

The DRAGON RIDERS OF PEARL: SEVEN WORLDS

By Dr Joe Ireland



Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

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Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

TO:

Emily Ireland – who loves to draw.

Karlie Ireland – who loves to help.

Sarah Ireland – who cannot walk in a straight line... because
she is too busy dancing.

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The unnamed peril

Rayn bled from the tremendous wound in his stomach, the bronze spear protruding out the other side of his rapidly weakening body. Trembling fingers clutched the unworked shaft, and he wondered why he wasn't dead. He stumbled alone through the abandoned streets of his home town, strewn with bodies of kinsfolk and animals alike, twisted and bloated in an undeath he knew all too well.

Desperately, he looked around for help. Pain again wracked his body, and his knees gave way underneath him. He looked in horror at his own blood stained hands, which now twisted and wilted before his very eyes.

Do you really think you've stopped me? A voice from within mocked him.

His voice caught in his throat, and he could not breathe. All around him the world began to burn, thatch, wood, even stone. Tears streamed down his face as he begged for relief.

A noise like thunder rumbled from behind him. He looked around, and for a moment felt relief as a mighty wave crashed through the lands of the Celtwyld towards him. Relief turned to fear as the wave grew and grew, becoming a sphere of green. It loomed up, threatening him.

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Suddenly the sky lit up, and he turned to see an orb of gold, and one of pearly white beside him. They, too, were massive, as though there were each a world. They stood with him against the devastating green flood.

Then, suddenly, the golden orb struck out at the pearl. It faded, and was soon gone. But in that very act the green flood reached out towards the world where he stood. The golden orb tried to flee, but there was nowhere to go. The flood consumed all, and then turned back on Rain.

Where are they now? The voice taunted in his mind. *Where have all your warriors gone? Where are they now?*

It's not... it's not my fault! Rayn begged. *There wasn't enough time.*

Time? It mocked him again, *there will never be enough time to flee from me... for I... am eternal.*

Rayn gasped as he sat up on his bed, shaking away the tendrils of the reoccurring nightmare he'd had for the past three nights. Again, despite his pleadings, it had returned.

He stood, and found himself a drink. None moved to comfort him in the communal resting place, but he did not mind. It was his role to comfort others.

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He washed his face, and returned to his bed. Again he lit his staff, the gentle blue glow making all seem at peace once more, the dream already pushed far away. He would think on the meaning of the dream in the morning, if he could find time among his new responsibilities.

If he managed to sleep at all.

Late

Rayn was late, and that annoyed her.

Pure paced the floor not bothering to hide her annoyance anymore. He was late, he said he wouldn't be but now he was. And that was *not good*.

Three weeks had gone by since the defeat of the plague. Three weeks since the fortress had descended from the sky and taken its place on the mountain.

Three weeks since her dragon had died.

She knew it was a far less painful experience for her than it should have been. The Matron, her bonded dragon, was three thousand years older than the oldest dragons usually were. Yet the Matron had managed to protect her from the strength of the bonding so that when she gave her life in order that Pure could live – well, it was much easier for her to live through that trauma than it should have been.

But still *she* had changed. She was still Pure, still the maiden that had bonded with the most powerful dragon on the entire planet known as Pearl. But her hair now sometimes danced with fire, and naturally her psychosensate



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dress changed to match her moods. Yet these unimportant outward changes signaled unwelcome inner changes – she was more easily angered, more passionate. She tried to conceal this by allowing others to make the decisions, but instead it was just making her more and more anxious to achieve...

... What? What *was* she doing here? Why did every night hold so little rest for her, as though every night was the evening before a mighty battle? Yet when the sun rose again, dimly calling through the constant clouds of her world, it did not call for battle. It was just another day. And each day the sense of impending need pressed her to ... wait, even *more* patiently.

And **he** was *late*. He was not supposed to be late. He was the chief wiseman of the tribes that had gathered to the fortress. All the wisemen deferred to him: the first dragon rider among them, bringer of the waters that stayed the plague, rider of the subdued prisoner Ironfang, and her closest friend.

Normally it would not be a problem that he was so busy; Pure was used to waiting. She had spent six months learning his language, she had spent four thousand years sleeping while the plague swept this world again and again. But she was not feeling like she should. Something was supposed to be happening but it *wasn't*.

And he was LATE.



At last she could take it no more and with a scream of frustration, the air around her burst into flames. Without thinking, she threw a mighty pillar of fire out the dragon sized windows and into the cold night. It would have incinerated any man that stood in that way.

Knowing that, at least, was mildly satisfying.

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The sky lit up but Jayd only paid it a causal glance. The red hot princess was angry. Again.

Jayd sighed, feeling sorry for what her brother had gotten himself into. The princess, Pure, had changed a lot since returning from the dead. A death he, her brother, had deliberately caused to halt the plague, and it had worked. Then he'd brought her back from the dead and now she was all over him, like she couldn't help herself.

It was as if there was something powerful that she wanted from him, but was too innocent to know herself what that was.

Jayd shook her head; he'd brought all this on himself.

So she returned to her searching. Since the fortress had descended from the sky she and her dragon, Darkwing, had spent every waking minute of every day exploring it. There was room for thousands of thousands in this place, huge chambers with mighty pillars of stone that spoke of the forgotten power of humanity. Massive pools of water, silent temples, and countless joined houses that could each fit a family. All materials that could perish within four thousand years, had, leaving mostly metals and stone. Yet even they spoke of a disaster: of a people who had fled in such haste as to not have opportunity to place a lid upon a pot, or pick up spoons as they'd cluttered to the floor.

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They were a mystery, an enigma, this people who had been living in this place. Sculptures too precise to have been cut by hand, blankets untouched by time, strange and diverse devices littering the floor. By her reckoning the fortress was divided into twenty larger divisions, made up of twenty cities per division, each city comprising twenty great villages of a thousand or so men, women and children. And near the center of each village was a small stone in the shape of a man with glowing gems for eyes: the teachers. She looked into those eyes often, and would find a new part of her mind opening up or a question she had about the city suddenly answered. It was a miracle beyond explanation.

But nothing reminded Jayd of the glory and power of the fallen ancestors more than the great suits of armor, the gigantic bows of pure crystal, and the living statues that she fancied could spring to life in defense of the fortress. It was glory beyond imagination...

... And yet she knew, for all their glory, they were gone. The people that once called this city home were defeated: defeated by the plague. True, a plague that they had just successfully, for the first time in four thousand years, driven back. But it was still around, and this plague had laid waste to every person, dragon and machine that had defended this place to their very last breath.

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Your thoughts are heavy, my rider, Darkwing, her beloved dragon, spoke directly to her heart.

It broke her out of her day dreaming as they walked side by side down an unfamiliar corridor.

Indeed, she replied. And they are no fun.

Perhaps we should fly together? He asked.

She laughed. He always knew how to distract her from her melancholy thoughts. He knew everything about her, and she hid nothing from him. He, too, hid nothing from her; it was the bond of the dragons and their riders. He was, to be true, a painfully shy dragon. He loved the darkness, and he loved being alone. But now he felt she was a part of him, so he went wherever she took him. Right now they were walking through a massive stone archway, large enough for many dozens of dragons to fly through, retreating from the cold of the night and the rage of an unsatisfied princess and into the darkness of the forgotten fortress for new things to see.

He was already opening his wings, his sly grin un hiding his knowledge of her plans. She activated her miraculous bracelet; turning it into dragon wings and a tail for her. Since she'd learned to

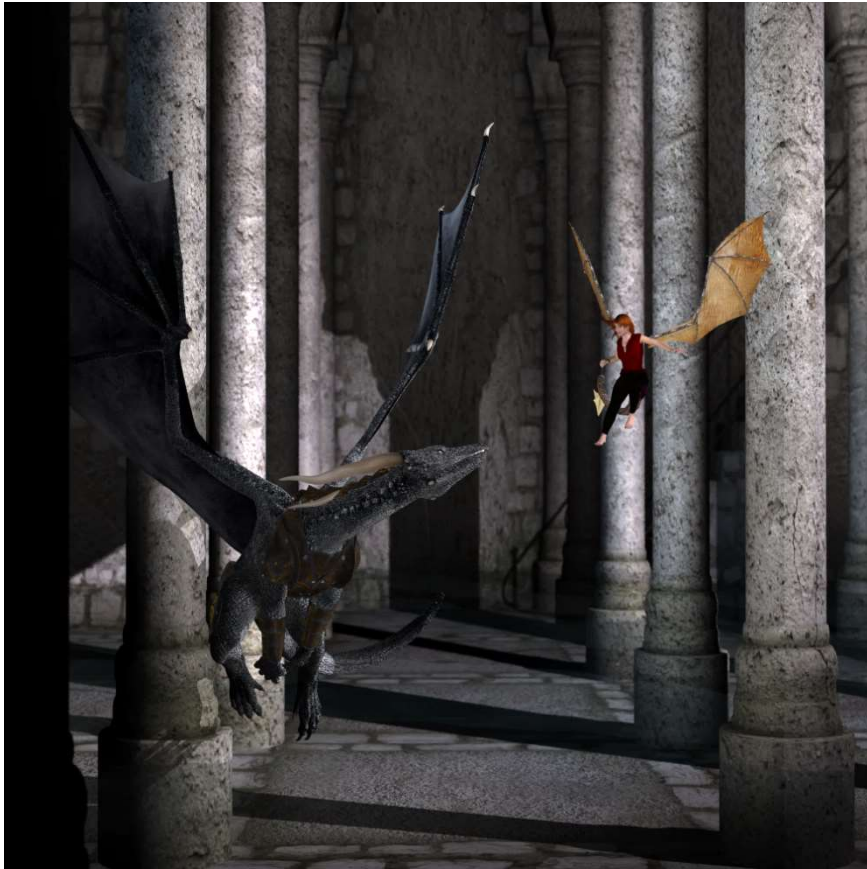


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use them properly they no longer enclosed her arms or legs, but allowed her the use of literally seven limbs.

Darkwing was faster and had already leapt into the air.

With a squeal, Jayd activated the other bracelet; the one Pure let her keep, and commanded the wind to lift her up and into the dimly lit corridors. Darkwing grunted in effort to speed up, and Jayd laughed. Buzzing about his head they sped away



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into the darkness, their happy laughter echoing through the abandoned corridors.

Snow lifted her head. She heard the laughter and knew at once it was Jayd and Darkwing losing themselves in exploring the fortress once more. She was curled up by her mighty dragon Windfyrth, pretending to rest while her dragon chatted with the tribal chiefs once more. They both knew, however, that Snow had no real interest in these discussions. At last she could hide her boredom no longer and with a bow, bid her dragon goodnight.

Windfyrth nodded sagely. Neither felt pain at their parting; they both seemed to be able to sense the other from what appeared to be a much greater distance than the other dragon riders. Snow was thankful, for she knew her dragon had much different skills and priorities than herself. Windfyrth was a *people* dragon. She held their attention with great skill and helped them organize themselves during the difficult transfer of so many warriors into the fortress. Her skills were necessary, and she maintained order with impeccable talent.



Windfyrth holds the attention of the assembled chieftains of the people gathering at the fortress from beyond the clouds, while Snow gets bored.

Snow, on the other hand, was *not* a people person. She was a huntress, but not of the kind she knew her tribe might expect or approve. She would speak to the beasts to find what she wanted, and at times that was other people. She sighed; she was the youngest dragon rider of the central circle of five. To celebrate her choosing to that role she had been covered in floral garlands

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by her own people, and had been given a coronation to rival the wedding of a tribal chieftain. Windfyrth had suffered it with professional decorum but Snow had been silent and, just like tonight, spent the entire night wondering when she could slip away.

But tonight she did not even have the animals to keep her company, for none had learnt to trust a human celebration, or her new dragon. Snow had long ago learnt to keep her talent very much a secret. Even her mother would denounce her, claiming demonry if she knew; the old stories only told of one other person who spoke to beasts, and he was a very, very bad man. So she told no one, her mother no doubt worrying constantly for a daughter who seemed more at home in the company of the trees of the forest than her own clan. Then a month ago she had felt compelled to track the four other dragon riders halfway across the continent before she'd caught up with them, and helped save Windfyrth's life, or theirs. It didn't matter. She was their friend and in public,



very much their companion. But in truth she was only home among the animals, and with her dragon Windfyrth.

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Snow found herself smiling as she thought about her clever dragon. Windfyrth had sent for her own people as soon as the plague had been dealt with. They were still a week or so away from the fortress, and were having trouble abandoning their home to make a new one here. But it was Windfyrth's will and plan to make many of them leaders among the other tribes. Snow was not too happy with that secret plan, but she kept it in her heart.

Snow reached the great garden that ran all the way around the fortress inside wall. The dragons and humans had brought in trees and grasses to each of the many levels and they were busy putting on new leaves. And, of course, the animals were gathering – and gathering quickly, as though the fortress itself longed for their company. Many of the beasts spoke of a kind of “call” that had brought them here, rejoicing in the bounty that they found. Birds sang of new places to build, and the furry little mellits were well content with their new burrows. It would be a very bountiful spring, Snow could tell, and the beasts were very happy here.

So why was she not? She enjoyed their happiness, but did not share in it. She'd always told herself she preferred to be lonely, especially now her best friend was a dragon. So why did her heart feel so... empty. As though it was cup that only held half of all it could. Was there a love she had not found? Perhaps Wiseman Rayn. No, he was honest enough, but he had the arrogant tendency to think he knew everyone and what their place

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in the world was. Rhoc, then? No, his untrained voice was frightening, and he seemed so willing to follow along with the commands of others it was as if he had no idea what he was doing, or why, or where he fit in the world at all. So what was she looking for? Was there something missing in her life, or in the world in general? She did not know...

As if on cue, jumping down from the sky, the dragon rider Rhoc arrived.

He couldn't have been happier, it was Snow! Little Snow! Rhoc realized his broad smile must have made him look very foolish but he was glad to find her. She had a way of avoiding people all the time, which made him curious. But she was a lovely girl, one he wanted to know better.

But she gasped, looking fearful.

He held out his hands, trying to reassure her with what language he possessed, "All right, Snow. All right, just me," he said.

"You!" She huffed, her voice angry. "What are you doing sneaking up on me?"

He didn't know what he'd done. Had she been so distracted she hadn't even seen him waving? Or maybe he shouldn't have

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jumped down from the fortress wall to greet her. It was a long way.

Right on cue, trying to smooth things over, his wonderful dragon Fairystone flew from his pocket to say hello. She was giving off a little golden light, as though the bright light of the day burned inside with her happiness all the time.

“Hello, Snow,” she said with a voice full of happiness.



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“Oh, hello, Fairystone. Hello Rhoc. You gave me quite a fright.”

“S... sorry,” he said. He knew he was a man of little words. He’d only just learnt to hear for the first time in his life about three and a half weeks ago. He hadn’t told anyone, but he’d been using the teachers to help him learn how to speak. It was helping, greatly, and now the men treated him with much greater respect now that they knew he understood them, and always had.

“You shouldn’t go sneaking up on me like that, Rhoc; I might have set the foxes on you!” She smiled, like she was trying to make a joke.

Rhoc flexed his muscles as if to say, *Yeah, you do that!* He would be quite happy to crush a few fox skulls in his bare hands, as he had during the battle with the plague. Besides, it would give him the chance to make her a new fox-fur scarf. He was sure she’d like that. She would look good in that.

But her smile died, and she did not look impressed.

He realized she probably liked the foxes more than him.

Then she smiled, seeming a little more at ease. He noticed a little bird arrive in a small tree, just putting out new leaves. The bird made a glittery, chatty sound. Snow didn’t say anything but smiled again.

“Well, I suppose we’d better be getting back to the meeting?” She said.

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Rhoc could tell she was lying. She wanted *him* to get back to the meeting; she was just going to keep wandering around talking to animals. He wondered what it was like; all he heard was chirps and growls. What would it be like to find meaning in their noises?

Yet he smiled, and with a nod turned to leave her to her thoughts. He knew when he was not wanted and though it made him sad, he also wanted to see how Rayn was doing. With a bow, he jumped high up into the air, higher than the trees, leaving her to the privacy she so clearly wanted.

Rayn listened. Slippery Elhm, seventh chief of the Farwends, was arguing that his warriors alone should man the western wall. All knew his warriors were far too few for the task, but he looked to gain the position favored by his ancestral gods for his sons and grandsons. It was selfish, but who could convince him otherwise? Rising Ahx, second chief of the Norwell, then spoke, attempting to have the other chief reconsider. Concessions were made, concessions were necessary, but it was difficult to forge these disparate and proud peoples into a united force. Difficult indeed.

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Few lightened his task more than Windfyrth. She was a master at understanding the human mind and organizing their strength. He expected her to intervene soon, to put the arrogance of Slippery Elhm to shame, but she had not done so yet so he had to assume it was not time. So he just listened.

He'd learnt quickly to keep as much silence as possible in these councils. He was, after all, only a dragon rider and not a chief. To be sure, the dragon riders were honored above all other warriors, but not one was given the gift of the divine to rule the people as were the chieftains. Yet they all wanted what was best for their *own* people. So he, like all other dragon riders, served as little more than adviser to the council of chieftains.

Rayn, however, knew that he enjoyed a certain status at the council tonight. He was gifted: chosen. Due to his dragon gift he could mediate between peoples whose languages were different and disparate. Rayn was even more honored that even though he was the youngest of those at council, he alone was chosen by the divine as High Wiseman of the fortress. He was given this honor as he had been instrumental in the fortress' discovery and saving his world from the plague. The wisemen were to heal, to council, to seek the will and secure the blessings of the divine on the works of men. His word was given great weight as the chief of the wisemen and, truth be known, anticipated betrothed of the maiden Pure, crown princess of Pearl.

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For while the council of chiefs ruled the fortress, the maiden, by authority of her birth, ruled the council. Not by much, it was true; her rule was more one of display and her authority little more than the ability to dismiss the council ruler if he was proven corrupt. But even so, her rule was honored and respected above all else. They flocked to see her decked out in miraculous fabric and fire, as was her way. All, even the children, looked to see her and hear her words on any topic. The young men drank in her beauty, and the old men studied her council for days after she expressed even a simple opinion.

Yet since her re-life in flames, she had become a fiery maiden. Her moods were unpredictable, and intense.

And that was the very moment when the sky above them, far away where the highest towers of the fortress lay, lit up once more with a sudden fire.

“I think the maiden may have need of your company this evening, high wiseman.” Rising Ahx smiled, and many of the chiefs laughed. They seemed to enjoy making sport of his relationship.

Rayn was loath to leave, waiting as long as possible to hear more from the chiefs. The councils were long, but important enough to be interesting. And this council was just about to get more interesting when it seemed Pure had become angry once more. Had he promised to see her this evening? The days were so

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busy he could not remember. And now if she was upset, well, all the council looked to him to keep his intended from setting fire to the world.

Rayn did little to hide his annoyance. He was trying to keep the tribes from tearing each other apart, why should *he* be required to settle the mood of an angry young girl? Could she not manage herself?

But in his heart he knew he'd go. He felt deeply for her and found he needed her to ... need him too. Just as he found himself relying on her. How it tore at his heart to see her displeased with him, in any way!

Again the sky lit up with fire, slightly blue this time.

The snickers at the council faded.

Rayn sighed.

He stood and they teased him some more about going into the "dragons den", as they once might have teased a man of his home tribe who had just upset his wife. He bore it with a smile.

Windfyrth stood then and began a stern rebuke of Slippery Elhm while Rayn retreated towards the dark of the towers above.

He'd not gone a dozen steps before Rhoc appeared, leaping down from the parapets above to weary the stones at his feet. Rayn clasped his old friend on the shoulder.

Rhoc looked up at the tower meaningfully, "What wrong?" He asked.

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“I go to speak to a woman,” Rayn replied; it was a statement of respect and affection in their culture.

Rhoc gave a broad smile, threw his fists up in the air and gave a gentle cheer.

Rayn smiled again. His friend had found such peace since the battle had been won.

“Life... good!” Rhoc replied.

Rayn nodded but could not smile. It was not that he didn’t wish the very best for his friend. It was just... he’d had troubling dreams every night.

But he didn’t want to revisit that right now. He wanted to see what was upsetting Pure.

Pure still felt so angry. It took him too long to find her. She knew it would. She almost set fire to his face the minute he appeared, opening the door with his glowing staff. *The show-off*. It reminded her that his works of faith and power were becoming truly masterful now, but she didn’t want to tell him that.

He walked up to stand beside her. He was inspiring, a young man, so handsome. So young. Not as young as her, but how old was she? Five? Four thousand? She didn’t know. She looked sixteen and felt around sixteen: Marrying age in her adopted

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culture. But she had bonded with a dragon that had seen four thousand years, and a part of that dragon's soul and memories still resided inside her sixteen year old body. It was a lot to process... too much.

She looked Rayn up and down. She didn't know what she wanted. She wanted him to hold her, and she wanted him to keep away.

It was a lot to process.

"Good evening," he said, his staff glowing a gentle blue. It was good, it meant he was praying.

"Good?" She said sardonically, "is it good?"

He waited. He refused to argue with her. It was admirable and frustrating all at once.

"I want to burn this whole city down," she said.

"Really?" He replied, looking at her with concern.

"No!" She said, frustrated, "I don't know what I want! I don't know what's happening. I want to shout, I want to cry. I just feel like a river inside; flowing too powerfully over too shallow a course. I feel the pressure building up inside, as if it's all going to explore out of me soon and... hurt someone."

"Do the teachers not help?" Rayn asked. She spent almost every hour of every day communing with them.

"Yes... no... oh! Why don't you hold me?" She demanded.

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He held out his arm uncertainly, she'd not asked him to hold her before, and there were probably rules about it from his culture that he was about to break. Without waiting to think about it, she pressed herself into his arms and turned her back to him so that they could look outside the windows together.

They watched in silence and darkness together, seeing only the night fires of the communing chiefs below.

"That's a little better," she confided.

"Good," he whispered as he held her close. He had to admit, she was beginning to scare him. Her skin was hot, almost too hot. And her hair would sometimes, in the breeze, release a tiny flare of red fire that she didn't seem to notice. People would be calling her the red maiden soon. She was hot.

He sighed, trying to keep calm. He wished he had spent more time with her teachers, maybe even more than communing with the chiefs. He spent all his spare time praying, as was his duty. The council of wisemen were due to convene in two days' time under the bright night that marked the beginning of the months. He was the youngest and yet the one in charge of so many wiser men.

Suddenly she shivered and he held her close.

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“That is nice,” she said. “I don’t know what is happening, or what you do to fix it. But I’m calmer with you. Thank you.”

She pressed herself affectionately against him as he leaned against the windowsill. Even if she felt cool now, he found himself becoming uncomfortably warm against her. He tried to stay calm.

“I have had misgivings of late,” she said, turning around. “Something troubles my thoughts.”

Rayn nodded. “I too have had visions in the night. A flood approaching, consuming a fallen people. I see it swallow an orb of white.”

“You mean Pearl?” She said.

He didn’t answer, he didn’t know. And he really, really hoped it wasn’t their world.

“What else do you see?” She asked.

He closed his eyes, uncomfortable memories flashing before his eyes. “Seven orbs, diversely colored. The white and gold set against each other so much that they do not notice the flood. There are other dreams too, a bronze spear ... I don’t know what any of it means.”

“Have you not written the dreams down?” She asked.

“No, they make so little sense-” he tried to explain.

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She looked at him. “Tsk-tsk. You are the high wiseman of the fortress. Your dreams are important! Write them all down, Rayn, in whatever language you choose.”

“We are using the language of dragons to communicate,” he said. “Many of the tribes are unfamiliar with each other but all have some experience with the language of dragons, even if they don’t know it until it is spoken to them. It is an old language that seems to have influenced every other tongue-”

He was about to launch into a little speech on comparative languages when she held down his hands to talk. He was highly conscious of how close she was standing, deliberately or not, her chest pressed against his folded hands. It was more than enough to stop him speaking.

He looked down at her beautiful, dark maroon eyes, her hair seeming deep crimson in the light. She had returned from death to be with him. She was pressed up against him... her nose close enough to caress with his own...

She seemed to read his thoughts and looked at him, puzzled. Like he was playing a game she didn’t know the rules to and didn’t really want to play right now. She stood back, still smiling.

“Come,” she said, “I have something I want to show you.”

She grabbed his hand and started walking away.

Rayn sighed, his emotions a confusing mix of bitter disappointment and sweet gratitude.

The scholar

Rayn hurried to keep up as Pure dragged him by the hand. They went past the grand hall where the high council could meet, even though the chiefs preferred to meet under the clouds. Above the grand hall was a flat roof that marked the highest point of the tallest tower of the fortress. There was little more out there other than twelve short stone pillars, a teacher, but no guard rails to protect visitors. It was where Pure spent most of her time. It was a miraculous platform that she called the ‘observatory’, that somehow allowed one to see through the clouds and into the space beyond, an endless expanse of tiny motes of light like candles in a thousand, thousand windows. And around each candle, Pure insisted, worlds such as his turned.

It seemed impossible but the teachers called it true.

But much to Rayn’s amazement she did not take him to the observatory. Instead they went to a small room he did not know existed directly below. Inside there was an ornate golden circle on the floor, filled with beautiful patterns. On the roof there was an opposing pattern. Four great gems, seeming to glow with an inner light in the darkness, sat evenly spaced around the room between four large window openings. In the center of the room, on a gold pedestal made up of intertwining dragons of brass, was a dark orb. Rayn noted they now stood directly above the great

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hall where many hundreds could meet, and directly below the mysterious observatory.

“Do you know what that is?” Rayn asked, pointing at the orb.



She shook her head, and let his hand go free. She walked around the orb, watching it with intense interest. “I think it is a dragon orb, used for communicating among the stars. I found it here two days ago. I haven’t had any luck waking it and the

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teachers are little help: I can't make sense of what they're saying."

Rayn walked up to the orb. It seemed to sense his presence and began to glow the same color as his staff.

"It's never done that before," she said, "I knew you would be useful."

He looked at it, sensing a connection forming between the orb and himself. It was as if the stone itself was trying to communicate. He heard the memory of voices inside his heart but they were faint, as though tired.

"What is it?" She asked.

"I think someone is trying to say something."

Without thinking he laid the head of his staff on the orb. He intended to give it some of the staff's power.

"I sense - " he began when suddenly the stone decided to answer him.

