently, warming Lushera and Kaphal's backs. Lushera felt like she could still hear the voices of the townspeople, having gone back to work.

"I wonder how long it will take this city to go back to how it was," said Kaphal.

"...It won't ever go back to the way it was. People died. Buildings were destroyed that can't be rebuilt."

"Yeah... You're right," murmured Kaphal. She seemed to regret being unable to protect everyone, though she tried, even if she wasn't concerned with the lives and deaths of humans.

"But even if it doesn't go back to the way it was, it'll come back alive. The people who survived will carry on the memories of what was," said Lushera, trying to sound as cheery as she could. She didn't see despair in the people below them, which meant it was going to be okay. Even if they lost something, something new could grow from what was left. *"So, once it's full of energy again, let's go get some ice cream!"*

"Agreed!"

Lushera was pretty sure she remembered a specialty ice cream parlor in Kugut'hulm.

Setrayu was only going to get hotter. Ice cream would definitely hit the spot.

Afterword As the author, Suzume Kirisaki, I would like to thank you for reading the second volume of *I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now*. As of writing this, I'm not entirely sure if the whole book will fit the page limit I have, so I'm going to keep this afterword really short. Sorry about that!

The original concept for the second part of the web version involved having Lushera get involved with the problems of the dragon world. She was an adopted child whose entire world was complete just with their mother-daughter relationship, but she would learn that her mother wasn't a god and there were things that could threaten even her. She would also see that if she expanded her horizons, she could build relationships outside the one she had with her mother, like a little kid going to preschool for the first time and meeting other children in the sandbox.

When the story was published as a book, I clarified the themes of the book from a few different perspectives. I hope you cheered on the mother and daughter as they both grew and worked hard.

I had a lot of help from many different people this time around as well. First is S, who rivals me, the author, in how much they love this story. Then there's Cosmic, who, as always, makes scary good illustrations for the book (and sorry for the misunderstanding where I wrote in the first volume that you read *Dragon Mom* before you got the request to be the illustrator!). Then there is every single indispensable individual involved in the layout, distribution, and sales of the series. And, this isn't about this volume specifically, but I'm really grateful to Wataru Hijōguchi for the manga version of *Dragon Mom* where we can see Lushera and everyone so full of life! I look forward to your work on that, which started its serialized publication at about the same time as this volume was published.

Lastly, I just want to thank you, the readers, one more time. Thank you!

The following is additional information from the author, Kirisaki, from the web version's afterword plus some extra details.

- Shurei isn't really meant to be Japanese, but my writer brain wanted to name him using the characters for “crimson” and “mountain peak” (朱嶺), so that's how he came to be Shurei. After doing that, I realized that it's only one character different from the name of a castle that dragons go to in a certain game.
- I made blue dragons like their drink because old-snake Yamato no Orochi destroyed itself by drinking too much, and it was known for causing water-related destruction.
- There are several freezing spells, so air conditioning, freezers, and similar technologies are fairly advanced. Besides, ice cream started becoming mass-produced in the real world sometime in the mid-19th century or something.
- There isn't a solid definition for the term “dragon king.” It's largely just an honorific term for the leaders of flights that are particularly large or influential. Also, while dragons can mate in groups of one male to many females, they don't have prides like lions where there is only one adult male. Meaning, not everyone in a single flight would be either a child or wife of the flight's leader.
- Names of nobles like Foster, for example, are just family names (even titles?). They're not the name of the region itself. That's just my preference, so that's what I went with.



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