"Yes? Yes? Who is this? Hello! Hello, can you hear me?" A voice echoed around the room, seeming to come from the orb itself.

Pure stifled a squeal then grinned at him broadly.

"Ahh, greetings?" Rayn replied in the speaker's strange, clipped language.

Whatever, or whoever it was, then shouted with excitement. After the shouting had died down a bit the person inside the stone

tried to speak, “By Osthrain’s beard! It works! After all these years, it works. Taro, Taro, come here boy, the orb, it speaks!”

“Umm, greetings?” Rayn repeated.

“Oh, sorry, yes, you can hear me, no? Who art thou?” The orb said.

Rayn looked at Pure. She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, indicating that while she too could hear the voice, she had no idea what was being said.

“I am Rayn, dragon rider of the Celtwyld, high wiseman of the fortress from above the clouds,” he stated. “And who are you?”

The voice cheered again; clearly, this was a very exciting time for the stone. “I am Mentis, good sir, scholar of the, well, of the nation of Heldri. What ho! Such good fortune it is to speak to you this hour, good indeed!”

“Oh, you’re not a stone then?” Rayn asked.

“Grrrrm? No, I’m a man. A scholar. Where are you boy, your voice sounds young.”

Rayn didn’t like that. “I am a man, I assure you scholar, and a bold warrior of the Celtwyld.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, forgive me. It’s just, yo ha! I’ve never spoken through a dragon orb before. This is such a breakthrough! Am I to understand you are on another world? Or just another continent?”

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Rayn shook his head, wondering if they'd somehow caught hold of a madman. Instead of answering he turned to Pure and attempted to explain what he had just heard.

“Thank you, Rayn, I knew you would be useful. This dragon orb is a device for talking with others on one of the other seven worlds. How fortunate!”

“Yes, hello? Is someone else there? What language is that?” The curious scholar interrupted.

“Greetings,” Pure chimed in, speaking in dragon.

The scholar tried to repeat the word, doing a very thorough job even if it was a little uncertain. Pure laughed.

“It means greeting,” Rayn explained.

“Yes, I assumed so. Tell me, who is that with you? Is she a servant or a friend? Perhaps a young lover or—”

“You have many questions and leave no time for answers,” Rayn chided the impatient scholar. “And have not yet answered any of my own.”

“Oh, forgive me, once more. Oh, Taroz, good man! Come, come see the orb has lit up? See it is all opalescent white, like a Pearl.”

“Pearl,” Rayn repeated in the scholar's language. He had just heard the name of his world in another language. It sounded sacred, even then. “Yes, I am from the world of Pearl-”

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Suddenly Rayn heard plates and spoons clatter to the floor – apparently this Taroz was a little less open to the concept of a talking dragon orb than the scholar.

“Calm yourself man, put that away. There is no magic here, I assure you. Simple technology. See? You needn’t put your hand anywhere at all to hear the voice. See? Say something, Rayn, can you speak?”

Rayn wasn’t sure he liked this man. He was too caught up in his own discovery, perhaps more concerned about what this meant for him than for the fate of his world. He wasn’t about to become a circus trick for another world.

But, still, a part of him found this scholar’s enthusiasm ... contagious.

“I am Rayn,” he replied, “Hello, Taroz.”

He heard a gasp. “How... how do you know my name? Oh, great sage of the dragon orb.”

“The scholar keeps using it,” Rayn explained and heard the man sigh in relief.

“What else do you know?” The servant asked.

“Nothing, I can’t see where you are,” Rayn explained. “So perhaps you will do me the courtesy of explaining, since your scholar seems too caught up in the moment for proper introductions.” Rayn noticed the way he was speaking to them; it was very formal, very polite. It was as if his gift went beyond

mere words to understanding the actual cultural niceties of a language. It was curious indeed.

The scholar cleared his throat. “Indeed, you are right, young, sorry, wiseman Rayn. As you say I am a scholar and this is my servant. We are of the royal nation of Heldri, founders of science and architecture for the last hundred years. Our nation spreads from the wilds of Visthree to the high mountains of Helenold.”

“And what, pray tell, is the name of the world you are on?” Rayn asked.

“Oh, Chalcedonah!” He announced.

“Sounds like Chalcedony,” Pure muttered.

“Now,” the scholar continued, “I have questions of my own—”

Just then a loud horn sounded from outside the windows of the room below the observatory. Pure gasped, she was losing interest in listening to a conversation she didn’t understand anyway. She ran to a window.

“What is it?” Rayn asked her in dragon.

“Horns. I cannot see in the darkness but I see lights, like a hundred people carrying torches against the night.”

“What is it?” The scholar asked. “What are you saying? The woman speaks again? What language is that?”

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Rayn looked out the window and saw, indeed, twice a hundred torches being carried. “Perhaps Windfyrth’s people have arrived early? They are supposed to be at least five days away.”

He turned back to the dragon orb. “I am sorry, good scholar, my duties call me away. Please forgive me; I will speak again to you as soon as I am able.”

“Grrrrm,” he said again, which seemed to be his peoples equivalent of ‘umm’. “Very well. Same time tomorrow then?”

“If I can,” he replied.

Rayn found he had to consciously intend for the link to be broken, and wondered how far away he could be from the orb and have it still function.

“I don’t believe it,” Pure said. “You did it! You actually made contact with people from one of the seven worlds! And they live!”

Rayn smiled. “All things are possible to those with faith.”

She didn’t seem impressed. “Yes, but they need the right tools.”

“And the right tools will always be found by those with the right faith.” He smiled.

She rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in exasperation. “Just call your dragon,” she ordered with a smile.

He laughed. Ironfang was already on his way and arrived as she finished speaking. They bowed, and mounted his back with

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respect. Then they flew down over the rapidly mobilizing warriors of the central continent to greet whatever friend or foe decided to seek them at this late hour.



The scholar of Chalcedonah

After consulting thousands of scrolls over dozens of years, Wenthis, noted scholar of Chalcedonah, manages to make contact via a dragon orb with another individual from among the stars by pure serendipity.

First arrivals

The warriors lined the upper wall, far too high up for Rayn to see who was carrying the lights. But whoever it was they were clearly making their way up towards the fortress. The warriors spoke with excitement and pointed. Ironfang set down in the midst of the chiefs.

Again a great horn sounded from outside.

“Who is it?” Rayn asked Rising Ahx as soon as he was able.

“That is a horn of the North,” he replied. “Those of the Northern continent ride to our aid!”

“Look to the sky,” a man shouted, “dragon riders!”

The assembled warriors gasped as three dragons, each with a rider, flew overhead in the darkened night sky. Ironfang growled with displeasure at their flying high in air that was not theirs. But as soon as they cleared the outer wall, still well out of bowshot range, they began to circle around and fly low, turning towards him and his dragon.

Within moments his four friends were with him. They seemed to come out of nowhere. Jayd and Darkwing appeared to arrive on wings of the night; Rhoc and Fairystone to his left as she unfolded herself from nothing into her battle ready stone form. Behind him, towering high in the night, Windfyrth stood,

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her wings silhouetted by the campfires, Snow perched fearlessly on her head.

The warriors around them, not quite accustomed to the sight, struggled to hold their weapons steady and not cover their faces in fear. The three other dragons flew low in the sky, bowing their heads in deference. They landed.

The lead dragon was lithe and bronze. About him great authority and power seemed to gather. He was ridden by a heavily armored female warrior with a great spear and polar bear armor. To her right a red dragon ridden by a wiseman with a white staff. To her left a blue dragon coated in ice, ridden by a small boy with a bow. It took a moment for Rayn to realize he knew this last dragon.

“Icewing!” Pure shouted in joy, pushing past Rayn. “I am so pleased you found your rider!”

She ran and threw her arms around Icewing and he returned her embrace. It looked like she was so happy for him that she was actually tearing up.

“So am I!” Icewing beamed with genuine gratitude.

The polar warrior stood her great spear to attention. “Queen of the dragons,” she said to Pure, speaking dragon but not very well. “In peace, we come.”



The fearless Icewing

“Of course, you do!” Pure said, hopping up and down with a wide smile on her face. She looked like she just wanted to hug everyone. Her dress had changed into the cheeriest yellow he’d ever seen.

The warriorress continued. “We bring two hundreds Spears of the North, eight hundreds more follow the path we left. And if need, we can call on ten thousand more in our land!”

Pure paused before answering. “I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” she assured her.

“Better more.” The warriorress grinned. “And a great gift we bring. This man, my prophet of the North.” He stood forward with

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a humble grin. “He has fasted much and has been brought a new gift. A prayer. To hear the words of other men as though they were your own!”

Rayn pulled back, another with his gift of understanding languages? No, even better. This man had found a prayer that could be shared with everyone. This meant that everyone could soon understand each other without one needing to translate. Slowly a grateful smile spread across his face.

“How is the plague in your land?” Pure asked.

“The curse? We have seen none of it since we left; the day my prophet here had vision that led us to you. He has seen all that you won in defeating the curse, the man with the cloak red, and first dragon circle here in tower from the clouds above. We wish to join you, to join with your people, to make your cause our own!”

“You are most welcome to,” Pure said, hopping from one foot to the other again in her strange manner of showing she was happy.

Rayn translated their greeting for the rest of the warriors. They roared their approval. Within minutes the warriors fought a new battle: preparing chambers for the Northern warriors, breaking out extra food, sending out their wisemen to heal those who were weary in travelling.

“This is good.” Rayn smiled.

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Rising Ahx took him aside. “Yes, but what is it for?” He asked.

“The plague is not all defeated,” Rayn replied. “Besides, my heart has many misgivings these days...”

“Indeed, my wiseman has spoken the same thing, as though there is a great need to hurry but as yet, we do not know why.”

“Perhaps it will be revealed to us?”

“Let it be soon,” the chieftain mumbled. “There are a great many warriors here, in great excitement and no cause to fight. We must be careful or they may find their own...”

Rayn had no time to talk to the mysterious scholar through the dragon orb the next day; he was busy sharing the Northern prophet’s prayer, or negotiating between one group and another. Then, just after lunch, Windfyrth’s people arrived. They must have hurried terribly to get there in such a short time and were exhausted to the point of fainting. The chieftains called on volunteers to bring in those that struggled.

In truth, Rayn didn’t know what he’d do without Windfyrth’s wisdom and influence: she organized people with great skill.

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Then, not an hour later, the Southern riders arrived. Rayn was helping the wisemen set up for council when the warning horn sounded. Soon four dragons were seen heading towards them from the South.

“Do you suppose?” Jayd asked with a mischievous grin.

Rayn smiled to himself, a giddy bubble of hope tickling up inside him. It was not the honorable warrior Norwich that motivated him thus, but the talented priestess who rode the green dragon of the South that he longed most to see. It seemed odd to him, since he was already virtually intended, but he found he wanted to see her again anyway – for she had saved all their lives in allowing them to escape.

You don't just forget someone like that, he reasoned.

As the four flew low in the skies to the welcoming committee of the inner five dragon riders, he was glad to see them all. Norwich rode his dragon as if they were one. His prayers answered, he had bonded with his dragon friend Stormbreath. However, he did not ride in front anymore; that honor was given to the priestess. Perhaps she had claimed her dragon first? It seemed the South respected the ancient tradition that time had almost forgotten – that dominance among dragon riders was determined by those who had bonded the longest. The third rider was another warrior he'd met among their people, only she rode

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a dragon he didn't know. The fourth rider, however, was unknown to Rayn and looked young even to his eyes.

The Southern dragons landed and the riders dismounted.

Rayn was the first to speak and he spoke from the heart, "I'm glad to see you!"

The dragon priestess looked like she might have said something, but instead blushed and turned to adjust her dragon's saddle.

Norvich smiled and spoke for the Southern riders on their behalf. "Good priest, Rayn, it is good to be here. We came as soon as we felt the call of the first circle and have left instructions for others. A hundred thousand warriors of our people are gathering at the Venfirth, awaiting to join the fight!"

The assembled warriors and chieftains gasped. Were they awed by the sheer amount of warriors the Southern continent boasted? Or were they worried about how they would feed such a number?

Still the priestess blushed and Rayn couldn't stop smiling at her. "That is good news, good news Norvich."

Rayn was about to say more when suddenly a familiar crackle of thunder lit the western sky.

The warriors cringed but Rayn ran to Ironfang. The dragon riders, all twelve of them now, took to the evening sky where a blinding circle of lightning was mystically forming.

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“Take hope!” Rayn called to them. “The warriors from the Western are finally returning!”

The sky opened up to reveal the day lit planes of the Western continent and from their covered skies, dragons flew. Hundreds, each bearing a great load.

They are coming from the Western as well? Ironfang asked.

Rayn held aloft his staff and it blasted out a brilliant blue as a welcoming beacon to them. Hundreds upon hundreds they came, bringing dragons he had never before seen – the children of the Western continent. He was sure that most would return to their own lands but among them were a handful of new riders: six in all. Rayn cheered for joy, Ironfang joining his cry with a roar of unmeasured power.

Then from the crackling lightning, last to arrive, the largest dragon of Pearl entered. Farwing, whose tail stretched for a league itself, closing the hole in the air that stretched around a world.

They flew down to the ground, the mighty dragon riders introducing themselves to the other riders. Eighteen riders to protect a world.

“I only wish we had some proper way to welcome you,” Rayn said.

“Your staff is more than beacon enough!” A tall, proud warrior stated. His skin and hair were dark, his leather plated

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armor scared and did little to hide his muscular arms. Twin blades of ornate and curved steel were sheathed on his back.

“This is great.” Pure smiled as she stood among welcoming dragon riders, her warriors hastily welcoming the citizens and their added strength to the fortress. “Now we have the strength of the Central, three from the Northern, four from the Southern, and six from the Western continent where the plague was strongest! What of the Eastern continent?”

“I suspect we will know soon enough,” Rayn replied.

The tall warrior approached him and whispered in dragon, “I am instructed of Farwing to bring you news. The murderer Doomclaw has not been brought to justice for his crimes.”

Rayn nodded, his expression hardening. He was there when the dragon rebel Doomclaw had slain their friend and companion Lifebreath, whose gift had helped form the healing waters that now protected all their lives. He’d done it for pride and because she stood in his way from breaking dragon laws he did not agree with.

“And he has gathered a few dragons to his cause.” Twoswords continued. “They have sworn never to take a rider but they fight the plague in their own way. They have saved many lives, even of men, and gather sympathy for their cause among those they save. I fear they may yet prove to be a thorn in our shoes for a while yet.”

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Rayn nodded and thanked the warrior, who then went to attend his people. He did not want to upset the excitement of the festivities with this unhappy news.

Just then Pure bumped into him; she was tearful.

“What is it?” He asked.

“Oh... Farwing... he...” She put her arms around his shoulders and cried. Not a very princessly kind of thing to do but she didn't much take to traditions or what other people thought of her. Riders and warriors stopped to watch. Somehow her dress and hair seemed the deepest blue in the night lights.

Farwing approached, the ground laboring under his enormous weight. All people grew silent and dragons unconsciously bowed in the presence of the most venerable of their kind.

“I have offered to take her as my rider,” he explained and Jayd audibly gasped. “At the festival of the bright night I will be made Patron dragon of all dragons on Pearl, since I am by far the oldest. The time of unity between man and dragon has returned. It would not be right for me to deny myself a rider.”

“I don't understand, I thought Pure had a dragon,” Rayn stuttered into the silence.

Farwing nodded. “She did; the greatest I have ever known. But her dragon gave her life to save Pure's, and their bond was very weak from the beginning. There is a ritual, an old ritual, that

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can bond a dragon to a rider that is not theirs. It has not been attempted for millennia but I believe it is time to do so again. I knew my intended rider, a man that lived fifteen hundred years ago. I watched him grow, father children, become old. I mourned for his death, but we were never joined as one. I am lonely for the company of men and offer the maiden my claw in joining, if it pleases her.”

Pure still had her head buried.

“Well, what do you say?” Rayn asked. “Does this not please you?”

All waited with bated breath.

Pure lifted her tear stained face and smiled. “Oh... yes!”

The people cheered.

Farwing bowed.

“Yes! Oh, thank you, Farwing, it pleases me very much!”

Thiaz

Rayn fiddled with the hem of his robes as he walked up the long staircase. He was late again for his overdue appointed meeting with the scholar. He could only imagine the excitement the lonely man would exude at this second meeting, probably filling his room with as many like-minded individuals as he knew. They would all be ecstatic to probe the mystery of the talking sphere.

So when he opened the door to find the room already occupied, Rayn almost drew his weapons in surprise and fear.

Yet the individual that stood there as though waiting for him was of such singular youth and beauty that it stayed his arm in an instant. She had the most distracting locks of honey blond curls that went all the way to her narrow waist. Her clothes were simple, yet beautifully adorned so as to clearly indicate royalty, as did the delicate crown of pure gold on her brow, a diadem of citrine surrounded by six diamonds. Her skin was flawless and her dark honey-brown eyes both coy and captivating.

She turned as soon as she saw him and spoke in a language he did not recognize. "Greetings, stranger. I am queen Mendelain of Thiaz. We detected your interspace link two days ago and have been striving to contact you since then. You are, I presume, the one we may speak to?"

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Rayn was silent in confusion.

“Hello? You understand me? Yes?”

Her voice was soft, yet so confident it was impossible to overlook. “Yes,” he finally managed to stammer a reply, knowing her language perfectly the moment he heard it. “Yes I am, I mean I am... Ahem, sorry, we weren’t expecting any visitors.”

“And you are?” She prompted him.

“Yes, of course. I am Rayn of the Celtwyld, high wiseman of the fortress from beyond the clouds. And you, fair woman?”

She blushed slightly at the compliment, “Oh, I am queen Mendelain, as I told you. It has been thousands of years since any of the other worlds attempted to contact us with the scry orbs and we were most curious. How is it that you have survived? We thought all others were slain by the plague.”

He held his head up proudly. “We have survived thousands of years of repeated attempts by this ‘plague’ to destroy us. Yet we live by the will of the Divine, and the kindness of the great dragon ‘the matron’ – may she rest in peace – who brought this fortress down from above the clouds. And now, here it is that I find this dragon orb that allows us to speak across such distances. You are from Thiaz? That is good... but I wasn’t expecting any visitors,” he replied with a grin.

“Visitors? Oh, no, I’m not really here,” she said and walking towards him, offered him her hand. “This is a dreamvision, a

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picture made from light itself. You seem a clever man, you are sure to understand. The, um, 'dragon orb' allows us to create them so that business and information can move more freely between the worlds."

He reached out to touch her hand and found his passed right through as though she were a ghost. A week ago he would have cried demonry and attempted to cast her out, but he had learnt there were more things in this world than were seen by the wisemen, even now.

She laughed at his startled gasp then continued to speak. "I would have greeted you in person but seem to be unable to make my image leave this room. Are the teachers not operable on your world?"

Rayn had too many questions of his own right now to answer yet another one of hers, and she did seem to like steering the conversation a lot. "How... I mean... can I do this?"

She paused and thought for a moment as though talking in her heart to someone he could not see. "Very well, do so," she replied.

"How?" He asked.

She smiled as though amused. "It is usually enough, Rayn, wiseman of the Celtwyld, to simply wish it in this place."

Straightening his robes and holding out his staff, he did just that.

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A bright light seemed to gather around him, accompanied by a tingling sensation. Then a sudden darkness surrounded him and in the next moment, as he opened his eyes, he found himself somewhere completely different.

“Amazing...” he muttered.

It was a room, much like the one he had just left, except the orb in the center glowed a pearlescent white. There were people there too, strange guards with gleaming bronze armor and polished spears. Two old men, who had the appearance of priests, concentrated on the orb as though learning from the teachers. Rayn hoped they weren't learning anything that was not intended for them, and in that very thought they sat up. Their expressions were calm but he did wonder what they were doing.

And then there was the queen of Thiaz in the same transcendent beauty he had seen on his world. Was he the insubstantial one now? He tried to move his hands through each other but they seemed as solid as before.

“This is your first time projecting, isn't it, Rayn?” The queen said and reached out to show him that her hand passed right through his. “This world is real but you are just an image here. You can see, hear and smell everything here, but not touch it. This is old technology, I'm glad to see it still works between the stars.”

“Your words are strange,” Rayn confessed, “but I am glad it works too.”

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“Come, see this.” She motioned with her hand for him to stand before her at a window. Below them a city of unimaginable size stretched far out and beyond the horizon. He could not see its end even though they were clearly in the highest tower of them all; so high it reached up beyond the clouds. It was huge beyond reckoning. The city loved gold, and yellow, and bronze, and so did its people. They had countless boats that flew and high in the sky an enormous rim of clear glass that must have encircled their entire world.

“Your people are mighty,” Rayn confessed.

The queen blushed again. “Surely as are yours.”

“Yes, they are,” Rayn admitted, then muttered, “Though not one tenth as many.”

“Tell me, Rayn, tell me of your people. Tell me of the history of Pearl.”

And so he did; taking a good hour instructing her, her wisemen, and guards. They took in his whole story without judgment or interruption. They were good listeners.

Then, as he had finished telling her about his hopes for the coming wisemen council, he heard Pure’s voice, as they all did.

“Rayn, are you all right? Rayn, why are you just standing there?”

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“One moment,” he said to the princess. Then answered Pure in their own language, “I am fine, Pure. I will be there in a moment.”

“Curious, what language is that?” The queen asked.

“My native tongue. I have a dear friend, she will want me to return now, as I expect the council will be beginning soon.”

“To return is as simple as a wish, though you should invite her here as well. She sounded anxious to have you return.” The queen smiled as though guessing there was much between them.

“Oh, we are not betrothed, I assure you,” he hastily added. Perhaps a little too hastily.

“Well,” the queen said, laying a spectral hand on his arm, “I hope very much that you will return to see us here in person one day, wiseman Rayn of the Celtwyld. I still have so many questions.”

Rayn took one last look over the impressive expanse of the cityscape before him. It would take a lifetime to see it all. “I will, if it is the will of the divine.”

“Rayn...” Pure sounded even more worried this time.

“I’d best be going,” he admitted. He watched the queen look him over, and remembered the sincerity of her invitation to meet him personally. Yet, leaving the queen’s lingering gaze, he returned his spirit to Pearl.

The Joining and the Eastern

When Rayn returned to his own body he found himself standing up, leaning against the wall. Pure was standing in front of him, her eyes were filled with tears and she crushed him with a fierce hug that would have rivalled the power of the plague-cursed.

“Oh, I was so worried about you!” She shouted.

“I was all-” he began.

Then she hit him, hard. “How dare you go scaring me like that! Don’t you know better!” Her hair flared a fiery orange.

He tried to back away from her. “Don’t worry, you were safe!”

“You! Don’t tell me what I was! Where were you? What were you doing?”

He didn’t like her tone, didn’t really want to tell her when she spoke so unkindly to him. But he bit his pride and answered. “The Queen of Thiaz invited me to see her world. It was quite a thing... very beautiful.”

She squinted her eyes at him, and clenched a fist once more. “Who was beautiful, the queen or her world?”

Rayn knew that was an accusation.

“Both,” he replied with a grin.

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She twisted on her feet, seeming unsure of what to say. “Well... good. That’s nice. I suppose it’s good news that Thiaz has prospered.”

Rayn sighed with relief, glad she seemed calm once more. “Yes, it has. It is very... yellow though.”

“Did you see dragons?”

“Yes, hundreds of hundreds. The people must measure in the hundreds of hundreds of hundreds on their world! I was very impressed.”

She looked concerned. “And... they had boats, that flew?”

“Countless in number.”

“Hmmm,” she said, keeping her thoughts to herself. “And this queen, she sought you out?”

“She wanted to see who was using the orb on this world. She invited us to come and visit. Well, me really, but I haven’t had the chance to pray about it yet. I would like to visit Thiaz one day. Yes, I think I would.”

Pure was silent for a moment. “Well, I’m glad you’re all right. I should have realized... anyway, come, I’ve decided something has to happen now and you need to learn how to do this properly.”

She took his hand and dragged him away.

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Pure felt nervous; this joining was unique. She had met her true dragon, and then she had watched her die. Often a rider did not survive their dragon's death, and never does a dragon survive their rider's. So this was a special privilege, but there was a good reason for it – she was the only known survivor of the royal house and thus it was only fit that she bond with the leader of all dragons on Pearl. It was a sensible decision and, in truth, a welcome one.

They were in the spiral chamber, the great conclave of dragons, deep below the fortress yet so high upon the mountain that the sun still shone within. The multi-colored crystals reflected the light in a million beautiful hues all over the walls. Within, every dragon rider, all the leaders of men and a hundred other dragons of nobility and rank were gathered. In the center lay Farwing, holding his head up to the dais where Pure remembered first seeing the matron. And between them stood the high wiseman of the fortress: Rayn.

He looked as handsome as ever and was giving a speech explaining to all what they already knew. He had learned quickly his role since she'd found him, comatose, in the dragon orb chamber yesterday. She still hadn't forgiven him for that, though she wasn't sure if it was finding him apparently in a coma, or for successfully contacting a world she had been too nervous to try herself. He left her no time to recall it now, for by the time she'd

reached the dais his speech had ended. Lighting his staff, he stood between them uttering the prayer the teachers had taught him, in order to permit a joining between two who were not made to be.

Suddenly he stopped.

He turned around as if looking for someone. Then he turned back and smiled at her, then bowed, and walked away.

Pure was annoyed and wanted to call after him, this man who liked to keep his secrets. But she thought it might make her seem foolish and needy before the people.

Farwing simply smiled and nodded at her, seeming to indicate that everything would be all right.

Well, it isn't, Pure thought. *He'd better not do anything embarrassing.*

He walked right up to the Southern priestess, Auroriella, and offered her his hand. So that was his plan, he needed help. The priestess looked nervous, and seemed unwilling. And did she blush? But before Pure could express her concerns the priestess nodded and, gripping her staff, went to join him. Yet then he stood her in his place and stepped down.

The prayer became hers, and the moment of re-joining began.

Pure felt the welling up of light and energy between her palm and Farwing's forehead. The energy of the joining. But it was weak, scattered.

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The musical chanting, almost singing, of the priestess rose and Pure tried her best to grow the light that would join their souls.

All of a sudden her heart was beset with powerful regret. A deep, unyielding pain. It tore through her and drove her to her knees, almost making her sick. She hated herself. She hated her life. She had lost her parents. A brother had been turned into a monster and tried to kill her. Her very own dragon had died to save her life. That was a wound, a pain, that would never die and yet she felt it so acutely. It was powerful; too powerful to ever trust in love or friendship once more. She had to keep everyone away so that she could never be hurt again.

Through her tears and, she supposed, her screams, she looked up. She saw Farwing. The mighty Farwing, oldest by far and most powerful dragon on all Pearl. To her surprise she discovered he was weeping too. Suddenly in the light she saw inside his heart. She knew he felt exactly as she did. He had found his rider as a young child yet there was no way they could be joined. He watched the boy grow into a man. He watched him take a wife and father four children. And as helpless as a mirror, Farwing could do nothing but watch as the dearest friend of his life slipped gracefully into death – without him. Farwing too, knew the pain at having lost one so loved.

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And in that moment her own pain was replaced with glorious compassion. She loved this dragon and knew just how much he had suffered waiting. She knew just what it was like to feel such loneliness and loss, and her heart felt like it might burst with light.

Without thinking she reached out her hand and Farwing, eyes closed, as if flowing towards a current of compassion and understanding, touched his brow to her hand.

And in that moment, they were joined rider and dragon, and each knew peace. She felt a powerful bond, even more powerful than before. She could feel his heart beating inside her. She could embrace the endless power and energy and ability to *do* that was within her dragon.

She held him close and looked down at Auroriella's face, also covered in tears. Somehow, she suspected, the Southern priestess had shared in every thought and emotion of that experience. And yet, to her credit, she had stood firm. There was a lot of emotion and Pure was suddenly grateful that Rayn had not been the one to experience it. She reached down and they embraced Auroriella too.

So full of gratitude and feeling was she that she didn't even hear the cries of alarm.

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Rayn was trying to push the tears from his eyes. It had been a very emotional experience, watching the joining, listening to Pure scream with primal intensity. He was glad he had obeyed the gentle suggestion in his heart that the Southern priestess was preferable for this ritual. Very glad.

But he was one of the first to see the approaching dragons, his chin lifting at just the right moment as though guided by the divine. Two dragons, clearly exhausted beyond reason, struggled through the sky. He shouted a warning, riders and dragons rose to their aid in an instant. It took them fifty breaths to reach the new dragons.

There were two and they were clearly bonded dragons. Ironfang allowed one to rest on his back. Norwich's southern green helped Darkwing bring in the other. They both fell partly unconscious the moment Ironfang and Darkwing came to their aid. Rayn and Ironfang raced them towards the safety of the ground.

Upon them rode two humans. The older looked like a nomad with the trappings of a merchant, a scimitar and dagger at her hips. On the smaller dragon rode an older man with a red face and bulbous nose; he wore little but street rags. Both were already unconscious, wrapped quickly in the arms of the healers. The

dragons were driven beyond exhaustion; each was covered in numerous deep, welting scars.

Farwing arrived as they set down. “Wildblizzard! Hailstorm!” His voice trembled with fear and concern. “Do they live?”

Rayn knelt down to bless the older dragon. Her wounds were full of darkness that was difficult to drive out, but he prevailed and her wounds began once more to heal slowly. A moment later her eyes flicked open.

“Hailstorm!” She cried out in alarm. “My brother, where are you?”

“Right here, sis,” he muttered, eyes shut while the Northern prophet struggled to heal him as well. “We made it, didn’t we? Just like you said. We made it.”

Painfully, the older dragon reached out a wing to cover the young dragon and his rider. “Yes, you are safe now,” she told him.

“Indeed,” Rayn said to her. “You are at the fortress. You are safe here.”

“Good,” she said, closing her eyes. Rayn felt the dragon’s spirit weaken; his own heart trembled at the shadows of the darkness and horror they must have had to endure.



Wildblizzard was known as a very protective big sister to Hailstorm

“No, come back. Live, good soldier,” he told Wildblizzard.

Her eyes fluttered open and her sleeping rider took a mighty breath. Suddenly the desert merchant sat up, pushing away her healers.

“Ethnomancer,” she said in her native language with a thick Eastern accent, “is he here?”

“Take your rest, tell us later,” Rayn ordered.

The desert merchant struggled to stand, stumbling over to make sure her dragon was all right and hold her hand to her dragon’s wounded brow. “No!” She stated. “You must know now, the rebellion of the Eastern continent is complete. We are all that

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remains of the dragon riders there. We have fled to warn you, hounded by one who travels by red smoke. Poisoned by Ethnomancer's gift, our wounds would not heal! The rebels... they are planning to destroy every dragon rider on Pearl!"

"What?" Pure said in astonishment, the room fell into a grim and determined silence.

"I speak the truth!" The woman shouted, obviously not sure what Pure was saying. "They have slain six riders there, hunting each one at a time. They take men as friends, not riders, who help them. They promise the men riches and power once they prevail. They are planning to attack in the dark night in two weeks' time."

"Let them come," Rayn said standing, "and face the wrath of the dragon riders of Pearl!"

The people cheered and brandished weapons.

The desert merchant of the Eastern continent held the sibling dragons close. Each pushed back tears of joy, the younger one openly wept.

"Thank you," she muttered to Rayn.

"Take them to the healing rooms," Pure ordered the nearby warriors, "and you, wisemen, find a prayer to deal with the dragons' wounds. We'll need that prayer when the rebels come in two weeks."

They nodded and left to their duties.

"This is sad news," Farwing whispered.

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“Perhaps, but at least we have time to deal with it,” Rayn replied.

“Strange,” Twoswords said.

“What do you mean?” Rayn asked.

“The misgivings, the unnamed peril. Knowing the rebels are coming, has it brought you peace yet? Does it name the unnamed peril?”

Rayn knew what he meant. The terror that haunted them was not lifted knowing the rebels were coming for them. It could only mean one thing... as perilous as the rebels were, there may, yet, be a more terrifying thing to come.

“At ... least we have time to prepare ourselves,” his voice scarcely able to hide his growing concern.

The Council

Within hours the fortress was a hive of activity, men and dragons strengthening themselves in their might against any attack a rebel dragon force could muster. The Western dragons had returned to their roosts, but promised to be near if needed. Pure soon confided in him, however, that they would rather wait out to see the results of the conflict than choose sides. Thus, if the Eastern survivor reports were accurate, the fortress forces were now matched dragon for dragon, and could fully expect a pitched fight if the rebels attacked while Farwing was away.

But Rayn had other matters to consider, for the evening before the bright soon arrived.

The clouds, which forever covered the sky of Pearl, were now lit with a pale blue color, a soft glow that imitated his own staff and bathed the night in a cool radiance like the twilight snow. The land grew reverent on these nights, and the wisemen's faith was often at its strongest. Great wonders and healing prayers were easily heard by the Divine at this time.

The council of wisemen had gathered. They met in a courtyard, surrounded by a great garden in the fortress that seemed made for such meetings. The meeting place was within the crescent of a curved hill that pointed towards a stone dais in the center. Rayn had observed that whenever one stood on the

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center of the stone dais, they could easily be heard from anywhere on the hill. He did not know by what cause of nature or miracle it was done, but it was. The chieftains often held their meetings here but there were no chiefs tonight. This was the largest meeting of wisemen in the history of his world, to his or anyone's knowledge.

As high wiseman, Rayn was sitting on the first of the three stones to the right. To his left were his two most trusted advisors. The Northern prophet, of which he had become fast friends - though three times his age - and Auroriella, the sixth dragon rider. It was not only that he honored her as a great warrior and priestess among her people, or even that he favored her, though perhaps he did just a little. But all could see that the council of wisemen no longer contained only men. The Divine had called, as history attested, many wisewomen to lead their people. Thus Rayn felt it proper to invite all the wise, be they man or woman, to attend. Auroriella more than demonstrated her worth in her faith and works, though a few of the more traditional were discontent with her place in leadership.

Yet what was going to make this meeting more interesting and the first of its kind was the prayer the Northern prophet had brought. For the first time all those present, regardless of race or language from across the orb of Pearl, could understand the words of the meeting. It was good, for the language of dragons was still poorly known among them.

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As the bright night deepened, Rayn listened to the discussions of the assembled wise. They were curious, as much as he was, of what would become of this night. Soon he sensed the hour had arrived. He stood and all fell silent. There was no need for lighting; their staves were sufficient, making every shade of the rainbow present and resulting in a mottled white glow over the area.

“It is good to be here, fellow wisemen and wisewomen, priests and priestesses, scholars and gifted of Pearl. I welcome all the faithful of the Celtwyld,” they stamped their staves with approval. “The noble prophet of the North,” one man waved. “Priestesses of the Southern,” many cheered. “And all from lands far and near,” the others stamped their approval. “It is good to be here!”

“It is!” The Northern prophet spoke out of turn. Many raised their eyebrows in confusion or disdain.

Rayn turned to see what the old man wanted.

The old prophet stood. “I have foreseen...” he said, speaking not only out of turn but now without permission, “a darkness threatens this land. A darkness from the sky that devours a pearl of white, and a pearl of gold. Dark times await us...”

Rayn tried not to be annoyed. He tried to be calm, to let the old prophet speak. And while he had revealed nothing of which Rayn himself was not aware, the old man was so much like the

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wiseman who had once taught Rayn everything he knew, and Rayn wanted to respect that.

But Rayn also knew this prophet was stealing his moment, undermining his place. The Northern prophet was seeking his power.

Sure enough, the old man continued, “In the coming darkness our people will have much need of strong leadership, experienced leadership.”

“You speak amiss,” a wiseman of the Celtwyld spoke, “get back in your place!”

The Northern prophet held up his hands for peace. “I only seek what is best for our joined peoples. Rayn, you are young. You have many responsibilities,” he said, and Rayn had the feeling he was referring to the maiden. “None should have to burden all you care for.”

“What is it you propose?” Rayn asked directly. He was flustered and did not care for games of politics.

The Northern prophet looked surprised, as though he’d not expected to be given this opportunity so quickly. He looked a little lost for a moment, then cleared his throat. “Brothers, let us take a vote. Let us choose from among ourselves one who has the necessary experience and vision to unite all this people as one-”

He was interrupted by Auroriella. “There is only one who should determine that, and it is not given by a vote. Only the

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Divine should speak of who should lead us and I believe that it is clearly given to us already, this young man who saved our lives and yours.”

“It is true-” the prophet began.

“Enough,” Rayn interrupted, “I refuse to govern those who will not respect my command. Let Divinity decide.”

The old prophet shook his head. “The Divine will not intervene in our choices this night.”

Yet the will of the people prevailed; many shouted, “A test, a test!” So the old prophet and Rayn, the dragon rider, took their staves to the center of the stone dais. There they stood up on their ends – an old test – the first to fall indicated they held the least truth, or were furthest from the will of the Divine.

And after five minutes of silent waiting, neither had fallen.

“May I suggest the Divine refuses to make our decisions for us?” The old prophet finally repeated.

Rayn was just beginning to find his voice annoying.

“Perhaps you both would serve this people equally well,” Auroriella said, looking like she was trying to be helpful.

“Then let there be a vote,” Rayn declared.

It took little time to arrange, many casting their votes instantly. A reed was placed on the ground. As each of the wise made up his or her mind whom to support, the reed would bend towards their chosen.

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But first, each candidate was given the chance to speak. The Northern prophet spoke, and spoke well. It was as if he'd been preparing this speech his whole journey here, perhaps even his whole life. It was a good speech.

Then Rayn spoke. He felt the presence of divinity near, almost within his words. But he also heard the old man's words too – he was young, inexperienced and full of many duties. These fueled his fears, and his fears stood in the way of the Divine.

Yet as he sat down, and the last of the votes were counted, the reed stood plainly upright.

It was another tie.

The wise erupted in argument.

Rayn looked down at the reed in dismay. He had wished for the support of a majority of the wise, knowing that he could serve them long and well. He would have wished even that the old prophet had won rather than they be left with this uncertainty. He watched the assembled wise descend into chaos and arguments, shouting, shaking their fists, stomping their staves. It was strife, strife brought on by the arrogance of an overly ambitious man. Strife; why should he need to prove his worth as leader when it was already given?

The noise became a grey shadow within his heart, sounds becoming indistinct against each other. He looked down and relaxed into a trance. He looked at the reed, standing bold and

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innocent, heedless of the din it had caused. He seemed to see the reed, flowing like grass with his brothers by the pond. Beside them he saw a tall, strong oak.

Then he perceived a mighty wind and all the reeds fell flat before it, bending without will against the onslaught. They were weak, submissive.

And the oak was strong, obstinate.

Yet the wind grew. The old oak groaned, but it did not fall. The reeds fluttered without resistance in the hurricane.

Then the wind grew into a cyclone. Still the reeds conceded. Then there was a thunderous crash as the mighty oak died, giving way suddenly to the strength of the wind. It fell in the river and disappeared. For all its might and power, it was not enough to stand against the great wind.

Then, just before he could begin to fear that nothing could stand before the coming tribulation, the wind died and the light of day returned. Then, in the silence, the reeds stood up again. They were whole and fine, while the mighty tree had died. Rayn perceived that those that were obstinate would fall, and only those that were submissive and humble would weather this storm.

His gaze returned to the bickering wise and he knew what to do.

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“Enough!” He stated firmly, his voice exploding from him with far more force than he had intended. The area fell silent in an instant.

“The votes are tied, then allow me to amend this. I will cast the deciding vote... and I vote for the leadership of the Northern Prophet.”

Some started to argue but he held his hand up for silence. “My decision is made,” he said, and walked to sit among the gathered wise.

The Northern prophet took the first chair, seeming at first stunned, then pleased as though he’d seen the will of the Divine working for him.

And Rayn smiled.

“You let them what?” Pure shouted at him. She was storming back and forth, railing on him for failing to maintain his leadership at the council.

“I have no regrets,” he admitted. “Either they didn’t trust my counsel and I’ve saved myself a great deal of turmoil, or they have cast aside the very help they need the most. When the time is right they will seek for me to return. Look at it this way: at least we get to spend some more time together.”

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Pure huffed and paced some more before replying. “Well, good. I have a project I need us to undertake. Call the others.”

“If by ‘others’ you mean dragon riders?”

“No, just the five of the inner circle, and one more of your choosing. We have a job to do. I don’t know why but it needs to be done NOW.”

The darkness

It was difficult to describe his frustration in words. Rayn tried to rush Jayd towards the high council chambers in the fortress, where he knew Pure and Farwing anxiously waited for them under the dim light of the bright night. An hour had passed and the others were quickly gathered, but Jayd and Darkwing were proving to be the most reluctant to arrive. In the end, Rayn had realized that he and Ironfang would need to brave the maze of houses in the caverns below and hurry them along personally.

Soon he and Ironfang found them, and quickly he told them all they needed to know about the meeting, about his divinations, even about the result of the high council of the wisemen. Yet still she and Darkwing stole ahead on lazy wings.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re keeping others waiting!”

“What is the time,” she mocked him, “but midnight of the bright night? First night of the year, shouldn’t you be praying or something?”

“I have and I will tell you the results of those prayers once we are in the company of the *princess*.” He gritted his teeth as he too often did when talking to her.

She flew along amid the houses, seeming in no rush at all. Ironfang shared his frustration but held his peace, presumably

only willing to exert himself in a real emergency or remembering their lazy and careless attitudes to use against them one day.

Ironfang; always looking for the tactical advantage.

“You aren’t disappointed, are you?” Jayd asked.

Rayn instinctively knew she meant the council of the wise.
“Not at all.”

She watched him in silence, but he couldn’t fathom her thoughts. “You don’t know what the princess wants, do you,” she accused him.

“Of course I do, she has a mission-”

Jayd cut him short. “No, no you don’t. You’re just so childish, Rayn. I know you are a man and I still only a girl but why has it always been that I’m the only one who really knows what’s going on in your relationships? Do you pay no attention?”

Ironfang growled at the dishonor she showed him but Darkwing continued to fly along as if it was no threat at all. Knowing Ironfang it probably wasn’t really a threat, and with Darkwing’s speed in the night there was nothing they could do to catch him if he chose to flee with Jayd anyway.

But those were the thoughts of a warrior, not the response of a man to his younger sister’s teasing.

Younger, *half*-sister.

“She is confronting her brush with death. Besides, the princess shares my misgivings of late.”

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Jayd hit her forehead with the palm of her hand. “You’re such a boy.”

He had saved too many lives to be insulted and wondered, instead, what she meant. He might have asked her but Jayd whispered in alarm, “What was that?!”

Darkwing turned among the houses sharply, Ironfang struggling to keep up.

“What, Jayd?” Rayn ordered.

She hushed him fiercely. As quickly as shadow, she and Darkwing sped towards an outer corridor. They were headed towards what looked like a guard outpost. Darkwing moved quickly as though he travelled this way often. In a moment Rayn saw the sight of her concern – a dark red light momentarily lit up the dragon sized corridors.

Stormclouds, Ironfang immediately recognized the signature of the teleporting dragon, a close friend of the leader of the rebels.

They glided forwards on silent wings when suddenly a mighty screech filled the cavern.

It was an alarm, and dozens of clawed feet scurried along the ground.

“Shrieker!” Rayn shouted, and in that same instant, Ironfang gave a terrifying battle cry. The traitors were here; *Stormclouds*

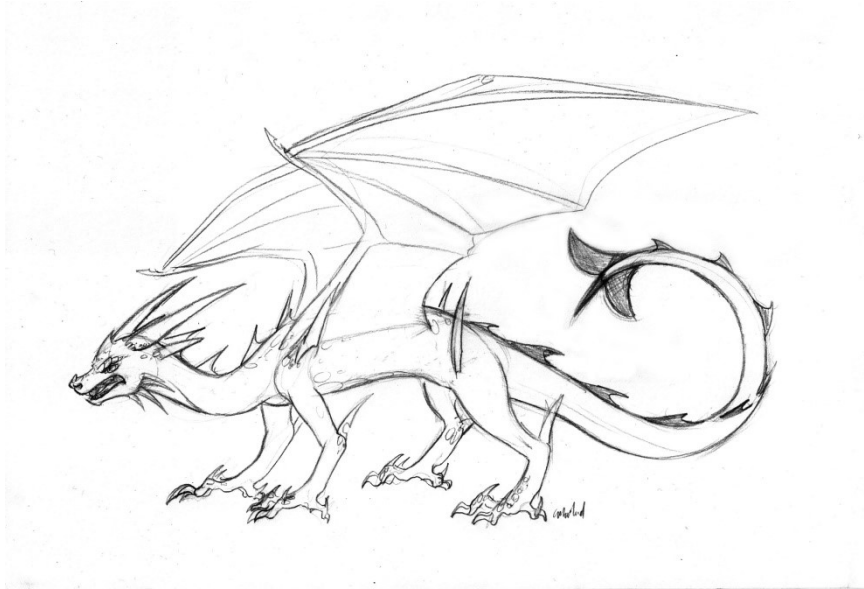
and Shrieker, allies of the murderer Doomclaw who had yet to answer for his crime.

They burst around the corner, Darkwing and Jayd swooping up to take on Shrieker who was hiding up by the roof, hidden so perfectly by the shadows it was as if Darkwing had seen in the dark.

Rayn and Ironfang turned around to look into the guardroom. Ironfang put a muscled claw against the door, pulling with such power that it split several stones. Inside, three dragons worked their theft, all of them painted with a burnt claw mark on their chest scales – a symbol of their rebellion against their newly appointed dragon patron, Farwing. Two of them, a red one and the dark blue Enfathomer, leapt at Ironfang. The last dragon grabbed up a crate full of the items and fled down through the stone floor.

The jailor, Ironfang recognized him immediately.

Ironfang hammered his fist down on Enfathomer's head as he went to grapple his wrist, knocking him unconscious in a moment. The other dragon held Ironfang's wing and the mighty dragon cried out as dark red mucus began to work its way along his veins. Ironfang's snapping jaws barely missed the evil dragon's flailing neck, but their enemy shrank back against the far wall, waiting for its poison to finish its work.



The Jailer - Stonewalker

But it never would; Rayn knew the prayers for staying poisons such as a snake's and he applied them to his dragon's wing. Like water off a duck's back, the mucus fell harmlessly to the floor, the injured wing healing in moments.

The red dragon trembled and cringed. Again it lashed out, but Ironfang was too quick, and just too strong. He caught the dragon's claw in his own and crushed down hard.

The dragon roared in pain, and tried to breathe on them but Ironfang struck his chest with his own tail. The blow was so forceful it put the rebel to silence instantly, his breath failing him. He struggled as though subdued.

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“What are you-” Rayn began, but was interrupted as a red and angry plume of smoke filled the room.

Ironfang was fast, lashing out and grazing Stormclouds’ tail. But the teleporting dragon was much faster and, scooping up the red dragon, disappeared once more.

Rayn was annoyed, *is he our ally or our enemy?*

Rider, I am sorry, Ironfang apologized. *I fear I may have struck Enfathomer a little too enthusiastically.*

Rayn looked down and knew the red dragon was dead. They didn’t have a moment to mourn their enemy’s ignorance before Darkwing and Jayd appeared at the door. Her eyes were fierce, as a warrior who has drawn first blood. He had to admit, it was inspiring.

She looked at the room.

“I am sorry, Enfathomer,” Ironfang said again as a mountain of regret filled his dragon heart, threatening to engulf Rayn in the process.

“Enough, Ironfang. We did what we had to do. These rebels risked their own deaths by stealing from our fortress.”

“But why did they want dragon rider armor?” Jayd asked.

Rayn turned, and for the first time saw that they weren’t looking for dragon weapons or even food, but were taking the dragon rider armor that filled this guard room.

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Thieves, Ironfang muttered, but it brought his heart no peace.

“They must be trying to disarm the riders,” Rayn guessed.

“But there’s so much armor in the fortress, they cannot hope to steal it all from us.”

Rayn wondered.

“They’re taking it for their allies,” Darkwing guessed.

Ironfang hissed. “Murderers!” He said, replacing guilt with rage. “They are going to attack the fortress!”

Jayd dared to laugh. “There are over a hundred dragons already and twenty riders. How can they hope to best us all?”

Ironfang pondered, gently nudging Enfathomer’s silent paw as he thought. “If they bring men dressed as riders, as promised, they may be a challenge to us. Do you not recall they have allies, men deceived into thinking their cause is just?”

Jayd scoffed.

“And has it not bothered you yet, youngling? Have you not noticed how no new riders have been claimed in over two weeks? The first twenty three were found in short order, every few hours. But suddenly, silence. Am I the only one to have noticed this?”

“No,” Darkwing agreed.

“Why are there no new riders? I am beginning to suspect the rebels have found a way to stop the joinings, but I do not know how.”

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“This is dark news,” Rayn said.

Jayd laughed, a stark contrast to the moment. “Sorry, it’s just that Darkwing and I like the dark.”

Rayn looked at his sister, letting her know with his eyes that he found her foolish.

“Sorry,” she repeated with a false frown.

“Go,” Ironfang ordered, “get to the princess immediately. We must alert the fortress!”

Rayn was impressed; Ironfang had given the very order that was in his heart to give.

Yet Darkwing did not move, but stood tall. “I am senior here,” he said, his voice quiet yet confident.

Ironfang bowed his head, just a little. “This is the wish of my rider, however, and he has authority over your rider.”

Darkwing just stood there. Jayd looked both insulted and a little hurt.

“Please?” Rayn asked.

They were gone in less than a heartbeat.

At first, Pure found herself bursting into tears when she saw the theft. The high council of chiefs, the wise and Dragon riders

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all rushed to inspect. In all, twenty dragon rider suits and several weapons were stolen.

Finally she dried her tears, and spoke only to the riders. “Leave others to the details; I have woken up the statues, they will protect us now. Come, Jayd and Rayn. There was never a more important time for my plan than tonight.”

She gathered them into a vacant town hall nearby. All the others were there: Jayd, Rhoc, Snow, Rayn and Pure - the original five riders. But Rayn had also brought the sixth rider - the Southern priestess Auroriella.

“Allow me to explain,” Pure said, finding her voice very authoritative and diplomatic, as though, tired of waiting, it was finally liberated in having a cause to pursue. In her enthusiasm she found herself glowing gently pale blue. “I’m going to wake up the golden threads that lie between the worlds once more, for only seventeen heartbeats. I have consulted the teachers; they tell me that is all the time we need. In those heartbeats we will each travel to one of the different worlds of the original seven. Well, six, since we’re on one of the worlds already. We will stay only for one day as measured by Pearl, no more. Then the golden threads will wake up once more and we will have to return home. Each rider must be in the air one hour after the next dawn on Pearl; our dragons will know the moment the threads wake up again.”

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Rayn smiled at her. “What you propose is an enormous risk.”

“Indeed it is,” Jayd said with a frown. She could tell she didn’t like the idea. “You’re going to allow us to travel between the worlds! And if we can, then why can’t the plague?”

Rayn answered on her behalf, “We’re only going to do it for a moment, and if the plague has lost its awareness it will have no knowledge of when, or how. We should be quite safe from the plague, as the Divine has confirmed to me.”

She huffed. She didn’t seem to believe him. “Remind me again of what it is we’re looking for?” Jayd said, now looking out the window on the cavern as if she wasn’t really paying attention any more.

“The other dragon orbs,” Pure replied. “We need to initiate communication with all the other worlds that we may visit them in spirit as Rayn has already achieved with Thiaz. We need to know if they are taken by the plague and become dust, or if they have prosperous civilizations as this one. And I want to do this tomorrow at dawn. So you’d better all sleep-”

“One moment,” Auroriella interrupted. “One night to prepare? Seems... hasty.”

“It is,” Pure agreed, “but it is necessary.”

“Why so soon?” Auroriella asked.

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Rayn replied for her once more, “We don’t know. But I agree with her sentiment – this needs to be done now.”

“But it’s so dangerous!” Auroriella interrupted. “Not to mention the plague, what of these worlds, who knows what dangers!”

Pure answered her, “I agree. But inherent in any noble venture is the element of terrible danger. Anything worth doing is worth paying the toll.”

“Besides, if our royal Princess has asked it of you, then you may expect the blessings of the Divine on your venture,” Rayn insisted.

Auroriella gave a discontented frown but did not argue.

“Where are you sending us?” Jayd asked.

Rayn answered, “I have cast runes for you all. I am to go to Chalcedonah, where it appears the scholar resides. As I have the gift of languages I can communicate with them all, though we will make sure none of you leave without the blessing of the Northern prophet’s prayer. Pure, it seems you have been called by the divine to respond to the official invitation from Thiaz on my behalf.”

“What? Are you sure?”

Rayn nodded with confidence. “Jayd, you are sent to Amarii, the purple world.”

“What of me?” Auroriella asked.

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“Sanmarellis,” Rayn replied.

“The one place I was hoping to go,” Pure muttered.

“Why don’t you?” She asked.

“Oh, my wiseman counselled me against it,” she told her, smiling warmly at Rayn. “I hear it is a tropical paradise of endless trees, but the divine has called you there, priestess. Bring me word, I long to set foot on Sanmarellis.”

“I will, princess,” Auriella replied.

“Yes,” Rayn said, “and I should hasten to add: it is forbidden by the divine to take any life from one world to another. There is official ritual for that but we do not have time or permission from the world spirits to perform it. So we must not trifle with life, lest we also bring the plague. Our dragons are already well versed in this rule, even if none of them have ever travelled to other worlds before.”

“But what of the people?” The priestess asked. “What will they do without the inner dragon circle?”

“I have already called the Norwich of the Vestrans to lead the riders in my absence,” Pure replied. “None others know of our plan lest they attempt to travel between the worlds without permission, so be sure to keep this venture a secret!”

“I finally figured it out. You don’t want us here,” Jayd told Pure, her voice tense. “That Rising Ahx fellow is organizing the chieftains like an old dog and your friendly priest from the north

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has all the wise following his lead. Now you hand out the organization of the dragon riders to Norwich? Well, that's just great!"

"My point exactly..." Pure said, her voice trailing off as she slowly realized Jayd was complaining, not being supportive.

They were all silent for a time.

"There is something more important going on here," Rayn suggested, "something deep. I have had visions... perhaps Divinity has cleared the path before us, handing our responsibilities on to others. There must be a reason. And I, like Pure, feel called to travel."

Jayd held her peace.

Rayn continued, "Rhoc, you journey to Tourmarelle. My studies tell me the life there is quite monstrous and dangerous. I feel you and Fairystone have the best chance of surviving but we need you to take the great dragon rider's armor just in case."

Rhoc nodded.

"So," Jayd summarized, "we just up and leave all our responsibilities here for a day, just after the rebels gain twenty suits of dragon armor. Are you sure this is wise?"

"I am sure it is divine," Rayn replied.

Then a soft voice spoke up. "What about me, Rayn?" Snow said.

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They looked over at her. She looked nervous. “The land the divine sends you and Windfyrth to was greatly troubled by the plague when last the teachers were aware. We do not know what you will find there. His people were once great and numerous, but that was over four thousand years ago. We... we don’t know what you’ll find there.”

“Then why are you sending her?” Jayd asked, her voice taut.

Rayn looked at her, annoyance written all over his face. “Because the divine has sent her.”

“Where?” Snow asked in the silence.

“Ethphraim.”

Pure, Rayn and a touch of Snow

Pure was nervous, and she had every right to be. She was about to travel to a world none of her people had seen in over four thousand years.

She felt Farwing's gentle laugh inside her, *Do not fear, princess. From what I have learnt of this proud people they will treat you with honor and dignity at all times, of that we can be sure.*

She was comforted by his words but still, she was forcing herself to do this. She had only heard about queen Mendelain, so beautiful and unafraid, from Rayn. She regretted heeding his council to seek friendships among a people who obviously had already mastered their dragon orb. Indeed, they seemed to have lost none of their understanding since the fall of humanity four thousand years ago. Yet why had they chosen to stay on their world? Pearl alone could command the threads between the stars, but Thiaz had boats; had they really given up on all the other worlds?

Pure looked around; there were the other five dragon riders, riding as high in the air as it was possible to fly safely. Each wore their full suit of dragon rider armor, which would allow them to fly without harm in the emptiness between the worlds. For a brief moment, she doubted her wisdom in sending them off on

individual missions, but her wiseman had said it would be alright, and she trusted his faith. Even so, to her dismay, the misgivings she had felt these past three weeks were scarcely muted by her decision to finally do something.

Pure gasped as she felt within Farwing the change that meant the threads had finally been reawakened. He wasted not even a heartbeat as he caught hold of the invisible golden tether. They were lifted up, clouds passing through them as though they had become a dream. She felt her heart lurch as she watched Rayn's blue light disappear into the darkness between the stars, and she longed to have him with her. The stars then blurred as Farwing rushed among them. She would miss her friends but there was somewhere else she needed to be.

A moment later a sphere of glowing yellow burst into view, and, in an instant, it grew to the size of a planet. Farwing skillfully, driven only by instinct, slowed their descent to a safe speed before they even hit the air. There was still an hour before they would catch sight of where they were to land but the countless dragons of Thiaz were already there to greet them.

It was terrifying; a truly majestic sight. A hundred thousand dragons of every shape, form and shade flocked around to greet them. A few of the larger ones even strayed into the space between the stars, though none were half as large as Farwing. They seemed to treat him with especial obeisance.

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The golden dragons and their riders formed an honor guard as they all flew towards the world of Thiaz. It was mostly desert. Sandy outcrops of glowing citrine jutted from the yellow grasslands, fed by pale waters that glowed honeycream in the light of Thiaz's only sun. All over the world massive cities lay, surrounded by millions of square kilometers of savannah. Their cities seemed to be walled with large curving structures of concrete and glass where countless vessels and people travelled. Within enormous domes filled with glass blue lakes, green forests and colorful menageries of flowers filled the cities of the golden world.

And wondrous things rode in the skies. Boats without sails flew through the air, machines of stone and iron moved about of their own accord, and the animals were numerous and peaceful. It reminded her briefly of the fleeting images that remained of her own childhood, long ago. It was beautiful beyond comparison and Pure felt her breath leave her at the sheer power and number of the people of Thiaz. There would easily be a thousand times the number that could be found on Pearl, though barely two thirds its width as a planet. So caught up in the majesty of this world and her own thoughts, she was completely unaware of the glowing green fire that trailed from the tips of her hair and fingers.

As they rode down through dawn-lit skies, a massive supercity came into view. By then over a thousand, thousand

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dragons and their riders rode with them, cries of welcome and victory thundering in their wake. People all over looked up to wonder at her riding in on Farwing, neither having ever set foot on this beautiful world.

The supercity itself was glowing with light, a bright nimbus of pure gold. The city was at least ten times the size of the fortress, and so tall it reached beyond the incredible heights of the clouds as though it longed to nestle among the innumerable stars beyond. But it was not to the heights of the city that Farwing was guided by the honor guard but to a palatial structure nearer the base. Huge columns of citrine stood guard over a massive mezzanine paved in what must surely be gold. They flew towards a dais at the far end and Farwing landed majestically.

Before them, the might of Thiaz was gathered; a thousand or so noble individuals in royal attire, and behind them seven noble dragons, all gold. From a throne of white and gold a young woman stood in welcome and Pure did a polite curtsy in respect. It was Mendelain, standing in power and authority. Her robes were expensive and ostentatious, the diamonds sewn into every edge were still outshone by the pure crystal that sat atop her delicate golden crown. Pure felt a little shy, wearing little more than her white dress and headband, but they really were the best clothes she had.

Mendelain smiled kindly, waving towards her.



Beloved queen Mendelain

Pure looked around at the intimidating crowds, hardly noticing the birds with strange eyes that she knew were sharing their sight with the rest of the world. She gulped hard at all the attention.

Remember, child, you too are a princess of a royal house. Farwing grinned inwardly at her.

But look at her, Pure complained, she fears nothing!

No one is immune to fear, Farwing whispered, smiling sadly at an unshared memory.

Mendelain seemed to dispense with some formalities, her guards looking concerned as she thrust aside her royal robe and

quickly made her way down the stairs. The next thing Pure knew the other woman had thrown her arms around her in a welcoming embrace. "I'm so glad you made it safely here." She beamed.

Pure sighed with relief and the assembled royals applauded. She felt herself turning a rosy pink.

"Was your journey pleasant?" Mendelain asked, seeming sincere.

"Indeed. Miraculous even! To travel by thread: Amazing!"

"Perhaps, one day, we may all share in your adventure." Mendelain smiled.

"I hope so," Pure said sincerely. But then she saw it, the way the other woman held tight her jaw, the subtle coldness in her eyes that Pure had wanted to disbelieve but had known existed from the moment she'd first heard her voice: Mendelain was hiding something.

But Pure didn't let that knowledge show in her eyes. She just smiled, like a child in a new place for the first time.

Mendelain took her by the hand and led her towards the assembled royals. Pure braced herself; instinctively she knew the rest of the day was going to be taken up with innumerable introductions, a thousand new names to remember, and an exhausting tour where she would be made to admire the countless sights of Thiaz. It was going to be a long day and she was going to have to remain a very good girl.

Rayn on Chalcedonah

Rayn could not keep the tears from his eyes; to have lived to see such a miracle! The candles called stars flew by as the distance between them became little more than a moment. The next he knew, he was looking down at a dusty red orb, highlighted with bright red lava flows like a shattered eggshell. Chalcedonah seemed alive in the light of the massive red star and smaller white companion that warmed it, even while it eternally circled a large gaseous orb of orange and red.

He was about to stand on another world.

He had often wondered, since becoming acquainted with the idea that all worlds were great orbs, how it was possible that one did not fall off it if they lived at the bottom. Ironfang assured him that ‘down’ was a relative direction and that all those on an orb would perceive the center of their world as being down, regardless of where they stood. He still couldn’t get his heart to believe it, yet as Ironfang gently turned in the emptiness of space and the world turned in his view, it was easier to imagine that there was no up or down out here.

Still, it was a puzzling and miraculous concept.

Stay your precious musings, my wiseman, Ironfang requested, and tell me where to land.

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Rayn had seen the place in vision the night before and guided his dragon to the land where he knew an anxious scholar would be waiting. The place approached quickly before Ironfang released the golden thread, the land here wreathed in morning twilight as Rayn hoped to not alarm people he had been told knew not the sight of dragons. He hoped they would see Ironfang as simply a large bat, not knowing how high in the sky he really flew.

I have always wanted to know what that was like, Ironfang admitted. To fly among the stars, to feel truly free!

Rayn wondered what he meant. Jayd also enjoyed flying, more than sleeping it seemed. Rayn had always wondered what it would be like to fly, to leave the prison of the ground, and now he had Ironfang he knew. Perhaps the dragons also felt trapped, not being allowed to leave their worlds.

Once the plague was dealt with, once and for all, they would all know this freedom.

And it would begin, within the hour, with a scholar who had promised to meet him at a great hill that was coming in to view right now.

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An hour later Rayn stood unafraid, before the council of strange men.

They called the place a 'university'. They called the council 'professors'. And they were, at best, a curious bunch.

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“You say then, young man, that you are from another world?” The head of their order asked. To his right, a young woman took down every word that was said in a rapid, scratchy script. To his left, a young man stood at attention, armed with a baton and wearing a badge of authority. That the land was truly alive, and Chalcedonah poignantly aware of his presence, was abundantly obvious; the ground had already shaken twice, though none of the others appeared to take any notice.

Rayn sighed. He had been asked that question too many times since he had arrived here, flying down from the skies, taken by the breathless and excited scholar by carriage to the university. Both had felt that the sight of Ironfang in the skies would be too terrifying an image for the citizenry to withstand, so he waited outside the city, in the hills and forest, waiting for Rayn’s command that it was safe to arrive.

“Indeed,” Rayn repeated to the council, “as I’m sure your scholar has told you.”

“Yes-” The scholar was about to say more but his superior cut him off.

“Yes, indeed, the claim has been made. Your manner of dress is strange, but how is it that you speak our language so perfectly?”

“It is a gift of the divine to me,” Rayn replied honestly.

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The wise men rolled their eyes as if they did not believe him. “I think it more likely he is from Drednoth,” a pale haired woman beside the leader spoke. “These claims of travelling among the stars are impossible.”

The superior held his hand up for silence. “Indeed, young man, I hope you can understand our doubt. What evidence do you give us of the truth of your words?”

Rayn was troubled and a little annoyed. “Is not my presence here enough for you to believe? I am Rayn of the Celtwyld, a wiseman held in great honor of the fortress from beyond the clouds. I am real and I have come to you from across the stars so that our worlds can begin to again enjoy the companionship which we once had.”

The old man shook his head. “So you say but how can we know of this truth for ourselves? Tell me, young man, by what manner did you travel across the stars?”

“I took my dragon, Ironfang, who rides the golden threads that hold the stars together.”

To his disgust, they laughed.

“How can you expect us to believe this?” The old woman said with scorn. “You are wasting our time with riddles, boy.”

He was no boy, though he was perhaps half the age of the youngest of them, that much was true.

“Then will you believe this?” He asked, and lit his staff with glowing blue fire.

They stopped laughing.

“Impressive,” the superior admitted, “but who is to say you do not possess some legerdemain absent to us? Some science of which we are unaware? I’m sure it would not be hard to discover by what trick you light your stick so. Even our magicians can do the same.”

Rayn sighed; this was not going the way he’d thought. They were scholars, yet did not welcome news from another world; they doubted it. Did they fear another’s success might somehow dim their own glory? Even so, perhaps he’d been too dramatic.

“Then please, have you any sick among you? Bring them forth and I will heal them if I can.”

This time they mocked him. “You see!” The woman protested, “Mentis, why have you brought this pretend prophet to impress us? He has you fooled even to the core.”

“No,” the scholar argued, “as I live and study, he contacted me through a dragon orb. See, I have brought it. He can make it work once more.”

The scholar gestured, and the pale skinned Taroz wheeled out the orb. It was once again dark and silent. Confidently, Rayn stretched out his hand but immediately realized there was no one on Pearl who would hear his call. What of Thiaz then? He willed

it to respond; perhaps Pure might enjoy a chat. The orb lit up at his command but again was silent. It found no one to speak to.

“Impressive,” their leader admitted.

“I, for one, am not fooled,” the woman insisted. “This is nothing more than stage trickery and magic. I pity the man who gives a moment’s wisdom to this mockery of scientific reasoning.”

The superior was silent a breath longer. “I concede, it is indeed... odd, at best. I think we might want to make a more rigorous study of that orb you hold there, scholar. As for you, young man, you look and sound just the same as any of us. Perhaps you are deceived into a false belief of your own origins? I do not know, but you must not ignore that it may be the truth of the matter here.”

Rayn stood up, his face flushed with anger, and the security man drew his baton. With a thrust of his staff, he tore the baton from the man’s grip. A divine power settled over Rayn and he spoke with sudden and mighty passion, “Educated fools, I name thee all!” He felt driven by a sudden power beyond his own that these wary scholars were wasting precious time that none of them had. “A great cause drives me, a passion beyond your *educated* reason. I am a Wiseman, servant of the divine, and I am sent by the divine into your world to warn you. A great danger approaches

and you would sit here in a committee to discuss it? You should be out sharpening your swords!”

Rayn felt a familiar presence nearby, a willingness to assist. He smiled. “Perhaps you will not believe the signs I have given you this day, but will you deny the evidence of your own senses as you lay eyes upon **my dragon?**”

With that, Ironfang, who’d come streaking through the skies at the first hint of Rayn’s annoyance, landed bodily on the side of the old stone building where they sat, shaking it to its foundations. He took a sizable chunk of the wall in his jaws and tore it out, shattering the windows on either side. Then crushing stone and glass in his wake, Ironfang pressed his way into the room, without even enough space to stretch out his enormous neck.

“Am I proof enough for you, doubting fools?” Ironfang roared.

“Ahh, Ironfang, they can’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Oh, yeah. Forgot that.”

Covered in dust and peering from his dislodged wooden banister, the university superior spoke with a trembling voice, “So... that’s a dragon?”

Snow

Snow looked out in disgust. Ethphraim was not what she had hoped. As soon as they’d seen the globe of blue and white, they’d both known immediately to head towards the darkened night side.

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The ride in was thrilling, but the planet itself... was not very blue at all.

First, it was covered with a dim, pale coating of brown air. A misty haze that was sure to be unpleasant. Very little of the planet was green, a land dotted in cities from one end to the other, and what was not covered in houses appeared to be either inhospitable ice or brown, uncovered earth. The only blue was the vast oceans that covered most of the planet, but even there it was clear that the world's oceans were not as blue as they could be. Great stretches of dark brown showed though the ocean's surface where great rivers left the cities and flowed into it, and there were other large patches turned green under the influence of pollution.

Windfyrth shared her disappointment, *I suspect*— she began but did not finish as she had to take emergency action to avoid colliding with some kind of machine that had great black rectangular wings. It seemed the people of Ethphraim had left it there deliberately between the stars. *Do they not even clean up out here?* She said instead.

Snow was silent. They would know soon.

Suddenly Windfyrth shrieked.

What is it? She asked her dragon

Windfyrth moaned with pain but steadied her course. *I... came in too fast. I have dislocated my wing and torn the major tendon. We have struck the atmosphere too firmly.*

Will you be all right? Snow said, now feeling her dragon's pain in her own body.

It is not severe, but I will need rest.

Snow hoped Windfyrth wasn't badly hurt, but healing would take time, and they were not supposed to spend more than a day here.

Thiaz greets Pure

Pure sighed, knowing her eyes were losing focus again. It was simply that this old man just wouldn't stop talking!

“Reopening trade negotiations has been a dream of my family for generations,” the wrinkled politician was saying - Pure had already forgotten his name - “but don't worry, if your people have lost the art of crafting the staff, or even the ‘boats’ as you call them, we would be happy to carry this burden! Pearl, as I am told, has many fine deposits of native gold and copper, and we could always use the vast networks of shallow freshwater oysters...”

His voice drifted into the din as Pure lost interest in his words. There were others who were supposed to be dealing with this kind of thing; smarter, wiser people. She was just here for one day, to say hello, to smile and nod. To see what aid they had against the plague.

So she cut him off, “Kind sir, forgive my rudeness.”

He stopped talking immediately, and listened.

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“You seem a well-informed man. Perhaps you could tell me how it is your people have survived the plague?”

He looked at her, seeming concerned. He did not answer, but a moment later begged her leave as the Queen of Thiaz arrived. Mendelain took his seat.

“Are you having a lovely time, princess Oordu?” She asked with a perfect smile.

“Yes, thank you!” Pure replied. “This food is quite delicious, I-”

“Pure, please,” Mendelain suddenly cut her off with a sharp whisper, “my people are peaceful. We have not known war in... four thousand years.”

Pure paused a moment, wondering why that was significant, then it struck her. “Oh, that’s how long it has been since the plague-”

Several people turned in their direction and the Queen laughed as if to cover up the conversation. “You should know,” Mendelain continued casually, “that talk of plague frightens my people; frightens them deeply. You have asked, so I will tell you only once. Four thousand years ago we threw every resource we had, men and dragons, into defeating the... Perish,” she whispered it as though it was a dread name. “We were victorious, but only just. Billions died. We didn’t even keep any for study, just burnt it all. We have not forgotten that tarnished day, though

none living now remember it. Still, for some, it was only five generations ago. So please, do not go about frightening my people, they may forget their manners.”

Pure pondered this. Then she continued in a quiet whisper, “Please, Queen Mendelain, I am come for more than trade. The plague has just resurfaced on Pearl, worse than ever before. Your people are strong, they have won this battle before, they still keep all their old understandings. You can help us. You... you might be able to help save us all.”

Mendelain was silent, looking at Pure, studying her eyes. “Perhaps, but not tonight. We must study all we know-”

Pure turned away in frustration; another politician. This woman would watch her Pearl turn to dust before she risked helping them. There would be little real progress in her visit here tonight; it was just a political visit to make the queen look good. Thiaz hadn’t helped anyone except themselves in four thousand years. That was not about to change any time soon. In truth, her visit was nothing more than a great waste of time.

She felt Farwing, flying far above, urging her to be patient.

It was then that Pure, looking about for a kindly face, or at least something else to talk about, spotted one of the most handsome men she had ever beheld. He was one of the Queen’s councilors but looked far too young. At his side was an ornate sword, probably ceremonial, and on his back an ivory harp. He

was laughing as he helped himself to the Queen's banquet, seeming free from cares, or above them.

"Who is that man?" Pure asked, too innocent to care who knew.

"Him?" The Queen replied, pausing a moment before replying. "He is my older brother, Prince Caspina, an honorable soul of Thiaz."

"Would you take me to meet him?" Pure asked, not sure why she needed to.

She didn't even need to look to catch the cunning gleam in the Queen's eye. But in truth, she simply didn't care.

Rayn – the dragons of Chalcedonah

Work progressed remarkably quickly after Ironfang arrived. The University, then the town, then the entire city was enlivened by his arrival. The questions never stopped:

"Are there others like him in the world you are from?"

"Is there a form of steam engine inside your animal there?"

"What species do you suppose evolved into dragons?"

It was as if dragons had disappeared into legends hundreds of years ago.

"What do you suppose happened to the dragons on this world?" Rayn asked the scholar later that day, after finishing the dry bread rolls and salted meats they shared for their midday meal. They ate outdoors, yet did their best to make sure Ironfang

had enough. Chalcedonah had calmed; the ground shook only once, and that very gently.

“They are gone, we suppose,” the scholar replied. “All are myth and legend. They speak of shy creatures that fear to come anywhere near human lands.”

“Whatever is he talking about?” Ironfang asked. The people stopped what they were doing to stare at Ironfang while he spoke. “They are still here.”

“Really?” Rayn asked.

“What was that?” The scholar asked on behalf of his curious people. “Your dragon speaks?”

“Ironfang assures me your dragons are still here,” Rayn told the scholar. The people murmured with surprise and disbelief.

Ironfang continued, “I sense their presence, but they are hidden, sequestered. They do not *want* to be found.”

Rayn told the scholar, who seemed very impressed. “What I wouldn’t give to see a dragon of our very own. Here. Right here! I would not believe it. I would not!” He said.

And knowing Ironfang, Rayn thought it a pity he’d just said that out loud.

“Well, perhaps there is something I can do about that.” Ironfang said with a grin. And while Rayn could tell what he was thinking, the people couldn’t. Without any warning he sprang upwards, leaping so high into the air the downbeat of his wings

flattened people and snapped a tree. The humans screamed. No one had seen it coming, not the scholar, not his people...

...not the dragon that was hiding in the sky.

Rayn didn't even know there was another dragon until Ironfang leapt into the air. For a moment he seemed to be chasing a low flying cloud, until he reached into that cloud and grappled another dragon. They crashed to the earth, scattering everything in their wake. His scales were a mottled blue, but mostly white. He would be difficult to see from the ground.

The citizens and scholars ran screaming in panic.

Before Rayn even had time to draw breath, Ironfang had twisted about. Breathing with exertion and excitement, he managed to pin the beast to the red earth.

"What were you doing spying on us?" Ironfang growled.

The light blue dragon breathed in fear and looked around quickly. Glaring up at Ironfang he replied, "It is you who must apologize." His voice seemed naturally very gentle, this bravado was forced. "Who are you, who come charging to this area, which was clearly under my protection, and rip out part of my university wall, and frighten my humans?!"

"Your university?" Rayn asked in wonder.

The dragon twisted around, looking out in alarm and fear at the humans who gathered to watch him.

"Say you will not flee," Ironfang ordered.

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The mottled dragon nodded and scurried to stand. “Oh well, I suppose the Griat is out of the bag now. Oh well.” He sat back on his haunches, seeming to want to look dignified. But he stared at the humans with great nervousness, his tail twitching constantly.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Rayn pondered. “I would say Chalcedonah’s dragons are *afraid* of humans.”

The dragon nodded. “It is true, though I try not to be.”

“That... that is a local dragon?” The scholar was the first of his people to speak.

“Yes, yes I am,” the dragon replied in their own language, seeming to pluck up his courage just a little. “I am Cloudform. I claim all the territory from Halav falls to the Gonswood. That includes the University. Do you like the spot I picked out? Worked well, didn’t it. I’m still not happy about the cuts in funding to the astronomy department, however...”

Citizens muttered in amazement. The scholar took a step closer, and Cloudform pulled away, his expression timid.

“But how?” The scholar questioned. “You must be hundreds of years old. Why did you stay hidden when there was so much we could learn from you?”

“Why?” Cloudform replied in a jittery voice. “When you slew so many of us, when you turned to madness at the end of the great shakings? When we learnt to fear men who hunted us? This

is a terrible wound – because a dragon never forgets. We share our parents’ memories. We know what it was like for them. That was why.”

The scholar looked ashamed. He looked up and asked another question, “Then why did you stay? Why did you stay?”

“Well, it’s not like we could go anywhere,” he replied, trying to grin, gazing skittishly as someone’s foot scraped on a tile. “Besides, I could see humanity changing. I was... some of us are... curious.”

“Come,” Rayn offered, “this is a good day for healing. Cloudform, will you allow this scholar to touch your face?”

“What?!” The dragon roared, accidentally pulling stones from the ground in his haste to pull away.

But he did not leave.

It seemed curiosity would win again.

“We could try...” Cloudform muttered.

“Stand back!” Ironfang and Rayn roared. The people were closing in and Cloudform was already looking like he was about to lose it with fear.

“Stand here. Reach out your hand,” Rayn told the scholar. “And for divinity’s sake, do not move.”

Everyone was watching. Hundreds of people. The scholar held out his hand and averted his eyes from the nervous dragon’s gaze. Then he waited.

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Rayn stood on top of Ironfang and he stepped back. Silently he prayed. He felt them now, the dragons of Chalcedonah. He sensed them watching, or at least one of them – a patron. He sensed their enormous collective fear of humans. But also their own enormous power, their confidence and strength. Their desire to find healing in a broken world.

Cloudform looked around nervously. He looked up at the sky and if he expected some other dragon to be watching, or perhaps he gazed back at destiny itself.

He looked at the scholar, who could not hide his own fear.

Twice Cloudform turned into mist, but never completely. With nervous eyes and cautious glances at Rayn, he pressed forward. With hundreds looking on, he finally pressed his snout to the man's hand.

There was a snap, a little internal click. Like a bonding, but not quite.

The people began to applaud.

Cloudform dissipated, only to reappear moments later on the steeple of the tallest, and stoutest, building there. "That's enough for one day," they heard him mutter.

"You..." the scholar puzzled out loud, "you're the evening mist on the steeple of the chapel!"

"Guilty, as charged."

"I've wondered about you my whole life," he muttered.

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Cloudform flew down again, allowing a few others, one at a time, to touch his trembling scales.

“This is good,” Rayn declared. He knew few dragons would find it so easy to overcome generations of fearing those they still clearly loved. But this would help, it really would. In the following year, Rayn was sure scholars all across the world of Chalcedonah would confirm the actual and real presence of dragons in their midst, most of them living quite close to human civilization, for thousands of years. All evidence of their existence that had been dismissed as legend would at first be humiliating to the scholars, until eventually they would dismiss this error too as the unenlightened mistakes of their own past. Dragons lived on their world, and had for eons. Dragons, like the nervous and wary Cloudform, who could not be kept from watching over the humans that he loved.

“Thank you.” Cloudform smiled.

“Sorry about, you know, before,” Ironfang apologized insincerely.

“Bah,” Cloudform said with a grin, “I let you.”

Prince Caspina

Prince Caspina was charming, the most charming man that Pure had ever met. She was grateful the Queen had introduced them, for he seemed full of wit, with a quick smile and a listening ear. He made waiting out the final hours of the banquet sufferable

with clever comments that made her laugh. Even when she did bring up the topic of the plague, after the Queen had left, he did not flinch or criticize her. And when she finally prevailed upon him to sing for her, accompanied only by his harp and assisted by his man-at-arms who played a deep long stringed instrument, the entire room fell silent to listen.

Then as the hours grew late on Thiaz, and on Pearl no doubt, Pure found herself energized in his company. The Queen had long since retired and only a few hardy souls and guards remained to socialize after the banquet. So the kind prince had offered to escort her to the royal suite where she could rest the brief night, and she was so pleased by his kindness she'd insisted he see the rooms with her. As a male, though he be the older brother of the queen of Thiaz, he would never wear the crown, but still he was clearly brought up in all the ways of nobility and kindness.

And in an act of utter chivalry, cloaked her in his own robe against the evening chill and waited with her in the dark night in pleasant silence. She'd never known a man so... thoughtful.

They stood at the balcony and she looked over at his dark honey-brown eyes, rendered even more lovely in the evening lights. He was handsome. And calm. Manly, without a hint of the fears that plagued other men she spoke to or the boyish uncertainty that was still in everything Rayn did.

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So much she wanted to tell him, but words were avoiding her that evening. As if by a miracle, he seemed to know she was looking to speak and so filled the silence for her.

“I hope it is no transgression,” he muttered, “but I fear you do the reputation of the house of Oordu a grave disservice.”

She sat bolt upright. “Whatever do you mean!” She said, the indignity unhidden in her voice.

“You are far more fair than even our best records say.”

She couldn't help but blush. How flattering this man was!

Farwing was high in the sky, one of the few dragons who could sleep on the wind. Even so, she felt his old mind awake to watch over her tonight and perhaps, to know her thoughts. Thoughts he might even share with others. She wanted to put Rayn out of her thoughts. He was just one boy, and not a prince. Besides, there was no claiming ceremony. She was not his. She could still visit any man she wanted, those were the rules!

And Prince Caspina was like a foreign land that she felt she would like to visit often.

Her eyes must have betrayed her thoughts.

He looked away, seeming troubled. “What... I must ask you, Princess Pure. Please tell me, why is it that you have come to Thiaz?”

The question surprised her. “Well, I don't understand why you would ask... you well know the reason, we want to reopen

the golden threads between the worlds. We want to know if together we can defeat the plague for all eternity. And we want to see what is still out there among the stars, you know, get to know each other better.” And she smiled what she hoped would be a welcome smile.

But it was clear from his countenance that this was not the answer he’d wanted. He paused a while before answering. “You know the commissioner from Lethriz seeks constantly to impose his taxes on the people of the Betteled islands, much to the chagrin of the council of the western sea. Twice yearly they meet, often staying days to deliberate the complex negotiations. Yet only this week it comes to light that he has taken a lover of the dish maids of the Betteled who work near to the council’s meeting place!” The prince bowed his head and laughed. “A dozen years, hundreds of thousands spent on worthless meetings all so that one man can have his mistress, and still this trouble is not resolved!”

He bent over the balcony and sighed. “So much time wasted, all because one man wasn’t honest about why he was here, and what he was doing. This is the sad way of my people, I am afraid. It is not my way, it is not the way I would have things done. But I am one man fighting against traditions of over a thousand years. We live long on this world, Pure; our science has allowed us to live around six hundred years to the average Pearlian. So change comes slowly to Thiaz.”

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He seemed so disturbed, she placed her hand on his arm to comfort him.

He pulled away. “Pure, please, no games. Tell me why you’re really here.”

His accusation hurt her, after an exhausting day of meetings and negotiations, of being a perfect princess. Frustrated tears sprang unbidden to her eyes. “You do not trust me?”

“I... I have lived too long among princesses and politicians not to be wary.”

She turned her eyes out towards the darkness, feeling Farwing’s enormous sympathy rain gently down upon her. She gathered her courage and looked directly at him. “I am being honest with you, prince. As honest as I know how to be, and to be honest I have never known a need to lie in my whole entire life. Perhaps it is the way of those of us of Pearl, or of Oordu? I don’t know. But I know it is my way and it will always be my way. We are here to make friends and to find a way to heal our worlds.”

He sighed, biting down on his finger and stormed to the far end of the room. “I, oh princess, a soul so sincere as yours does not belong here on Thiaz! We are treacherous, underhanded, calculating, there are games within games. There are things you should know, my sister, her ambition... be careful. Be far more careful than you have ever been before.”

He turned and began to walk away into the darkness.

“You don’t belong here, Pure.” He apologized into the silence, and all illusion of his kindness was shattered with the gentle breaking of her heart.

Rayn returns

“This news is dire,” Cloudform, the dragon that Ironfang had attacked, explained as the morning hour arrived. Rayn was tired but had been careful not to fall asleep. He wanted to make sure he and Ironfang were ready when the early light first touched the sky so that they didn’t miss their chance to return to Pearl. It had been a sleepless night of endless questions, and scholars taking drawings and samples.

“So you tell me,” Cloudform was confirming once again, “that a plague did indeed sweep through the worlds around four thousand years ago? It would make sense, no records exist from before that time and the only memories we have are locked away as dreams in our minds. It is as though a great catastrophe long ago has caused us to forget our past. This ‘plague’ would explain many things. We would dream of a joining between man and dragon but it never happened.”

“On our world,” Rayn replied, “a dragon circle of five riders was necessary to allow other dragons to heed the call to bonding. It was formed first by the oldest dragon on the world and a remaining heir of the royal house that founded our world. It took

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place in a crystal cavern with a spiraled floor, the high conclave of dragons. Perhaps this can help you?”

“A little; we know of such a cave on our world, and all know the oldest and wisest of the dragons, but of the royal house of men, nothing is known. Perhaps, if you return, you may help us? I sense old wisdom in your staff; it is an ancient device, the kind both men and dragons have coveted and fought over for centuries. Now all are lost, as is the glory and wisdom of the dragons and men of Chalcedonah.”

Rayn paused, for while the dragon’s voice was steady, he could almost feel the sorrow for the lost glory of his world. It was a moment to be silent.

“There is another thing which I speak of in fear,” Cloudform continued. “If, indeed, it is a plague that defeated us long ago, then you should know it has not been seen since it turned this world into red dust four thousand years ago. Should it arrive here once more, should you have brought it today even by accident, there will be NO natural immunity among men and dragons. While on your world, you tell me, it has grown, even gaining sentience? Then we will all die with a rapidity that will be truly horrifying to your eyes.”

Ironfang and Rayn were silent.

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He hoped he had brought no plague today. He had tested all his companions, knowing the divine blessed their decision and knowing the divine had promised no plague travelled with them.

But the thought of this beautiful world full of curious people all falling to dust still silenced him.

“I will do all I can,” Rayn replied. “But search you out the old records; find all you can, anything that may help us. The plague is defeated, but it is not destroyed. If there is anything,”

“I will try,” Cloudform promised.

“As will I!” Menthis vowed.

Rayn nodded. “That is so much more than I could have hoped for. Thank you, thank you both.”

“Well, thank you for ... helping us... you know...” Cloudform muttered, and Rayn smiled. It might be another generation before the dragons and men of Chalcedonah trusted each other once more.

*Was it really **only** their fear of men holding them back from the bonding?* Ironfang pondered.

The hour of departure drew nigh, and with their final farewells, Ironfang and Rayn took to the skies, watched on by hundreds of curious people and well convinced scholars. Rayn wondered who else watched on. Who knew how many hidden and shy dragons gazed on, apart from one very timid dragon Cloudform. They left him still clutching to the pinnacle of the

steeple, well away from the curious hands of the hundreds of humans, though he knew each by name. And far from Mentis, the diligent scholar, who was there to find them when the dragon orbs had seen their first use in four thousand years.

It had been a good visit.

Pure returns

He did not turn up to see her off. Just the Queen, her closest advisors, and the millions upon millions of citizens of Thiaz. Pure chided herself internally for being upset; she listened to Farwing pleading for her to put on a brave face. But she was so upset by what that insensitive prince had said it made it very difficult for her to smile.

At least we find a world whole and healed from the plague, Farwing consoled her.

She could at least force a smile about that. *Yet what understandings will they share with us?* Pure argued.

Farwing didn't answer.

Pure grinned on the outside only as she thanked the good people of Thiaz and their beautiful Queen, who was visibly concerned over Pure's unhappiness. But they said all the proper words of farewell, leading out an honor wing of ten thousand dragons into the air above the clouds. Then, as Farwing grasped the golden threads and began to speed towards home once more, Pure could not but look at Thiaz with its massive cities and flying

carriages, its wealthy, peace loving people. And spoiled, stupid princes.

And she *hated* Thiaz even more.

Towers of stone

Snow moved cautiously among the towers of grey stone. She did not like it here. She felt dizzy looking up at the cloudless sky, terrified by the endless infinity that stared at her with a hundred billion unblinking eyes. Did they know they could see to the end of forever from the surface of their world?

It had taken great courage to begin to explore. She had taken off her armor; clearly no one wore such things here. The people didn't seem at all very dangerous, though they were strange. For some reason Rayn's prayer had dissipated as soon as she arrived, for she was very disappointed that she couldn't understand any of them. Perhaps their ignorance provoked the divine to withdraw its blessing? She did not know.

Windfyrth insisted on coming, using her powerful chameleon abilities to blend in. But it was clear that she was slowing everything down, and so Snow settled her in a greened area among their strange stone houses. Then Snow left to look around, just a little, while a pale dawn began to deliver the promise of light at the horizon. Windfyrth should rest.

The houses here were very strange. Tall grey structures filled with windows of perfectly flat and impressively large panes

of glass. They had lanterns that seemed to glow without fire lighting every street. The streets were paved with a strange, soft black stone, painted with white and yellow lines which apparently provided direction to the even stranger horseless carriages of steel, and the few locals that were outside this early in their morning. The carriages roared, like they had dragons imprisoned inside them, but they were lit before and within as though by an unseen wiseman's hand.

The more Snow looked, the more she felt amazed ... and afraid. As the morning hour drove on, more and more individuals entered into the town of grey houses. Then more, then more. Her manner of dress must have seemed strange but no one stopped to talk to her. They only stared, or pretended not to. Surely she must have seemed lost to them but no one stopped to speak to her.

By mid-morning there were hundreds of them, hundreds of hundreds of individuals with short cloaks of grey and hard shoes that cracked loudly on the stone. Morning vendors soon began to open their shops, offering strange foods that smelt of exotic spices and grease. She wanted to try that food, for her stomach betrayed her hunger, but none would sell to her and turned their noses down at the money she offered, sending her off rudely.

More and more individuals began to fill the streets and the strange, brightly colored carriages filled the street with a noisy chorus of honks and beeps. Snow began to feel lost, yet the sea of

humanity pulled her along like a river. She only just managed to drag herself free of that river when she found herself standing, alone, in the middle of a massive joining of two roads. The houses were lit with massive banners that changed color as if by the hand of the divine, presenting messages she had no hope of understanding. The place was full of color and noise, full of food she could not eat, full of people who would not speak to her.

Suddenly there was a chorus of horns. The carriages all about her were bleating at her rudely. Several people at the far end of the street began to shout and wave as though she was standing somewhere that she shouldn't be. Snow looked about in fear and confusion, finding herself standing in the center of a circle of bleating carriages and shouting people.

Enough was enough.

With a scream she ran from the place, only narrowly avoiding a carriage that swung unexpectedly towards her. She pushed past the rude strangers who shouted at her, heedless of any hands that might have tried to steady her. Tears streamed down her face as she fled towards Windfyrth and the only garden in a forest of tall grey houses.

Meanwhile...



(Pocket, a friendly dragon of Chalcedonah, enjoys using his invisibility power to spy on students and teachers at the great college. He can often be found biting those he considers bullies on the ankles.)

Jayd on Amarii

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

It was the only word to describe what she was doing. It was stupid.

But Jayd still found it hard to be self-critical when Darkwing was laughing so much. His joy at crossing between worlds bubbled up inside her, diffusing her attempts at being angry, and left her feeling only more stupid. Giggles punctuated her cursing; why could she and her dragon not make up their mind?!

Relax, princess, Darkwing teased her. Weaving! And I will be the first! Any moment now, come on, come on, bring it!

Jayd surrendered to his indomitable enthusiasm. He was watching the stars with unbroken intensity, so she decided to be the sensible one for them. She had her knife, and a second in her boot. She had a full suit of dragon armor. Against Rayn's judgement she'd brought healing waters, just in case the plague was rife on Amarii. She was ready.

With a sudden lurch, Darkwing suddenly caught hold of something and like a rope it pulled them forcefully upwards.

Jayd screamed.

Darkwing cheered, *Look, rider, we are the first, the first!*

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And they were. Jayd stared back to watch the other riders, each a bright point of light, streaking away into the blackness between the stars. Jayd had spent much more time than anyone, even Rayn, learning from the teachers. He was always praying and that was good, that was his job. But, still, he was a wiseman and yet he knew less than she. She looked out at the stars. Each point of light in space was a sun, a ball of light and fire glowing, powered by the pressure of its own weight. Inside, in a process the teachers showed her, the orbs of matter went through a complex process of shedding their being as energy that became the light that warmed the worlds. It was a miraculous process.

But Rayn still wouldn't know any of that. He probably didn't even know that each point of being, throughout all space, was the end of a thread that stretched out to join every other point of being in space, wrapping together to form the threads that kept worlds around their suns, and suns glowing brightly. Threads that tied men and dragons to the surface of their worlds.

Threads that branched and twisted across space to form what might be called highways. Where being was greater, the threads grew stronger and the road was quicker. Dragons had been created with a special talent to be able to travel along them. Men had technology, but the dragons held all their wisdom within their code of life. And so Jayd marveled as Darkwing, without any training or experience, took hold of the correct thread and guided

them towards the deep blue orb that was the sun of Amarii, switching threads without doubting himself to guide them towards the much smaller orb that was the planet.

He began to slow their descent using his wings, even before they'd hit the air shield that protected this world – its atmosphere. Jayd watched and she could see the world was... purple. Even the oceans, though it caused her to marvel. Within that moment they began to move over the mountains. With the improved sight of her helm she looked around, admiring the rocks. Among them the structures of an ancient world lay: Roads, buildings.

All broken down by time and covered in a thick layer of dust.

With a sudden panic of fear, she and her dragon realized at the very same moment: this world had been fully claimed by the plague.

Rider, the air! Darkwing panicked.

Sensing his need, Jayd filled the space around them with a bubble of pure air. *What happened?* She asked him.

I don't know. I just... did you know we dragons hold our breath between the worlds? We can hold them for over an hour. But as soon as I took a breath on this world I discovered they have no, how would you say it? The air here is stale, it cannot support life. All life has left this world.

Empty, Jayd repeated in dismay.

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So the plague here had won. There was no life.

And I fear to land. If the very dust here has the remnants of the plague it may reawaken once we touch it. Oh, I wish the threads were still awake! I would return this moment!

Jayd shared his fear and sorrow. But they were here now. Here for an entire day at least, flying the whole time.

I hope the others have better luck. Jayd said, and with a pang of fear she hoped and prayed that they would all return safely home.

Rhoc on Tourmarelle

Rhoc roared as the darkness surrounded him. Fairystone's dragon form was too small to carry him on her back, so he had to place her inside his suit of armor. He took instead a chariot, similar to the boats of Thiaz, and held the harness with one hand while bright lights shot by him like the fire of distant volcanoes. He did not want to show fear, but he felt terrified.

Worry not, little master, she told him as she drove the chariot along, *I have always wanted to see the stars pass by as we took hold of the golden threads. This is a privilege I never thought I'd see!*

So Rhoc kept shouting, crying out his fear. Moments later they veered swiftly to the left, no doubt switching threads at Fairystone's command. It was good, since they were heading towards a bright orb of brown fire. The heat was apparent even

from this distance. Then they changed threads and started heading towards an orb so dark it was only visible since it put out the lights behind it. Fairystone seemed to be slowing down but the orb continued to grow and grow. It was unimaginably large, larger than all the Venfirth combined.

It is a world, Fairystone told him.

He'd never imagined it was like this. Never in his wildest dreams.

The next thing Rhoc knew they were struck by some invisible force, the air around him becoming a blazing fire as they approached the surface of the world. The chariot and armor, however, seemed to protect them, spreading out an invisible barrier until it was safe for them. Together he and Fairystone began a long and tedious descent down towards a darkened world.

He watched the world below them in wonder. It was dark, and very humid in the pale light of its brown sun. As they fell below the clouds, the light disappeared almost completely, but not the constant heat. It seemed the clouds were very much like a blanket keeping the world warm. As he floated down he noticed that there were no trees. Instead, huge, twisted, bulbous structures of deep orange or brown reached up towards the ever-dark night sky.

What are they? Rhoc wondered.

The trees of Tourmarelle are a lot like fungus or mold.

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They are not like the curse? Rhoc wondered.

No, not at all. They are alive. But they are a different kind of life than the ones that you are used to. I... I am grateful to see them. She said, sounding like she was actually having to put some effort into sounding hopeful.

You don't like them, do you? Rhoc guessed.

Oh! Fairystone protested. Why us? Rayn knew I was from the desert. They knew we'd prefer drier air. Yet here we are, yucky, sticky Tourmarelle!

For a moment Rhoc was surprised; she'd been hiding her feelings very well. Then he burst out laughing, and in a moment she joined him too.

Let's just make the most of it, he suggested.

Might as well!

Over an hour later they finally arrived, Rhoc setting down on a large black mushroom that grew to the height of five men standing. It rested above the surface of a boggy, desolate swamp. Constant fog filled the sky, and the air was hot and wet. He was already sweating. Strange sounds filled the air, sounding like frogs and strange bat calls.

What now? Fairystone asked him, trying to sound casual, yet clearly nervous. She stopped flying around and hid once more under his chest plate, her light glowing dimly through the unbreakable glass window there.

Well, we need to find someone. If there is anyone here to be found, he replied.

See if they have a dragon orb, Fairystone agreed.

Or if they have weapons against the curse.

So where do we begin?

For where to land?

Jayd and Darkwing had spent hours on the wind, sailing above the endless fields of dark purple dust. There could only be one conclusion: this land was truly dead, all life destroyed.

One moment, rider; what is that? Darkwing asked.

His mind directed her gaze toward tall, narrow mountains on the horizon. In an instant, Jayd saw that they were not mountains but massive stones. They were a pair of obelisks, leagues tall, as thick as a city at their base.

This is a strange thing, Darkwing concluded for them both.

It took almost an hour to fly there and when they arrived they both marveled at the enormous structures.

What are they? Jayd asked.

Suddenly the pillars answered them. Dark winds began to sweep around the stone from tip to base and Darkwing had to pull back from the rapidly growing cyclone. A moment later great bolts of lightning swept among the storms, seeming to reach out towards the opposite pillar.

What is happening? Jayd screamed.

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Darkwing was fighting the wind as best he could but it swept him inexorably towards the swirling matrix.

It's a trap! Jayd said with dismay.

No, Darkwing disagreed, it is a door.

Great bolts of purple lightning tore the air before them, bridging the gaps between the pillars. Beyond the endless lightning, a new land seemed to be coming into focus.

The wind drove them on.

I think the portal is out of calibration, Darkwing guessed. We're going to have to make a deliberate attempt to cross into it or risk being crushed by the winds out here!

She did not like his plan but could see no other option.

Darkwing partially folded his wings and went into a steep dive in the direction of the pillars.

Now when the lightning— he started to say but didn't get a chance to finish as they hit the barrier between the worlds and were drenched in purple energy. Miraculously, it didn't seem to harm them and a moment later they found themselves in a bright, new land.

We'd best drink the blessed waters, Darkwing suggested. In case we touched the plague on Amarii.

She took him up on it immediately. *Could it have come with us?* She asked.

No, the winds and lightning would have prevented that. The only way it could have travelled with us is within our blood. So we should be safe now, but I daren't return by that means.

How will we get back?

Darkwing looked around. *I cannot tell where we are. I will need to see the stars to get a proper bearing. Hopefully we have not gone too far. There were habitable worlds beyond the seven but none were properly settled before the plague struck.*

Wherever we are we will have to remember our path; I dread to think returning to Amarii may be our only way back. Jayd sighed but deep inside she couldn't really believe she'd never see her home again.

The world here was enjoying a bright day under a yellow sun. It was a wide land with green fields, brown roads, and many grey rocks. Silver, it seemed, was plentiful here and lay about at random as alluvial deposits on the surface.

Where to now? Jayd asked.

Darkwing sighed. *Wherever we want to, really.*

So where did they want to go?

That way, she said, pointing to the largest city of humans within one hour of flying.

Rhoc and the Twisted

It was Fairystone who had first heard the distant thrumming of drums. He didn't like the idea of swimming through the mud,

so he jumped. The tops of the mushrooms were as soft as the mud below but their stems were hard as wood, and often branched. There were strange purple mushroom trees, dark green ones with dots, and pale wide sweeping ones with upturned structures like leaves. Eventually curiosity won out, and Fairystone buzzed along with him, humming softly to herself as though to keep away the shadows.

Soon they came upon what looked like a human gathering. They were on a small, muddy rise in the swamp. The humans were gathered in the middle, performing some kind of ceremony. They were dressed in nothing but loincloths and jewelry, their skin even darker than the mud of this world. The men wore weapons at their sides, stone knives or wooden clubs. A small group, two men and one weeping woman, sat in the middle by a dismal fire. The rest of the villagers beat on drums or waited outside the inner circle of men, anxious looks on their faces.

Seems to be some form of judgment, a court perhaps?
Fairystone offered.

Rhoc nodded, unwilling to interrupt.

The drumming suddenly hastened, growing to a crescendo. At its pitch an old man stood and the drummers fell silent. He approached the center of the circle. Then he pointed towards the left.

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Suddenly, with a storm in its wings as it slowed its approach, a dragon appeared. But it was unlike any dragon Rhoc, or even Fairystone, had ever seen. It was large and dark with strange irregular welts along its twisted and grotesque form. One eye was larger than the other and one horn ended in a twisted lump. Its tail curved up into a scorpion's spike. It took up a place within the mud, below the humans. It was an abomination, seemingly overtaken by the curse, yet it bore no festering in its wounds.

Its mind, however, was clear, and as it spoke its voice appeared in the hearts of all present: *Dwindiwai, why have you summoned me?*

The old man bowed, then spoke loudly, keeping his hands pointed to the earth, and by the Northern prophet's prayer Rhoc understood every word. "Spirit of the mud and flame, we seek your guidance! Do you accept our offering of fattened swamp fowl?"

I have eaten all I require this day, but look on your feathered necklace of conch shells and polished morewood.

"This old thing?" The man said in disbelief. "It is not honorable payment for a dragon, surely?"

It will suffice, the dragon said.

This dragon seems generous? Fairystone offered.

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The old man handed over his necklace; the dragon took it and breathed in its fumes deeply. There was something about it that pleased the twisted dragon greatly, and it allowed the necklace to be placed on its horn.

Now, Dwindiwai, why have you called me? The twisted dragon asked.

“This,” the man said, his voice grave, pointing at the woman with displeasure. “This woman, has been caught in the close embrace of this man!”

Hmmm, the dragon replied, she has, I presume, some promise to the angered man on her left?

“Indeed,” the old man replied, gravely.

The dragon stretched forward, pressing its large bulk through the unwilling waters of the swamp. It seemed to smell them all.

And yet, old Dwindiwai, I sense she is unmarried?

“It is true, but great spirit of mud and flame, she is promised to him,” the old man said, pointing to the angry man.

The twisted dragon did not reply for a moment, thinking deeply. *Why do you think you can force her to marry your son?* it asked the old man.

He stuttered, not knowing what to say.

You humans, and more-so you of the Dwindiwai, how I have watched you these past eons. Have I not shown you that making

the choices on behalf of others brings sloth? Do you not enjoy deciding your own meal to hunt each day? Do I make your choices for you?

The old man said nothing but his deep frown seemed to indicate he was clearly not pleased.

The woman, however, began to cry again and reached out to hold the arm of the man she was accused of loving.

Your son would make a fine mate to her, I am sure, the twisted dragon spoke again to all. Yet I feel marriage is such an important decision that not even I would make it for her.

His form may be twisted, yet his wisdom is straight as a steel arrow, Fairystone muttered to herself.

Many of the people watching nodded their agreement. The son looked angry but would not challenge the dragon's wisdom.

The old man looked down and nodded. "Thank you, thank you spirit of the mud and flame. I... I am sorry to have burdened you."

Burdened? No, not at all. In fact, I think your calling me had more to do with the breath of this world than your concerns today. You see, we have a most interesting visitor.

And with that, the twisted black dragon turned toward Rhoc, his deformed and haunting visage piecing the darkness of the swamp.

Come out, the twisted dragon commanded, fixing them with his twisted and horrifying gaze.

Rhoc ran.

Jayd – the people of Argentus

There was a truth inside Jayd, a certain thing she knew. If the people of this world were going to kill her, she wanted to get it over with right away.

So without hesitation she steered Darkwing right towards the largest city she could find and landed him in the busiest section she could see. It was a marketplace with a dominating statue of a fierce dragon as the centerpiece. Fat birds covered every spare space, for there was little space left among the myriad of market vendors and stalls. It looked every bit as exciting as the yearly market at Ferrisville, or what was once Ferrisville. But Jayd soon noticed differences; compared with even the proud warriors of the Venfirth, the people here were tall and athletic. The commoners were unarmed and dressed as though they were very poor. About the marketplace, dozens of soldiers stood at attention. They wore iron breastplates and red plumes on their iron helmets. They had leather skirts, short swords without hilts, and great spears behind their enormous, towering shields. They looked disciplined, physically strong and dangerous. Each citizen took care to stand well away from them.

Yet they all fell into a panic as soon as they saw a dragon fly overhead.

You sure about this? Darkwing asked. It was the kind of thing she knew he'd never do on his own.

Yup, she replied as chaos erupted in the market below.

They moved to land among a screaming sprawl of humanity. Darkwing carefully set down on a hill that might have been reserved for eating lunches. He didn't mean to, he really didn't, but he somehow managed to knock the head off the dragon statue in his desperate attempt to set down without crushing any people or fat little birds.

The moment they landed Jayd looked up and was surprised to find everyone, including the soldiers, bowing on their knees with their faces towards the ground. Many trembled, and some even wept.

At least they're not going to kill us, Jayd thought.

She stood up in the saddle, asking Darkwing to lower his head so that everyone could get a look at her. She knew they wouldn't know her language, but by Rayn's staff she would know theirs. But that, she and Darkwing decided, was a secret they would keep to themselves.

"Greetings!" She shouted.

The people fell silent in a moment.

"It's all right, I mean you no harm."

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They lay there, looking at each other.

“It’s all right.” She sighed with exasperation. “I’m not going to harm you.”

No one moved.

I wonder who they fear more, Darkwing pondered, me or you?

She wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but as no one was talking to either of them she went up to the most confident looking person she could find. A fat, robed man with a crown made of leaves. He had snuck several glances at her already, yet he still looked somewhere between terrified and ecstatic.

With trembling hands he looked up at her.

“Do you understand me? Have you a wiseman?” She asked but could tell by his response he had no idea what she was saying.

She sighed again.

“Talk to me,” she ordered.

He seemed to get the idea. “Please,” he begged, speaking to Darkwing, “spare me and our people.”

Darkwing nodded, slowly, just for effect.

“We will not harm you, unless we need to.” Jayd smiled.

Her words seemed to calm the man. He continued, “I am Bellioc, your humble servant. I perceive you can understand my words, but yours are too unfamiliar to us. You have come to

declare war on the Western Tyrant, no? We can be at arms within the hour!”

“No, not that,” she tried to tell him. At least they seemed to know a ‘no’ when they saw one.

“No? Yes, of course, a feast first! We may discuss war in the morning.”

Jayd liked the idea of a feast, but not so much of a war council.

She looked at the tall soldiers, the tallest twice her height and broadly muscular. Their weapons were sharp, and the proud and skillful way they held them made her just a little nervous. But Jayd had spent more time studying her own dragon armor and its powers than the other dragon riders, and knew the spirit that kept the air about the rider in space could also be used to keep such things as weapons from harming them. She didn’t think Rayn knew that. Actually, now that she thought of it, she probably should have told everyone that.

And she was not here to get involved in any local wars, unless absolutely necessary. She shook her head once more and the people looked around, confused.

“Who are you, mistress?” He asked. “Are you the voice of the tyrant there?” He indicated towards Darkwing.

She shook her head.

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The man looked further puzzled. “Then surely he does not answer to you.”

Well, kind of, Jayd indicated with a wave of her hand.

If it were possible the man looked even more aghast. “Then you... you must be a goddess!” he decided.

“Sorry?” Jayd asked him, her mouth twisted into a confused smirk. Looking back, Jayd realized he probably took that look to mean ‘What else do you think I am, you idiot,’ kind of look.

The man stumbled back as though someone had grappled with his very heart.

“She is a goddess!” He cried with fear and dismay.

Instantly the entire marketplace: people, soldiers, and the man, gasped. They pressed their knees, elbows and faces even further towards the dust.

Jayd sighed.

This is going to be a lot more work than I expected. She told Darkwing, but he just smiled, he could see through her.

He knew she liked it.

Rhoc and the conclave

He thought he could get away. He was sure his vast speed and strength would mean no human or dragon could pursue him in this land.

But he was wrong.

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The Twisted was fast and able to swim as well as he could fly, despite his grotesque form. As for the men, the young hunters knew all the safe paths.

He was being cornered.

Rhoc turned to catch his breath and spy his pursuers. They were trying to close in directly, the dragon keeping at a distance. Then, at the furthest of his sight, Rhoc noticed the chief's son, the man accusing the woman, setting himself up on a far distant round purple fungus. It had a pulled and taut appearance as though the fungus was stretched to breaking point. The chief's son stabbed it with his stone knife, puncturing the top, and was suddenly sent flying through the air. With practiced skill he landed right in front of Rhoc before he could run away, club drawn.

Rhoc knew he did not want to test the strength of his bones against the curved spikes protruding from that club.

He knelt down, expecting to be tied with strong ropes.

Instead the warriors just waited. The dragon swept up from the muddy waters and looked down at him. *What is your name, foreigner?*

Rhoc didn't know what to say. He was supposed to be meeting this people, but this dragon looked to be full of the plague.

It's all right, Fairystone assured him, trust this one.

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The twisted dragon waited, his breath smelling like new turned soil and fresh mushrooms.

“Rhoc,” he finally said.

Rhoc, a nice name! So tell me, strong one, why is it that you fled?

Rhoc said nothing but pointed at the dragon’s imperfections.

Ah, you fear the curse of dragons, is that it? Well let me tell you, I can see inside your mind, read the history in your heart. I know you, Rhoc. I know you were born deaf and that you blamed your parents, for that was what you were taught. So tell me, how is it that you can fear my deformities when you, yourself, are well acquainted with what it is like to be unlike other men? Hmm, how?

Rhoc felt his face suddenly burn with shame. He had feared this imperfect dragon and forgotten how imperfect he, himself, was as well.

Where are you from? The twisted dragon asked.

“Pearl,” Rhoc said.

The other warriors and the old chief had arrived. They heard him speak the word and knew it was in answer to the dragon’s questions.

Pearl, the Twisted mused, I know not that name.

Rhoc found his courage to speak but the sound he made would make no sense to the men. One even laughed. But he knew

the dragon could read his heart. *I am from Pearl, an orb among the lights, far, far away from here. We travelled along threads of gold to reach you, my dragon here, see, she brought me. We come seeking a dragon orb, a device through which we may speak to you. We come seeking the peaceful communion of brother dragons and men. We come to find weapons against a great plague that threatens our land, and your own. You just, I mean, you startled me. I... am sorry.*

The dragon mused a moment, then shared Rhoc's words with the Dwindiwai.

The old man nodded to a question Rhoc did not hear. A moment later the twisted lifted its neck and emitted a deep, throbbing call that penetrated the mists like arrows through a deer's hide.

Come, Twisted said to him, offering both he and the chieftain his back, we must ride to the dragon conclave. It is a long journey, and they will need to hear this!



Twisted of Tourmarelle meets Fairystone

The oracle of Argentus

The banquet they held in her honor was amazing, even Jayd had to admit that. They couldn't stop handing her food and compliments, and even though she wasn't supposed to, she couldn't dare risk offending them by refusing at least a sip of their delicious wines. She drew the line when they brought out a line-up of their most handsome young men for her to pick from for companionship that evening. They were disappointed, but seemed to respect her decision.

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She did try to tell them she wasn't a goddess but they didn't really get it – so fixed were they on worshipping her and glowing in her company. The king of the town, a man they called Mayor, arrived for the feast but he really didn't have much to say. No one went near Darkwing and he preferred it that way; at first he stood guard behind her for the banquet, then at last he went out to enjoy the darkness and watch the stars.

It was hard to communicate her wishes; she had to play an odd kind of guessing game to get anything she wanted. Finally they told her all about their history, but didn't get what she meant when she tried to tell them about the curse. They guessed she was some kind of goddess warrior out hunting a terrible monster, which was kind of true.

After dinner there came the entertainment - the jugglers really were quite impressive, and the foolish man who kept falling over had her in stitches. After that, Mayor asked what she wanted next. She had arrived at what must have been midday here and still it was not yet midnight, so she felt she still had some time before she needed to be back in the sky.

“What I really need,” she tried to explain, “is to find out if you have any dragon orbs on this world. Then you can talk to my brother; let him explain things, this whole ‘goddess’ thing.” Which made her just a little sad but she knew she couldn't keep it up forever.

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“Silence,” the king of the village said, “the goddess speaks.”

Jayd sighed. Time for another guessing game.

She drew a picture in the sand, a straight line for her, a straight line for them, then a ball in front of each. It wasn't very easy to draw balls, Jayd realized, having not drawn except with charcoal in many years. Then she did her very best to represent the light, as she understood it, moving like a wave between the orbs. She told them the whole story, how it all worked and how important it was.

They nodded and smiled and did their very best to understand her. Even so, no question they asked even came close to the truth. In frustration she pointed up at Darkwing, arm to the right, while holding the writing stick in her lap. “Dragon orb, like my Darkwing, Dragon orb,” she repeated.

“I still have no idea what she is talking about,” the man she first met stated.

“I do,” Mayor said, sighing deeply, “perhaps it is time.”

He turned to the robed women who kept the doors. “Priestesses,” he said, and Jayd finally wondered if they really were the priests of this culture, “take us to the temple. The Goddess wishes to see the Oracle.”

The Priestesses gasped.

Oracle, Jayd thought, *well, this might be something.*

“Mayor, please,” the woman stated, “are you sure-”

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“And you wish to question the will of a goddess incarnate?”
Mayor replied.

“No, no sir, but... it is said ...”

“Then leave us now,” Mayor stated.

The woman left, shooting him a dark look.

Mayor apologized for her, claiming the hour was late. He asked if Jayd was going to bring her dragon. She told him no but still sent a message to Darkwing to keep close.

They took twelve guards who walked around her and Mayor like some sort of royal escort. It was late but still citizens insisted on following along in a great troupe. After a few minutes they came to a temple of some sort where the priestesses were waiting. After they went inside, Mayor took a moment to explain something to two of his guards and they drew weapons to keep the citizens from following any further.

The mass ‘aww’ of disappointment was almost comical.

Jayd laughed as they went inside. It was a lovely temple but she recognized none of the symbols or implements that were around them. Then, what might have been the high priestess, a tall young woman of maybe thirty with an overdone hairdo, used keys to permit them further, into a tiled cavern.

Mayor smiled as he helped Jayd in, four guards and the high priestess followed him down. Jayd could tell it was an old cavern, scarcely used. It went for many, many paces down, and Jayd felt

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with it a twinge of nervousness that her link with Darkwing was growing weak.

At last the cavern opened out into a large, rectangular room. The guards lit great bronze lamps, and the room filled with light. Around the walls, dozens of beautiful pictures were made from small, colored, square stones. There were carved pillars every few paces, looking just like in the temples of the teachers back on Pearl.

And, sure enough, there was a teacher.

Jayd sighed with relief.

Then time suddenly slowed down.

Jayd had learnt a lot about the dragon rider armor, that it was designed to mimic the incredible senses of dragons. Someone was trying to shoot her with an arrow, using one of the strange, crossways bows the soldiers occasionally carried.

She could have let it shatter on her armor but in truth, Jayd was annoyed. These people had been nothing but nice; why would one of them suddenly try to shoot her?

So using the reflexes granted her by the armor, she turned around and grabbed it mid-flight.

It had been one of the guards left at the door outside.

Jayd snapped the arrow, her blood boiling with indignation. “Why did you do that?!” She shouted at him. “You, you there,

don't try to hide it. You just shot this arrow at me, and I want to know why!"

She threw the arrow away and the man clutched at his chest, his face pale, his breathing constricted. In a moment he fell on the floor as though asleep.

Well, that seemed a bit of an overreaction, Jayd thought. And I didn't even get an answer to my question!

The others trembled in their shoes.

"It's all right," Jayd said, "I'm not going to hurt you, or him for that matter. Go pick him up; you'll see he's alright."

But he wasn't. When they went over to him she could see he was virtually scared to death. He almost couldn't breathe.

Kinda emotional, aren't they? Jayd thought to herself.

Two guards hauled him out and Mayor looked at her in fear. "Forgive me goddess, I... I..."

Jayd had had enough. This people needed to know the truth before anything else got out of hand. She patted him kindly, and went to talk to the teacher.

The teachers of Tourmarelle

Rhoc and Fairystone were taken to the great conclave of the dragons of Tourmarelle. It was open to the air; a spiral made of stones running from the center disappeared in the swamp that surrounded them on all sides. The fungus here was ancient, and so very tall.

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And there, just outside the great hall, was a much smaller mound with twelve stone pillars, just like Rhoc had seen rise up from the soil of Pearl. He bid the twisted to take them there.

This is an old place, Twisted told him, made by men. They say it was used by them in the past but it sees no use now.

Rhoc jumped down, landing in the soft earth. Entering among the mold and lichen encrusted pillars he found what he was looking for in short order: it was a teacher. Its stone arms were whole; its gem eyes gently glowed. Rhoc gleamed with surprise, and Fairystone chattered with joy.

“What is this?” The old chief asked.

Rhoc told Twisted what to reply, *It is an old device of men, a teacher. It holds all the knowledge of humanity.*

“Was it made by the world spirit in the beforetime?” the old chief asked.

No, Twisted dragon smiled. It was made by men, to teach their children.

“I have never heard of such a thing.”

Come, gaze into its eyes, as did men before you, Rhoc told him, and remember all your people have forgotten.

He did so, and fell silent in wonder, a sensation Rhoc was familiar with. He did not know what the old man asked but when he stood, he was reverent.

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“He... it... tells me all you say is true. May I, spirit of mud and flame, may we return here... often?”

Twisted actually laughed; *It's your teacher, not mine. Do with it as seems wise to you.*

Rhoc smiled. Good things were about to happen around here.

What about the dragon orbs? Fairystone reminded him.

Rhoc asked the teacher and in a moment a thundering rumbling started from beyond the small mound. A moment later it had become a tower of stone that reached up high, higher than the clouds.

And Rhoc knew, at the top, a dragon orb would be found.

Oh, said the Twisted, reading his thoughts. *We wondered what that tower was for.*

Leading them Rhoc ran up the tower, the old man carried by Twisted. Rhoc could hardly wait. He was going to show them the orb and how to use it.

Very good things were happening.

The priestess of Argentus

Safety lock protocols have been activated, the teacher told her.

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Jayd was a little frustrated. She'd come all the way down here, risked coming to this world, and the teacher – which worked perfectly well by the way – wouldn't speak to her.

What do you mean? Jayd asked.

By order of the high priestess Venderthain, no one may gain knowledge from the teachers, it replied.

“That's stupid!” Jayd shouted at it, and Mayor and his two guards flinched.

“Please, if you will,” the high priestess begged, “I see she does not speak to you either. I feared as much. The oracles have been silent my whole life, since long before my grandmother's day. Legend tells they once revealed many secrets, but that was long ago.”

“Who is Venderthain?” Jayd repeated for emphasis. “Venderthain!”

“Do you mean high priestess Benderfain?” The high priestess asked. “She lived, oh, about seven hundred years ago. She was a master of medicines, and is said to have helped the warlord defend Illerallil using polished mirrors and a great arm of wood that lifted the enemy's boats from the water. For one born without writing, she is known as a genius.”

“Venderthain,” Jayd repeated. Now she had someone to blame.

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Who is this high priestess, and why did she order the safety... whatever. Jayd asked the teacher. Suddenly its eyes lit up with knowledge. This time the teacher replied in an old woman's voice:

I am Venderthain, high priestess of the Empire. This is my last will and testament. As many of you will know, I have served the saraphynx tyrant Denwel of Illerallil my whole life. He came to me as a young woman and told me about the oracle. He taught me how to use it to gain knowledge and I have, finding ways to cure ills or heal bruises. Each time I have consulted this oracle for my answers. I thought, as do all my people, that the gods spoke through this statue of stone. But I know now that I thought wrong.

It was his greed, you see, the saraphynx tyrant Denwel. He was young, ambitious. In offending the tyrant of Drelhalli in his... choice of spouse, he invoked their wrath. Your own history will tell of the war, of the great and terrifying Drelhalli general Moth, who torched, not twenty years ago, all the eastern cities in his attempt to break the empire once and for all, killing all in his path. It was a desperate time.

Naturally the princes and the tyrant Denwel sought my will, and I sought the guidance of the oracle. Our people were in great fear, knowing the tyrants cared not for the life of their own citizens, living only for plunder and their endless lust for war. I knew Moth was coming to kill us all. Never before had I sought

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for any answer to my problem. I had always asked about one or two issues: where to find a certain man, when to sow the winter harvest. Always has this oracle answered, but now I opened my mind to all solutions. My mind was suddenly presented with the entire collection of all human knowledge. I saw the boats of iron that laid the foundation of this world, life pouring from the gleaming lights in their side, the men of stone that walked, bringing life. I thought them gods but no, the Oracle told me, they are just tools of men, a wisdom beyond my own. That there should be gods, I still believe to be true, but this oracle was not a manifestation of them. Or perhaps it was, but it not the way we believed it. It was sacred knowledge, all of which I have kept to myself these past twenty years.

I could not believe all I was freely told by this teacher! Men and saraphynx lived as one, playing, living in peace. Life was poured out upon a dry world, our own! But so soon after, an endless plague, a great disease, almost killed us all. The world was turning to dust. In desperation the broken survivors built great pillars of stone [Jayd recognized the obelisks that had brought her here], and fled to this world: Argentus. But their peace was not to last. Men were few and the saraphynx outnumbered them greatly. The hearts of the saraphynx slowly changed. One day a few traitors, who believed all men were beneath them, broke down the circle of inner riders. Then there

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was war, and the traitors won. Men became slaves to the whims of the saraphynx, to be farmed by them according to their plans for conquest. That was over three thousand years ago, and I weep for what we have become.

Yet I stayed my mind, seeking to overcome the Drelhalli and his general. It was the oracle that taught me how to polish the mirrors and curve them, how to build the crane that would lift the general's fleet and dash them upon the rocks. I am just a servant, not a scholar: I just asked the right questions.

So we built the tools, and the general was defeated. But, naturally, to my tyrant this was not enough. He was ambitious. He wanted more. He wanted all the world crushed under his claw. He bade me, then demanded, then threatened that I had to look for new tools for his many wars. I showed him the telescope, the methods of cold forging, the means of drying saltpeter wherein fire may overcome stone.

Finally, I saw what I was becoming, what we all were: New warlords and tyrants. [Here the woman's voice grew strained, as though caught in a terrible memory] I... it was me... I took him the dried metal that would become his final poison. None knew of it on this world. I know I have earned eternity in the fields of torment for my murder, but perhaps the gods will show mercy - in so doing I have saved a hundred thousand more from death! To

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my gratitude they have left off the work on saltpeter. I hope they never take it up again.

For these past weeks I have fasted, knowing old age must take me soon. I have concluded that it is not the saraphynx tyrants, so much, but their broken hearts. They seek reconciliation with men but are brought up to believe themselves above us. Thus they challenge us, treat us with disdain, waiting for the day when we will rise up and take our proper place at their sides. There must be a way, but we have lost our light, our knowledge, the right heart that governs the wisdom of the oracles. Humanity deserves little more than to be their pets... for now. One day we must take up our glory, our wisdom; the wisdom to know and do what is right and true! So I, tonight, seal this oracle until that day is come. I hope you, who have the wisdom to find this message, will know what to do and say what is necessary.

Jayd sat back. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Dragons had become tyrants, and had taken to farming humans? Were they the monsters here? But she didn't have time for this; she needed the dragon orb, and a way to defeat the plague forever.

Remove the safety protocols, Jayd ordered the teacher.

Please state your authority. The teacher replied.

Um, Jayd, second dragon rider of Pearl.

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Welcome to Argentus, the teacher said. Dragon rider Jayd, you lack sufficient authority to order removal of safety protocols on this world.

What? If she wasn't afraid of damaging it, she would have gladly hit it, What do I have to do to remove the stupid safety protocols?

You lack sufficient authority to order removal of safety protocols, it repeated.

“Stupid teacher!” Jayd shouted.

A guard stepped backwards without meaning to.

“My goddess, don't be angry,” the high priestess said, touching her arm.

Jayd was annoyed at Venderthain. What a stupid thing to do!

But then she paused. Or was it? Hiding all the knowledge? Was it wiser to keep the teachers a secret? Jayd soon found herself reluctantly agreeing. If the dragons, whom they called saraphynx, had turned evil, and if any evil dragon tyrant had found out about the boats that flew, he probably would have built an army to try to conquer Pearl. They wouldn't have defeated the Celtwyld, Jayd was sure. But then again, the people of Argentus were great warriors, and there were so many of them, and they had so many weapons.

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But she no longer had the luxury of keeping these people in their tormented ignorance. She had to find a way to protect them from the plague, to free them from the dragons - and ignorance would not serve that cause.

Then Jayd looked at the high priestess. Perhaps if Jayd lacked the authority, another high priestess wouldn't.

"What's your name?" Jayd asked.

"Sorry, goddess?"

"Jayd," she said, pointing to herself.

"Oh, goddess Jayd, yes, we know. But does your name have a meaning, we cannot tell. It is new to us, but I digress. My goddess, I am Lelleth, it means spring winds among our people."

"Lelleth, that's a nice name." Jayd said with a kind voice.

And Lelleth smiled, tears in her eyes.

Jayd sighed, *very emotional people*. Then she tried to tell the priestess, illustrating with her arms, that this Venderthain had put the oracles to sleep.

Amazingly, the high priestess understood. "And you," here she got excited, clasping her hands in an almost clap that this people liked to do, "you think it may be time to awaken them again?"

Jayd nodded.

Tears brimmed the priestess' eyes.

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Jayd smiled, “Lelleth, remove the safety protocols,” she ordered.

Of course Lelleth had no idea what Jayd was saying, so she had to mime it. Somehow the clever Lelleth understood once again. “Wake up, oracle. It is time.”

The teacher spoke back to her and Lelleth replied, “I am Lelleth, high priestess. And yes, yes, it is time.”

In the next moment the teacher’s eyes lit up, *All functions have been restored.* It declared to every heart.

Both Jayd and Lelleth clapped.

Finally, Jayd knew she had a way to talk to the others; she would tell the teacher her thoughts, and it would translate the messages directly into Mayor, his waiting guards and the good high priestess.

I am Jayd, she told them, dragon rider of the Celtwyld. I have come to your world to warn you of a plague, to find your teachers and your dragon orbs, and to meet your kind and generous souls.

“You... you are Jayd, a ‘dragon rider’?” Mayor asked.

Indeed, and... I’m sorry, you people really do need to understand, I’m not a goddess, whatever that is.

Lelleth gasped.

“You... you’re not a god?” Mayor asked.

No, just a girl, sixteen years old. Well, nearly sixteen.

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“But, how did you curse that man?”

Curse him? I didn't curse him, I just told him off. You people just get a little carried away with your emotions sometimes.

“But... you caught a crossbow bolt.”

I did, didn't I! Jayd said, admitting it was pretty miraculous, But that's just a trick of the dragon rider's armor, it has a spirit that stretches out... I'm not sure how to explain this... it's just a tool. There is no demonry here - though the teacher used the word 'magic'. Not power of the gods, just good, new-fashioned understanding.

“But what about the oracle, how did you heal it?”

Oracle? On my world we call them teachers. They too are just machines, filled with all of humanity's knowledge. All of it! You can use them to learn great things, any of you. But especially children, it is said to work particularly well on children.

“Just like in the old fables!” Lelleth rejoiced.

Just like that, Jayd smiled.

“So...” Mayor said, thinking deeply, “this armor you wear, would it work for anyone?”

Well pretty much, Jayd said.

Lelleth gasped again but Jayd ignored her. *I mean, you need a dragon bond to harness the full powers, but as long as you have a working power source, like this full suit has, you can pretty much do anything a dragon rider-*

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Suddenly Mayor shouted, “Guards, grab her at once!”

They obeyed without hesitation and in a moment Jayd found her arms held in the vice like grip of the enormous men.

She struggled but they held her fast.

Lelleth screamed and fell on the floor.

“Silence, priestess, for death waits for you next! So, Jayd of the dragon riders,” Mayor said, walking up until he pressed his frame against hers, his vile breath streaming down her face, “is there anything else I should know about your armor before I strip it from your dead flesh?”

Jayd’s heart beat throughout her whole frame in fear. She had not seen this coming. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She thought once again.

And the thought made her laugh.

He struck her but she barely flinched. Instead, she just smiled.

Well, you probably should know that you’ll look pretty ridiculous in girl shaped armor, she told him.

He went to strike her again, but her words stopped him.

Oh, and there’s one more thing – this!

With a snap and a roaring like thunder, her wings unfolded, the air spinning around at her command. The three men were thrown backwards. One guard hit the wall leaving a bloody stain,

and Mayor crashed into a pillar with a sickening crack. Jayd knew they had died instantly.

The third guard cowered on the floor.

Jayd menaced towards him through the air, *And you, man, will go upstairs and report Mayor's attempt and failure at murdering me **immediately**. Tell them to be prepared to apologize.*

“And one more thing, soldier,” Lelleth said, suddenly standing with dignity, “You are now to swear that you did not hear goddess Jayd ever claim that she was a mortal, and if you break your oath, you and your children will cease breathing within that hour.” Her voice was mild, yet so very, very threatening.

“I s... I swear,” the terrified soldier replied, and a moment later turned and ran.

I don't think I want them believing I am a goddess anymore, Jayd confessed to Lelleth.

“Let me handle my people,” the high priestess explained. “It is time for us to rise up against the oppressors – not of the saraphynx but of the greed and fear that holds us both. You have shown us the way with your courage, you have achieved so much! You ride with a saraphynx, you defeat trained soldiers in combat, you curse men with your voice. And you can fly! They will believe nothing else.”

Jayd sighed, *So can anyone when they learn how.*

“And they will learn, in time.” The priestess smiled.

As a nagging feeling pulled at her conscience, Jayd wasn't sure she believed her. Had she just freed the world from a tyrant, or just created another?

But it was worth a try.

Bitter council

The hour of the great meeting of the dragons of Tourmarelle finally arrived. Most could not arrive in time but there was at least one messenger from each of the seven hundred divisions of their world without sea. Their audience was a random assortment of the most grotesque and twisted dragons Rhoc had ever known, each seeming more aberrant than the last. Some few had complete transformations: tentacles, eyes on stalks, webbed feet. Yet all seemed healthy... just different. Rhoc was made to tell his story, then tell it again. Then Fairystone told it in dragon.

In the end the mother dragon among them, the matron of their own people, spoke. She was larger, larger than Farwing. She preferred the mud and so was never seen in full, and Rhoc was never sure if she had one head or five. “Rhoc and Fairystone, you are welcome here. We greet you in the name of the great spirit that calls this orb our world. But you must forgive us, for your message is strange... come, let me tell you a story.

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She continued, “A little under eight hundred years ago, as this world measures time, a great plague threatened all life on this orb, the *Perish*. Men and dragons fought together, many died yet none prevailed. Then, on the day of horror, the threads between the worlds fell silent and we knew: we were alone. Yet we fought on, winning victories time and time again. However, over the decades this disease would resurface, different each time, adapting to every change we created to defeat it. The men were dying by the millions, our cause becoming truly desperate.”

“Then one among us, a dragon scientist known as Pureheart, proposed a radical way of dealing with the menace.” At this, if it were possible, the assembled dragons grew even more silent. Even the beasts of the night grew reverent in expectation of what she was about to say. “We took the plague into our own bodies, protecting men from the ravages of this disease. They lived, as did all life on this world. Yet this salvation came at a price... such a terrible price: no longer could we join with men.” The assembled aberrational dragons hung their heads in sorrow. “The dragon riders were no more. Over time our numbers have dwindled, till these few here remain. It is enough to stay the plague on this world, but we are so alone. We care for men, wondering at what they have become, fearing how the loss of our mutual bond has contributed to their loss of wisdom. Yet we are also grateful, for they are a peaceful people now, living in balance

with the land they love. It is strange what they have become, yet their lives are so short.”

Rhoc didn't know what to say, he had no words.

Thus Fairystone took it upon herself to speak, “On our world, four thousand years as time is measured have passed. Our memories tell of the plague turning to dust time and time again, life scattered to the farthest reaches, surviving in nooks or forgotten islands. Yet each time the plague has destroyed us, our life fought back. Each time it returned, we grew stronger. Now, after all this time, we have finally prevailed in our first successful war against it. Today we have brought with us a vessel of water, blessed by a faithful wiseman of our people, perhaps it can heal you too?”

The assembled dragons muttered with confusion, most sounding hopeful.

“I thought it was forbidden to take such among the worlds?” Their matron asked.

“Oh, food and the life it may contain, yes. But I saw no problem in allowing my rider his usual water skins.” And he heard the smile in Fairystone's voice.

So Rhoc brought out the healing waters. He uncapped them and at the matron's command, Twisted leaned forward to study them.

Then pulled back suddenly.

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Recap it, boy, immediately! He almost shouted, *that liquid will be the death of us!*

Rhoc shut the bottle as quick as he could, careful not to spill any. He did not need to speak for them to know he was confused.

“We have feared this day,” the mother dragon spoke, “We are the plague-wrought, our lives bound up in the disease so that others may live. We lived in fear that one day a cure might be found, and that this cure would come at the cost of our lives.”

The assembled dragons spoke then, their voices becoming more and more angry, their gentle tapping on the ground soon became angry stomps. A few even had to be held back by their companions.

Enough! Twisted cried out, *let the mother speak.*

She held her silence for a long time. “You must leave, and leave in peace. We will consider this news. It is good that those of Pearl have survived and we rejoice in this, we truly do. But you must leave now or as soon as you are able. We must consider this terrible news.”

Darkwing

Jayd didn't sleep that night. The trial of the now ex-Mayor was brief, both the high priestess and the honor soldier telling the same story. Only Jayd noticed Lelleth sending the other priestesses down into the teacher's room; one after the other, in

silence. Each returned with a look of wonder and understanding on their faces.

Yet slowly a reluctant dawn began to peer over the horizon.

Soon after a priestess arrived, telling them that the teacher had shown them the location of a strange orb that apparently could communicate through worlds, hidden in the nation's capital. Lelleth then quietly send out the word - heroes were needed. She vowed to allow them to the teacher, hoping the heroes would find a way to get the orb and heal the wounds between man and saraphynx once more. And if she could talk to other humans across their world, arranging a revolution, change would not be far behind.

Jayd wondered what that would mean for the brave people of this world.

Suddenly there was a commotion. A moment later the soldier who'd survived attacking her at the oracle pressed through the crowd and fell at her feet, begging again for his life. She tried to lift him up but he wouldn't come. Lelleth indicated that a kiss on the forehead symbolized forgiveness, so Jayd kissed him. With tears of gratitude, he stood up. But he did not speak, as though he expected her to know the thoughts of his heart.

What of the assassin? Darkwing muttered. *This man here is the brother of him that who shot an arrow at you.*

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Jayd nodded, and then insisted on seeing the one who'd shot at her, grateful the teacher made it possible for them to understand her, though for Lelleth's pleas she spoke only to her.

Sure enough, he was on his deathbed, his eyes unfocused, his breathing labored, a heavy fever racking his body. His wife and two young sons stood by in tears.

She didn't know if he could hear her but she spoke to him kindly, "Soldier, I know you did this at Mayor's orders to test me, to see if I was a goddess. I know that's something sacred in your culture because when he found out I wasn't one he tried to kill me and take my power. He was a very bad, bad man, and he earned his fate. But you, you were just obeying him. So if you can, if you hear my words, get well, good soldier."

And she kissed him on the forehead.

His breathing steadied, his fever broke before her eyes. A minute later, he sat up.

"Goddess, you have forgiven me. You have forgiven me!" He wept, throwing himself at her feet while his family openly wept.

Jayd sighed at all the attention, shaking her head and pushing them away. With her eyes, she begged the high priestess to tell them the truth quickly.

Then, from down the streets, she heard the people screaming. It was coming from outside. She was tired and felt

drained. Too much had already happened today. But Jayd ran with the Priestess and saw, riding in the bright morning sky, a massive brown dragon. Two lesser dragons rode high in the sky keeping watch. As Jayd watched in disbelief, the large brown dragon started burning several houses and barns outside the town.

She couldn't believe it, after all she'd been through, and now this? But a darker rage soon simmered within her, spoke in Darkwing's thoughts, *How could any dragon treat humans this way?*

"Please!" The priestess begged. "Save us from the rage of the saraphynx, he thinks—"

But Jayd didn't wait for her to finish.

She and Darkwing were going to teach the saraphynx tyrants of Argentus a lesson or two.

"Ride high in the sky," she told Darkwing. He looked nervous, but just as incensed at this dragon's behavior as she was.

Darkwing took to the sky, the tyrant screeching in rage at his presence. As Darkwing flew higher, their enemy's rage increased until he was almost drooling with blind anger.

Darkwing spoke her thoughts and his, "Tyrant, stop this murder at once!"

The tyrant looked surprised, then laughed. "These are mine to do with as I wish. How dare you command me in my own domain!"

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He charged, and Darkwing breathed on him. But the tyrant clearly had fought dragons before and swiftly dodged the weakening breath. A moment later he swung his wings against the air and twisted his enormous bulk upwards, his tail smashing into Darkwing's flank. Then the tyrant moved away before they could react. It was a clever tactic, and she could feel Darkwing's deep bruising. She looked down, spying the terrified village that expected to die today.

The tyrant spoke next; he had already taken to the higher air. "I see you like this little village. But your choice is a waste of time, and why on Argentus would you ride with a human?" He laughed. "But I like your style, stranger. Take oath with me and I will let you live, I may even let you govern this pathetic hovel of humanity on my behalf – they have not produced a worthy hero for over three hundred years, I'm sure you can find a way to turn that around."

He circled them, his two friends staying high in the air.

But his offer gave Jayd an idea.

"I am not willing to serve another," Darkwing spoke her thoughts, "but when I defeat you, you will leave this village alone to govern themselves?"

The tyrant laughed again. "Certainly! But you do not want them for yourself? They will not have to wait long till another saraphynx claims them, I am sure. And I am not willing to let this

pathetic town out of my clutches; their position alone is a tactical advantage. So if I win, you will bear me this oath that you will remain, under oath to me and serve me as their tutor.”

“Agreed!” Jayd shouted.

The tyrant scowled and Darkwing scolded her, *If he thinks you a rider, well, he may not take kindly to the rise of the dragon riders on his world, know what I mean?*

Jayd did. In a world that treated humans like slaves, or battle fodder, the appearance of dragon riders was sure to threaten the power of all the tyrants. They might even make a truce among themselves just to attack Pearl itself.

“Your human is feisty, I’ll give her that, but you know it’s forbidden to teach them our language.”

“She can guess your intent, for her cleverness is one of the reasons I chose her, as you may well learn.”

“To battle then?” the tyrant asked.

“To battle,” Darkwing responded, and folded his wings. He had guessed the tyrant’s tactic before Jayd was even aware of their danger. Fire, mixed with caustic spittle, exploded from the tyrant’s maw even before he’d filled his lungs with air. Darkwing flew quickly to the left, not even feeling the heat as he headed towards the dark woods near the town. The tyrant was momentarily confused, not expecting his tactic to fail, and had to flap furiously to pursue.

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What's the plan? Jayd asked, her heart beating like thunder. Death had come for them on their journey after all, and yet she was not afraid. She even found it exciting.

Head for the darkness among the trees. I hope we can outrun him there.

We won't outrun him, not on this world. What can we do? The people here need us.

That's a good point.

Darkwing slid skilfully among the trees, dodging and diving with almost prescient skill. A moment later the leaves above them burst into flames, burning drips of dragon bile raining down on them. Jayd patted out the fire on her armor.

Hold tight, Darkwing commanded her. *I have never tried this before.*

His wings grew, shreds of darkness streaming from him in the shadow of the trees. It was his dragon talent, the night flight. During the night he became the fastest dragon on Pearl, perhaps the fastest anywhere.

And night, Jayd suddenly realized, *was nothing more than an enormous shadow as the world turned away from the sun.*

Every tiny shred of mottled sunlight slowed him but he pressed on. Leaves, vines, and small trees shattered at his sudden pass. He headed out, as if towards a faraway mountain, the tyrant shrieking as they fled.

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And then Darkwing turned, pulling a full circle, and seven breaths later exploded from the forest and right towards the tyrant's back.

The tyrant had expected the tactic, but Darkwing was travelling too fast for him to move out of the way. The tyrant's great jaws opened and he drew breath, ready to expel his liquid fire all over Darkwing.

Without thinking, Jayd knew what needed to be done. She opened her mechanical dragon wings and the air bracelet and flew towards the tyrant's mouth. He breathed and an explosion of fire surrounded her. The bubble of air protected her and Darkwing from most of the flames, and her armor from the rest. She drew her long knife, the one that she had taken from the treasury in the fortress; she knew a normal knife would never penetrate the hide of a dragon. Yet armed with a dragon rider's knife and without fear, she raced across his mouth and slit the dragon's sensitive tongue across its length.

She heard him shriek with intoxicating pain, then Darkwing collided bodily with the tyrant, knocking his breath from him. They struggled as they fell, but the greater size and strength of the tyrant was no match for Darkwing's speed and agility. They hit the tree line just as Darkwing swirled onto the tyrant's back. Trees snapped and shattered as they fell, the tyrant taking the worst of it as he tried to steady himself. A moment later they hit

the ground with a thunderous crash that startled birds from the trees for countless leagues.

Darkwing pinned him to the ground and Jayd flew in and pressed the point of her long knife against the dragon's brow.

"I yield," the tyrant said, admitting defeat, its tongue slowly regenerating even as it spoke.

Jayd stood unmoved.

Darkwing spoke, "You vow to leave the good people here to self-governance and that none of your allies will destroy their peace?"

The tyrant laughed, coughing blood. "Indeed, though without a saraphynx to guide them, they will soon destroy themselves, you will see."

Jayd, glaring into the dragon's eyes, did her best to pretend she didn't understand and wasn't powerfully offended by what he had just said.

"Oh, I think they might surprise you," Darkwing replied, letting his enemy go.

The tyrant paused before replying, "Thank you for sparing me. I see you are a being of honor, and if you wish to let them govern themselves so be it – I have heard of far stranger things. I am too busy anyway, with the green of the north torching Felvol and Pendhap this week, plus the usual rebellions of the saraphynx of Zenvol. I have enjoyed our little wrestle. As for you," he said,

turning his head towards Jayd, “I can see why he takes such a brave and clever human for his pet.”

Jayd gripped her sword and looked at Darkwing as if to explain what the tyrant had just said, but he just smiled.

The tyrant glanced at the sword but didn’t move. “Now, if you will excuse me, I’ve some business to attend to.”

Jayd was silent as the tyrant left, his two witnesses in tow.

Is this how they live, and what they must put up with each day? She asked her Darkwing.

Not for long. Darkwing smiled. He looked towards the town and spied the people cheering frantically. At their front stood the high priestess, a mingled look of fear and relief on her face: Relief that the days of the dragon tyrants were finally numbered; fear, knowing what it would surely take.

Rhoc returns

Rhoc and Fairystone waited out the night in sadness, resting underneath a blue mushroom in the unrepentant heat. As the appointed hour approached, he lifted himself up into the chariot and grasped hold of Fairystone’s harness.

This is not how I would have had it end, he said.

Me neither, she glumly replied.

Jayd leaves

She couldn't say anything or take any of the mountains of gifts of fine jewelry or gold that they attempted to press her way as she and Darkwing took again to the late morning sky. They waved goodbye, the black breath of Darkwing a fitful salute to this world of oppressed – and occasionally over-emotional – warriors. They raced back to the dead world of Amarii. Holding their breath and taking hold of the golden thread, Darkwing ascended in the purple sky.

Fallen Snow

Snow was running back towards Windfyrth as fast as she could.

Suddenly she heard a terrible wailing sound rip through the air and she turned to see two blue painted carriages with red and blue lights flashing from their ceilings. Inside she saw the people looking at her and pointing.

Instinctively she knew they were coming for her. They'd found her and singled her out.

It was time to leave.

She ran as quickly as she could, but it was not fast enough. They knew the lay of the land too well. In less than a minute they'd blocked off all her exits.

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So she did the only thing she knew to do in a situation like this: she called the beasts.

Their voices were strange but she'd been listening to their language the whole time she'd been here. They were everywhere: Birds, rats, mice, even small creatures like tiny shin high tigers. There were hundreds, all over the strange village.

They were not of her world but when she called, they came.

The strange people who were trying to talk to her, to calm her down, didn't even notice at first. The first few bites and stings were shrugged off. But as the beasts began to surge all over them, doing enough damage to kill them if that had been Snow's intent, they lost cohesion and began to run.

So did Snow.

But she did not get far before she found herself lost in an area she was not familiar with. She could still feel Windfyrth nearby, but not so near that she could hear her words.

The people in blue were scattered but one of them still managed to throw off the tiny tigers and was just about to grab her, his eyes wild as if he knew that knocking her unconscious



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would stem the tide of driven animals. Fortunately, that was when Windfyrth arrived.

She landed, smashing down onto the strange stone, her wing still badly twisted, even more from her panicked flight to rescue her. But when Windfyrth arrived; she arrived angry. Immediately she smashed one of the noisy carriages in half, and with a swipe of her tail, thrust the man so far away it might have killed him.

An instant later the other blue clothed people pulled small, dark sticks from their carriages and their side, and pointed them at Windfyrth. With a bestial roar, she shattered their windows, then she bent down to cover Snow.

“What’s happening?” Snow screamed.

“I think it’s time we leave, mistress,” she replied.

There was a strange noise, like the snapping of a thousand great oaks. Windfyrth didn’t even wince, though Snow felt her side being pelted as if with tiny stones of great force.

Windfyrth bowed her head and Snow was about to climb on when suddenly a huge arm of metal swung down and struck her. She tried to rise but her neck was momentarily pinned under the great arm of iron. Snow looked along the arm to a glass box where a man seemed to be trying to help the blue people harm Windfyrth. Snow screamed at him to stop then called on the animals once more.

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A moment later her dragon wriggled free from under the arm of metal and began tearing it to shreds with great fury. In that moment Snow felt a terrible, blind, uncontrollable rage well up inside Windfyrth. She turned on the people and the mayhem they were causing, screaming at them to stop and to let them depart in peace so that they may never return to this horrible world. But it was no use; they didn't speak the same words. It must have simply seemed that an enraged dragon roared terrible threats at them; roaring as though working herself up for greater bloodletting.

Snow reached up, trying to climb on to Windfyrth's back, but she was in such a state of rage and indignity that she couldn't get a good hold.

And that was when Snow saw, a moment too late, the blue clothed man whom Windfyrth had thrust away from her, his left arm twisted and bleeding, the bone visibly protruding from his blue shirt. In his other hand he held a little black box and before Snow could think, she saw him use it. Not on the enraged dragon, but on the little girl who held the dragon's soul in her heart.

She only felt a flash of pain as the electricity moved through her. She was spared the terrible sight as he took her prisoner, the horror at Windfyrth's rage, and the terrible indignity as she then surrendered rather than allow Snow to be harmed. The mighty Windfyrth became a prisoner; chained and buried under black rock and arms of steel.

Auroriella

Everything was green, just like the images the teachers had shown her. Sanmarellis was amazing, but as far as dragons or humans went – completely unpopulated.

Auroriella was an old word for ‘sky’, but she had not told the other dragon riders this. It was such an honor to be invited into their inner circle. Yet she could hardly think of anything to talk about, and certainly wasn’t going to say no. She hadn’t even discussed anything with Norwich when she’d learnt they were about to embark on this quest, though her heart ached to do so. He was more like a father to her and still the better leader than she. But she had been chosen by her dragon first and he several days later. The dragons had informed them with great intensity that seniority was determined by the date of choosing and no other authority, so he took his place at her side and listened to her give the commands and judgements she’d learnt from him.

Auroriella sighed. She and Bell were resting after the morning of silence on this world, finding neither man nor dragon for company. They had eaten their simple rations, added to with wild berries and some healthy roots at a pool of running water. Divinity had called it whole, so they ate their fill. She was just beginning to feel they really should be preparing to take to the air again.

But Sanmarellis himself seemed to have other ideas. The air was so sweet, and warmth of the day quite pleasant. They were lounging in the massive branches of a famous 'walking tree' in unaccustomed luxury. Sanmarellis was paradise. The air was fresh and easy, breeze light and helpful. The scents of countless flowers filled the air with their perfumes. Huge beasts taller than the houses at home, as well as small and harmless animals, roamed about in the open as if unaccustomed to predators. It was little wonder that the pale princess had wanted to come here.

Bell laughed at her thoughts. Yes, that princess, who had her eyes all over Rayn. Oh, he was cute, a little too cute. She laughed again at the memory of how she'd met him, but if someone had told her she could fall in love with someone after she'd saved their life, she might have thought twice about it! Then all the way during their frantic flight to the central continent she'd promised to forget him, promised there was nothing more than professionalism in her feelings for a boy two years her junior. Then he'd run up like a puppy smiling from ear to ear in happiness to see her and all words had failed her completely. Norvich had had to save her, giving the speech he'd given her to share at their arrival. Again Auroriella and her dragon laughed at the foolishness of it all.

Yet he was so handsome, who could not be distracted by his growing form of manhood? The gentle cleft in his chin, the way

his eyes stood out just a little more than other men from under his solid curves of brows. Yes, that was a handsome man. It was no wonder she and half the young women of Pearl noticed him, who could not? He was set to become, quite possibly, the most powerful man on the world. He had led the expedition that had defeated the plague. He had called down not only a prayer to open the ears of the deaf, but the blessing of the great waters that had defeated the curse! He had, apparently in his spare time, ‘popped’ over to her Southern continent to mend the oracle and take its teachings back to his own land. There was no man quite like Rayn, and the woman who would stand by his side for life was sure to be guaranteed strong children and a comfortable life. Why should it not be herself?

Then she and Bell laughed again at the foolishness of it. Still not really a man, yet still sought after by a woman who, divinity had confirmed, was over four thousand years old and bonded to *both* of the oldest dragons on Pearl! A simple Southern priestess would never do as a mate. It was just a foolish dream.

Auroriella stood and stretched out on the wide branch of the tree where they roosted. It was as wide as a street and beautiful. While she watched, its enormous roots had slowly lifted from the soil over the hours, preparing the massive life form to take another step. It was no wonder that the threads between the worlds had been broken before the plague had ever touched here. This

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tree alone was over six thousand years old, as her staff had confirmed. Older than the plague itself.

This place was beautiful.

Yet it all seemed so... uninhabited. On their hurried flight to the surface there were no cities, no points of light to welcome them. Auroriella and Bell had headed towards the most blessed place, as divinity had directed them, but there were no people, and after a day of riding, no dragons to challenge them in the sky.



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Perhaps they really were all alone here?

The sobriety of the moment brought back an unpleasant memory. Her moments of being alone while awaiting her high priestess' judgement after letting Rayn and the others go free, after being entrusted as their only jailer. Auroriella had known she did the right thing, for the fact that they survived was a witness in her own heart. But she was made to wait, alone, while the high priestess deliberated with the divine. Then as she was taken to stand alone in the hall of judgements, she was absolved of all guilt. She expected to lose her staff but instead was ordered back to her priestess' duties. She expected to lose her citizen rights, and thus her call to being a dragonfriend to dear Bell, but she was allowed to keep it all. For reasons of her own, the high priestess of the Vestrans had let her keep it all.

Perhaps it was her way of saying, 'Sorry, I was wrong about the oracle all this time.'

But Auroriella knew her better than that; more likely she was biding her time for revenge. The other people were greatly encouraged that all could look in the oracle's eyes safely now, and that it was no longer only a blessing for the priestesses.

It was hard to know if the high priestess would ever forgive her for that.

Yet within three days she'd been called to lead the warriors and riders to gather at the central. She'd felt the call too, from the

moment the divine light had called her, as if hypnotized, to embrace her dragon no longer as friend but as a part of her soul. As the first dragon rider of the Vestran.

It was a good thought.

And then she'd met Rayn and lost every dignity and composure like a love-struck school girl.

It made them laugh.

Rayn probably didn't realize, or if he did, he didn't care. He didn't even seem to notice the way the Western warriorress, equal to his age, was constantly trying to catch his eye. He had not responded to the letter by the Velich chief for permission to court his daughter. He even ignored the flirtations of the Northern chief's young wife, meant in jest, but not entirely harmless. Perhaps the unimportant women were just simply... never mentioned.

Auroriella sighed and sat down. He was becoming a very annoying thought.

Perhaps it is time we resumed our search? Bell suggested.

Time and beyond! Auroriella replied with the determination that she truly valued.

Still, Bell complained as she stretched her wings, *there doesn't seem to be anyone on this orb.*

That gave Auroriella an idea. *Perhaps, but since we cannot find them, let us see if we can have them find us?*

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She felt Bell smile, a closeness they had never known as friends. Stretching her mighty dragon jaws skyward, Bell let out a piercing, bell like call. A call that could shatter rock at close range, but that was not her intent this time. The sacred noise didn't even shake a leaf, but it split the silence of the day for leagues and leagues.

Auroriella laughed and jumped up onto her back, no longer surprised by the lightness of the dragon armor.

“Come, let us see if any come to seek us!” Auroriella shouted.

It soon proved Bell's gift was indeed divine, for a hundred or so passes later the new dragon arrived with such a cry of exultation they almost fell out of the sky in surprise. It sounded something like, “Truuuuue!”

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It was a male dragon, green with scintillating highlights of purple. He rode in on a stretch of light, as one might smear mud across a floor, passing the distance between them and the horizon in a thought.

Bell reacted with instinct; fiercely. But it did not turn Auroriella



from the saddle and she calmed Bell with her thoughts.

Thankfully, he flew low in the sky.

“No doubt hatchlings!” He called in a strange, mutated form of dragon. “Play the fire! How being comes to watch sky with us?”

“What did you just say?” Bell asked him.

“Oh, oh! The old tongue it is then. Oh, been a switch watch. Yes, hello then, welcome to woods of Sanmarellis! You are... Hey, what is that creature on your back?”

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“I’m a person,” Auroriella said, not too keen on this strange dragon. His movements were fluid, like he was trying to come out of a dream, but his words were frenetic and confusing.

“Woah, like, I didn’t just come out of a sun soak did I, ‘cause I could swear that like animal just, like, talked or something.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Auroriella said in disdain.

“OH! Woah, this is hot farfall critter! You, what are you?” He moved closer, but Bell moved away, taking the higher ground.

He seemed to get the hint and backed off before speaking again.

“You are NOT from around here, hey?” he said.

“You only just guessed that, didn’t you?” Auroriella looked down at him.

“Hey, let’s put a plug on the negativity, talking monkey thing, see? It disturbs the vibe around here. You can’t disturb the vibe, see?”

“My name’s not ‘See’,” Auroriella protested.

“‘Cause not, no! Just, means yes, like as is See! See? Not See. Oh, See! So, you’re new here, and I’m the first to greet you, which is lucky, I’m probably the smartest one around here.”

Please tell me that isn’t so, Bell whispered inside.

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Auroriella tried not to laugh. “And, um, how did you get to be the smartest?” Auroriella asked, choosing to be polite with this strange dragon.

“I got educated!” He sung. “Looking at the bees, watching all the birds, I read the stories and marked the days and weeks. I know things, K? So... you gonna come with me or not?”

“To where?” Bell said dryly.

“To the cave!” He remarked cheerfully and began to fly away.

“To the cave?” Auroriella asked Bell.

To the cave! She mocked his strange accent.

They followed him, gliding low in the sky until they came to what could only be described as a large cavern high above the ground, made inside an impressively large knot growing on a walking tree. It had been hollowed out until it could be made into a comfortable dragon dwelling, with a table, two ‘lounges’ where dragons could lie in comfort, a dragon desk, and bed. Auroriella, however, chose to sit on the table since she was far too small to be seen from the floor.

As soon as he landed, the green began a furtive effort to clean up by sweeping the leaves from the windowsill.

“Blind eye the mess, trues!” He seemed to apologize.

“No, really, we live just like this,” Auroriella said sarcastically, while Bell laughed inwardly.

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“Woah, that’s, like, no way trues! You mean you got a tree view as well?”

“Ahh, not really. We live in a tower, well, for now.”

“Stone? Woah. Cooool.” He seemed to approve.

Auroriella sighed, she didn’t know how she’d get anywhere with this dragon. “Um, good, sorry, what was your name?”

“Manners! Of course, I am Starwing Longstride Ringingtone... the third. Prince of the Afthah, rider of the winter storm, bringer of Venn berries and, let’s see, level three of the party animals! Woot!”

Auroriella and Bell looked at each other.

“You’re not like other dragons I know,” Auroriella confessed.

“You, little one, how can you speak? Your head looks waaay too small.”

“Her head, I assure you, is filled with more knowledge than you possess!” Bell said, getting angry.

At that, Starwing softened his mood and fell silent. He paused before speaking again. “And you’re not like the dragons around here, either,” he confessed without decorating his sentence with random ‘likes’ or ‘woots’.

Apparently Bell had touched a sensitive topic for this dragon.

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Starwing sighed. “Forgive my manners, trues. We... we don’t get many visitors. We don’t get *any*.”

They waited in silence.

“You’re a human, aren’t you?” Starwing finally asked.

They nodded.

He clicked his tongue in what might have been a kind of ‘knew it’ gesture. “Four thousand years! Four thousand four hundred and five! I knew it trues, I knew it since I smelt you here, gleaming your scent on the far breeze. When I heard you call, I knew I just had to come. I KNEW IT!” He banged his fist triumphantly down on the table.

Bell grew to battle readiness.

Starwing softened his gestures. He acted like a fool, and may have spoken like one, but he could tell when he was upsetting Bell.

“What happened?” Auroriella asked.

Starwing cast his gaze to the ground. “We no longer remember.”

His mood seemed to be able to drag every heart in the room down as if on a short winter’s day.

Thankfully Starwing snapped out of his severity a moment later. “So they’re gone! Just us dragons to tell the stories. Read the stars. Did we really used to travel among them? I wondered, I was one who wondered. All the rest were like, ‘Ho, true, don’t

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travel out the air, where'd the fun be but here!' But I still wondered. Can we really travel between the stars? Are the memories real?"

Now Bell was becoming seriously worried about this dragon and she glanced down at Auroriella, not at all knowing what to say.

Suddenly Starwing stood up and slumped up over the window.

The room fell silent.

When he looked up once more, dragon tears touched his eyes.

"I feel it, you know. Your bond. That's... that's what's missing. You know the trues here are all like, 'Peace and wonder', but they feel it too. Now most take to chewing Knotgrass to numb a loneliness we can no longer name. You're not safe here, you know? The others will *fight* over your human to keep her."

Auroriella nodded, but was glad her staff and dragon were with her. She did not feel in any danger, at least, not right now.

"Tell me what happened," he begged without decoration.

So Auroriella did, right from the beginning. Everything she knew. And he shared his story too, and what he'd learnt. How Sanmarellis' dragons had survived the plague because the other worlds had done everything they could to protect them, taking even their humans and leaving the dragons alone. And the dragons

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here had not coped well with their loneliness. Without human ambition there had been no wars, but no joy either. Slowly, over time, the numbers of the dragons dwindled until only a few thousand, thousand remained, and their light burned dimly.

But when Starwing learnt that the other worlds were filled with people, it gave him new hope. He begged them to send others, begged them to let the Sanmarellis dragons leave. But it broke his heart to learn that the plague was still about.

“Oh trues, tell me it is not so! I think we’d rather risk our world be dust than stay alone anymore!” he stated with heartfelt honesty.

“We will bring others,” Bell said in pity.

“When?” Starwing asked. “Do I tell the trues? They’ll fight, you know that. We need evidence and lights. No, no, no, See? See, you need to tell us your plan.”

“The dragon orb!” Auroriella shouted. “Do you have a dragon orb?”

Starwing looked confused, then stood up and went to the cupboard. “You mean one of these?” He stated, holding a dark orb between two clawed fingers.

Auroriella gasped. It was a dragon orb. “Bless the divine,” she muttered an old prayer of thanks.

“Pity don’t work anymore,” Starwing said.

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But Auroriella had learnt her lessons from the stories told by Rayn. She held out her staff, she knew the prayer to will it to share its strength with the silent orb.

It took only a moment and the silent orb lit up with a deep green light.

“It works now.” Auroriella grinned.

“Woot! Hold the lights Trues, wack the rabbits! The dragon orb lights, the dragon orb lights! Imma tell the others, s’once you leave, See?”

“See,” Auroriella agreed. One over excited dragon was enough for one visit. But she taught him how to use the orb, and looked forward to the moment when they would speak again.



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Auroriella spent the night in Starwing's tree while he told them strange stories of the hero dragons of the past, doing, it seemed, the most crazy things to stave off boredom in a world that provided no challenge or enemies. His stories went from the sublime to the ridiculous, yet it was all worth hearing.

And as night drew on, Bell refused to rest but Auroriella was glad to have a friend like Starwing to listen to as she drifted off to sleep.

The next day a single, lonely dragon watched them leave, a sad look on his face. But Starwing could not come. He had to tell the other dragons on Sanmarellis that the humans had returned.

That would be good news, for them.

Surgery

By the time Snow came around she found herself tied to a metal bed, but her mind was so darkened that she could tell nothing more; even her eyes refused to focus. She could see her clothes had been exchanged for a light blue dress, but she could not make out the room for the bright lights that shone around her. People were there, she could see them moving about. She felt a pin prick in her arm, and a numbing warmth spread through her. But she did not know what was happening.

She heard Windfyrth roar and she cried out in dismay. But she could not move. She heard the people shouting. Then she saw, with numb terror, one of them hold up a needle to her own eye. She instinctively knew that they were threatening Windfyrth with hurting her if she did not comply. She cried out again, but her dragon was silent.

Again, the world fell dark.

The return

Rayn felt a profound joy as the white orb of Pearl came into view, a feeling echoed in his dragon. Around them they saw the other dragon riders join them, Jayd and Darkwing last. But Rayn was glad, they were home.

“Have *we* got news,” Jayd began, “Amarii is-”

Suddenly Rhoc’s voice roared through the helms, “Where is Snow?!”

In that second, Rayn’s heart shook in his chest.

Something was very wrong.

Everyone fell silent.

“We have to go *back*,” Jayd shouted. “We can’t leave her there!”

Rayn consulted with the divine; Jayd was correct, they would all go to Ethphraim. But before he could order it, Pure spoke.

“We can’t,” Pure replied, “We only just woke up the threads. I need to talk to the teachers to get them to open again.”

“And I hate to be the practical one,” Auroriella called, “but isn’t all this travel too dangerous?”

One roar from Rhoc silenced any doubts.

“No one is left behind,” Rayn told them.

The Southern Priestess said nothing.

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He looked over at Rhoc. He was silent but Rayn could feel the rage emanating from him. Slowly, Rayn realized Rhoc must have growing feelings for Snow: feelings that would fuel his strength; feelings that could cloud his judgement.

They would need to be careful with Rhoc.

Rayn cursed inside his helmet, and Ironfang shared his disappointment. All had gone well with the visits; perhaps coming home was the mistake.

Suddenly his staff shocked him.

The walls of the fortress were easily in view. Everything looked as it should be, guards lined the walls and lights filled the windows.

Yet now something felt amiss. In that moment he noticed, enhanced by the sight of the dragon rider's helmet, the windows of the observatory were burnt and broken. A battle had taken place there.

A battle between Norwich and... who?

The rebels, Ironfang finished for him.

In that instant Rayn knew it was a trap.

"Pull up, riders!" He ordered. "Take the higher ground!"

They obeyed as one, and not a moment too soon.

Stormclouds appeared, but so accustomed was Ironfang to his tactics that he clobbered him out of the sky before he could land a single blow. Another twenty dragons were racing up from

the fortress below, and on their backs were men in dragon armor, holding incredibly long spears.

“I guess they weren’t going to wait till the dark night after all,” Jayd said, sounding like she was smiling.

A clever trick, to deceive. Ironfang observed. *They must have allowed those western dragons to escape them so that they could be used to put us off our guard.*

“Enough talk. To war!” Rayn roared.

The five riders charged.

The battle was pitched. The Eastern men wore dragon armor, and rode dragons as allies and friends, but they could not match the unity of a true dragon rider. Even so, their skills were novel and tactics well thought out. They knew the five dragon riders personally and even with Farwing’s mighty bulk and the added power of their dragon gifts, such as Rhoc’s violent strength and the maiden’s flames, they were slowly being bested.

A moment later, Doomclaw took to the higher sky.

Rayn knew it was their chance to turn the battle.

“So, Ironfang, you still serve a fallen cause,” Doomclaw mocked him.

“Join me in death, murderer!” Ironfang replied.



Doomclaw the magnificent

“Fool! Do you not see the plans of the humans? They would make us pets again, they would make us tools! This man, this man who rides with me as an ally is no fool. He, as I, would rather die than see us become the slaves of other beings.”

Ironfang breathed fire on him. Doomclaw swerved to the right and scarcely dodged most of it. The man lowered his long spear and Doomclaw charged, but Rayn turned it aside by his faith in the divine. Then Doomclaw came swinging in with a scythian wing cutting Ironfang in many places with his dreaded gift. To his horror, Rayn realized that even his dragon armor was not immune to Doomclaw’s metal bones. Blood ran freely from a gash in his own arm.

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Ironfang stumbled in the clouds.

He will best me in this place, Ironfang assured him.

“What have you done to the people?” Rayn demanded.

“They are free,” Doomclaw assured him, “and being taught of the proper relationship between men and dragon. We will never again be your slaves; and all will die who say otherwise!”

“Fool! Being bonded with a human completes me!” Ironfang roared, the wounds of his own dark past returning to haunt him. Rayn wondered how Doomclaw could have possibly convinced all these dragons to believe him.

“Your life is lessened by resisting the bonding, not improved!” Rayn insisted, and Doomclaw dove in to attack once more. They had to dive to avoid being cut to ribbons. Rayn knew they had the lower air now, and from below he could see two other dragons closing in that could tear them from the sky.

Time seemed to slow down, as it often did when death drew close.

Why does the maid not command them? Ironfang asked, his strength slackened by his many deep wounds.

Why not indeed? Rayn wondered. Casting a glance at her, he found his gaze shifting to sight a foreign priest on a spotted purple dragon, circling far below. He had a short bone wand pointed at the maiden. He was covered in tattoos, his skin pieced

and bleeding with a dozen self-inflicted wounds, his eyes wild with the incantation he repeated.

Demonry.

Rayn swept his staff and sent his anger at the man, who was knocked off his dragon and fell screaming towards the earth. His dragon seemed to delay considering helping him, and so he fell.

And Pure immediately remembered her gift. “Rebels, fold your wings!”

In spite of their intention, none could deny her authority. They fell, many quite far. The five gathered in the sky, each bleeding from many great wounds.

The rebel dragons struggled to regroup.

“To the Southern, then?” The massive Farwing asked.

“Do so!” Pure ordered him.

“But Pure, what about the fortress?! What about our people?” Rayn screamed.

“Oh, give it up Rayn,” Jayd insisted, “this battle is lost. We need to regroup!”

“No, I will-” Rayn began.

She is right, Ironfang insisted, and in that moment Rayn knew it was true. They were outnumbered, and against Doomclaw’s gift they had little protection.

Lightning began to form around Farwing and Doomclaw roared in frustration. He appeared to have freed his wings much

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sooner than the other dragons. A moment later he was racing towards Farwing's tail. Rayn realized that the maiden was too far away to stop him, and if Doomclaw injured Farwing in just the right place, he might not form the passage at all.

Suddenly the Southern Dragon, who rode with Auroriella, did something nobody expected. She threw her rider to Ironfang. He caught the screaming Southern priestess in mid-air. Then she charged and slammed into Doomclaw, breaking bones and knocking him unconscious with her terrifying shout. He still managed to stab her in both sides, his fearsome spines cutting deep into her flesh. The Southern priestess cried out in pain and dismay as the grappling dragons fell towards the earth.

"Go, GO!" Shouted Farwing, the air swept city of the Southern clearly visible, three dragons already taking to the air in the foreign sky.

Ignoring Auroriella's screams and pleading, they fled. Rayn took one look in dismay and fear at the broken observatory at the top of the fortress from beyond the sky.

Horror

“We have to go BACK!” The Southern Priestess roared, storming about the temple grounds. Rayn almost covered his ears; Auroriella had said nothing else since arriving here only a few hundred heartbeats ago.

“Bell is in trouble, I can feel it, we have to go BACK!”

“Enough,” Ironfang roared. He knew she spoke dragon.

It scarcely silenced her.

They were in the temple now, without invitation. As soon as they’d arrived on the Southern continent they’d headed straight here. Within the temple lay a teacher which the local priestesses still called an ‘oracle’. Rayn knew they could use it to communicate with the prisoners of the fortress. They needed to find a way to defeat Doomclaw and the rebels.

They needed it to rescue Snow.

And they needed to do it before Doomclaw convinced Stormclouds to bring the fight here.

“Priestess, please,” Rayn insisted, “we’re doing all we can. Have patience, he’s not going to harm her when there is a chance he can still use her as bait to capture us, and you.”

She looked at him darkly; clearly her wisdom was departing her in her fear for her dragon.

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The high priestess of the Vestrans finally arrived, “Auroriella, dragon riders of the North. You have come to our sacred site without permission, I must-”

Ironfang roared.

Rayn held him back, but noticed Auroriella smiling.

“Please,” Rayn said in their language, “High priestess please, the fortress has fallen to a score of dragon rebels and their human allies. We need to use your oracle to contact our allies.”

“Well, no,” the high priestess insisted. “You are men and dragons. I alone am a priestess.”

Then I’ll eat her where she stands, Ironfang offered.

Hold steady, bold warrior, Rayn encouraged his dragon. He smiled inwardly, believing Ironfang would do no such thing.

“High priestess!” Auroriella breathed with surprise and fear. “My dragon is with them. She is being held captive even now, I feel her pain in my own body - You must allow us to speak to them right now!”

Now the high priestess walked up boldly, looking like she was feeling much more confident now that she was back in control. “Auroriella. You watch your tongue.”

“You let us use the oracle or I will use it for you,” Auroriella threatened.

The room fell silent.

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“Your words are sedition!” The high priestess spoke with religious indignation. “You may be a dragon rider, but you do not have authority above me here!”

Auroriella’s eyes filled with tears.

“Please,” Rayn begged.

The high priestess looked like she was about to break into a rousing speech once more when suddenly Jayd, binding Darkwing’s wounds still, spoke.

“Why are we wasting time here, there’s another oracle less than half a day’s ride from here, let’s go use that.”

“There is?” The high priestess muttered, probably coveting that too.

“Fine, let us not waste another...” Auroriella began.

For a moment everyone hung on her silence. Then her face paled. Her hands started to tremble.

“NO!” She wailed. She collapsed to her knees, holding her chest. Deep sobs racked her body between ungodly screeches of dismay. Her whole body trembled uncontrollably and she screamed from the depths of her being again, and again, and again.

Her staff turned blood red.

Rayn did not need to ask to know what had happened. Bell, first dragon of the Southern continent, had been put to death for resisting Doomclaw’s will. Auroriella’s dragon had died.

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Her uncontrollable screaming split the silence of the shrine, the priestesses standing back in shock and fear.

“She is dead! She is dead!” was all Auroriella could say.

For a moment no-one knew what to do. Then Pure, princess of the house Oordu, walked towards her with silent tears in her own eyes. It was a pain they both shared, though Auroriella’s was surely more acute right now. Pure knelt down and took the weeping priestess into her arms.

Many long breaths passed.

Rayn then turned and looked at the high priestess.

She did not try to hide the tears in her own eyes. “Go,” she muttered. She cleared her throat. “Go, consult the oracle as you have once before, man of the Central continent. Find your friends. Avenge my priestess’ murder.”

Rayn nodded, yet he stumbled as he turned.

You must tend to your wounds, Ironfang insisted.

“But the fortress...” Rayn tried to explain, but could say no more as the floor suddenly rose up to meet him.

Jayd felt frustratingly helpless. Rayn probably didn’t even hear her calling his name as they carried him from the temple. He was deeply wounded and was dripping blood even as he fainted,

and yet had no idea. Darkwing was right, they had been bested today. Farwing ordered the dragons to sleep, which was how they would heal best. Eventually the other priestesses took the weeping Southern priestess away too, leaving herself, the maiden Pure, and Rhoc alone in the temple. Beds were brought out for them too, but Jayd felt no use need for them.

“This is a terrible day,” Pure muttered.

“You think?” Jayd muttered bitterly.

“Indeed I do,” Pure replied as though Jayd had asked an honest question.

“What do we do now?” Jayd asked. Usually Rayn made all the decisions; it was just her job to find the way. She didn’t like being alone like this.

“Knowledge,” Rhoc suddenly called out. He was bruised down one side of his face but was otherwise as unharmed as herself and the princess appeared to be. All, however, were deeply shaken by Auroriella’s tears, and shared in her trauma. To lose a dragon: It was worse than death. Knowing Doomclaw could hold that against them made Jayd feel helpless and small. She did not know what she would offer to save her dragon’s life, and hoped it was not the world.

“Knowledge,” Pure agreed. “Yes, good point Rhoc, we need knowledge.”

“Knowledge of what?” Jayd asked.

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“Knowledge of what went on at the fortress. Knowledge of what is going on there now.”

Jayd looked up at the teacher, their ‘oracle’, which the high priestess seemed to have tried to keep from them, until Auroriella broke. Again she felt a tremble pass through her body.

No, she was a warrior too, a bold dragon rider, the second on Pearl after the princess, a warrior of the Celtwyld. Her enemies would fear *her*.

She approached the oracle, the princess moving to assist.

Teacher, Jayd spoke in her mind. She felt it respond. *What happened at the fortress?*

Immediately it showed them, the way the rebels had risen from the stone, carefully, taking one or two dragon riders at a time over the course of a day, beginning only a few hours after the six had left upon the golden threads. By the time the dragon riders had realized what was happening it was too late. Only four riders remained to take on the twenty from the Western. Led by an unyielding high wiseman of the fortress, they had all been slain as an example to the others.

Jayd could not but weep at their failure. The fortress belonged to the rebels. But Jayd refused to rush now. She and Pure spent a good hour looking around, locating prisoners and rebels. Noting their strengths, and the depth of their own failure. They wasted another hour talking to the teacher, trying to get it to

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activate the stone guardians. But it would not, refusing to allow the tools of men to be used in war.

“If only we had known what the rebels were planning,” Jayd said.

“This is all my fault.” Pure cried silently. “I was too keen on seeing the other worlds. I felt so driven to, and when Rayn liked my idea I just grabbed the opportunity. If only we’d spent more time preparing!”

“Then no one would have left,” Jayd realized. “And the rebels would have taken us too. But I wish we’d told the others. I wish we’d given them more time to prepare, maybe stopped the rebels first.”

“How do you suppose they knew where to find the riders?” Pure asked.

“I have no idea,” Jayd replied. This was the kind of question she had no idea how to find the answer to.

Pure paused. “You don’t suppose it was the teachers do you?” She asked.

Teacher, Jayd asked it, have the rebels been accessing the teachers?

Processing. It replied. Please define ‘rebels’.

Those who are allied with Doomclaw.

Sociocultural and political differences, leading to bloodshed, have been noted in the past two days. Power factions

among the dragons have led to a shift in power in the fortress. The new governing authority call themselves “Liberators,” as given by their leader, Doomclaw.

Jayd’s blood boiled in rage at the murderers’ delusions of righteousness.

Those are the rebels.

Have they been accessing the teachers? Pure asked.

Yes, the teacher replied, Rebel access: Ethnomancer, time mark 15.15.99912, three days ago, asked, “How can we kill the white maiden.” Rebel access: Ethnoman-

Enough, Jayd insisted. Stop all rebel access to the teachers as of right now.

Denied. Teacher access protocol dictates a neutral stance to all shifts in power.

Jayd couldn’t believe her ears. Even the teachers would not help them? *Hey, what if the princess Pure of house Oordu ordered it?*

Royal override would be sufficient.

“Hey Pure,” Jayd whispered, “say ‘I agree’.”

“I agree?” Pure complied.

Override successful. All rebel activities are now considered countermanding royal decree.

“Amazing, how’d you think of that?” Pure asked.

“I just... think of these things, you know?”

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“I guess your finding ability really does go beyond objects to solutions.” Pure smiled.

Jayd was silent but smiled inside. *Right, teacher, activate the stone guardians and crush the rebels.*

Unable to comply. Stone guardians may not be used in bloodshed. Hard programming formatted in initial discourses of stone guardian creation. All civil matters must be addressed by diplomatic process.

“So we’re still stuck with that one, aren’t we.” Pure sighed.

“Diplomacy? With Doomclaw?” Jayd scoffed. *Right, teacher, you want us to solve this ourselves? Get us Norwich. Let us see where he is once more.*

The vision reopened before their eyes. Norwich was in a makeshift prison with four other dragon riders. Outside the window they could see the surviving dragons chained to the ground. About them the rebels prowled, ready to end the life of any who disobeyed them.

It looked bleak indeed.

Norwich, can you hear me? Jayd asked.

The man cried out in surprise. “Jayd?”

Silence, Norwich, speak inside your heart.

Norwich nodded and said nothing as a human guard looked up from his card game, watching him for a moment. Norwich resumed the posture of a broken man. There were three others in

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the room with him: the Northern warrioress, the western warrior with two swords, the drunkard from the Eastern all glanced up and back down. They were injured, and unarmed.

Speak, Jayd. Norwich said. *I don't know by what miracle but I hear you as if we spoke rider to dragon.*

Indeed. I see the dragon riders were bested by the rebels.

Had you been here we would not have fallen! Six of our riders go missing and the rebels knew the precise moment to attack. I fear we have a traitor in our midst.

Perhaps, Jayd offered, *or perhaps they've been using the teachers to watch us. We have added precautions now.*

Norwich seemed surprised at the suggestion. Jayd knew he hadn't used the teachers much, few of the people of his culture did. *I am glad you have 'added precautions', that is good but I fear too late. Doomclaw has a master tactician at his command, one we know of as Ethnomancer. He seems to know the motives of both dragon and men. I do not know how we will prevail, even with Farwing and the maiden's flames.*

She pondered this. *Are you hurt?*

No, they leave both rider and dragon uninjured... usually. We have just been forced to witness the execution of the Southern priestess' dragon. She was most distressed. I fear for my dear Auroriella, is she alright?

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Jayd was silent; she didn't know what to say. *She lives*, was all Jayd said. She could feel the heaviness settle on Norwich's heart.

He spoke, his voice trembling in rage, *We need to find a way to escape. We need to find a way to reclaim the fortress and bring those murderers to justice!*

I agree, Jayd replied. *What do you know of Doomclaw's plans?*

Simple, keep us here to bait the princess into showing up and surrendering. Then he will execute you and us all. And now I think of it, should he realize you have a way of communicating with me, he will torture each of us here until death or you surrender. Never give him that chance.

Jayd trembled with rage and fear. Pure covered her mouth with her hands. *What of the warriors? And my mother?* Jayd asked.

I suspect he does not know you have a mother. He has cast out every warrior not giving an oath to never bond with a dragon. All who actively try to resist him have their heads mounted on sticks around the walls, both men and dragon.

Curse this murderer! Pure trembled with rage. *Doomclaw has to die.*

Easy, good princess, Norwich stated as though he was troubled at her rage. *I agree with your decree, but I beg that we*

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must exercise much caution. How do you propose we escape? Is Rayn alright?

He is resting, Jayd said.

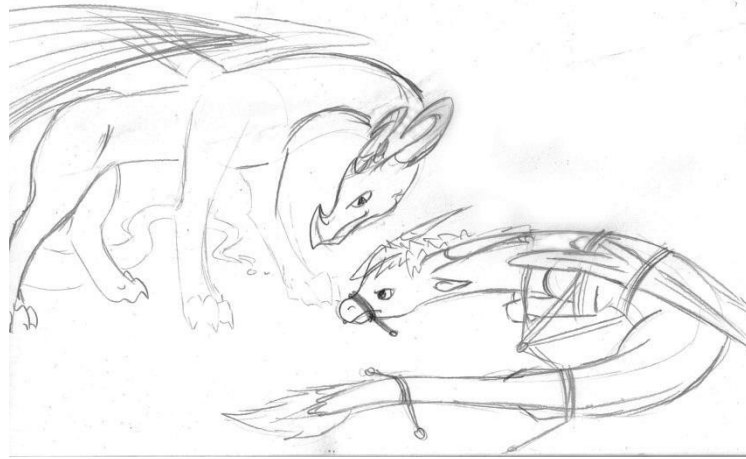
Perhaps Farwing could call a conclave? Pure suggested.

Perhaps, Norwich agreed, though all here will know what he is doing, and you will not know traitors from friends. Not all dragons are sympathetic to the dragon rider cause, many even here seem undecided. We would need to first –

This is folly, Pure complained, no dragon is forced to take a rider! Why not just leave those that do want riders to their own choices? Why does Doomclaw feel he needs to impose his will on others?

Simple, princess, Norwich said. He desires power.

They were silent once more.



Deathwalk torments Hailstorm

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A conclave will give Doomclaw knowledge of our plans, and I am sure he has taken steps to counter it already. It is too obvious a move.

So what are we to do then? Pure asked.

I do not know, Jayd replied, eager for her brother, the wiseman, to awaken.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside the prison cell, in the courtyard of the imprisoned dragons.

I see Ethnomancer talking to Shadowfix and Doomclaw. Norwich whispered in his heart. *There is trouble; I cannot make out what they are saying.*

They heard Doomclaw roar, and saw him moving up towards the main hall. “Fallen princess! I know you can hear me! You have been very foolish, forcing the teachers into silence. You have one hour! You hear me? One hour, or this dragon dies!”

And with that, he placed a Scythian claw on the neck of Norwich’s dragon.

They broke the link immediately.

“Go wake Rayn,” Jayd ordered.

Pure ran.

New war

He could hardly hear Pure yelling at him, but he roused himself from unconsciousness by the hand of the divine. The prayers of the priestesses about him helped, but his head still ached beyond all understanding. He called for water.

A faint light glowed in the morning sky, but dawn had not yet broken.

“Come, come, now! Norwich is in danger,” Pure begged.

Rayn pushed aside the cup and drank from the pitcher of water the priestess held.

“Are the dragons yet healed?” He asked.

Pure paused, looking within her own heart for the answer. “Not at all.”

It took him a moment to find his feet, leaning heavily on his staff. He noticed the strong guards who helped him up, but was not surprised when they left him to stagger up the hill on the arms of the little priestesses. In spite of the water, his mouth felt dry again in moments. With great fervor, he prayed.

Now only three riders were there to meet him. Snow was lost, and Auroriella in mourning. It was back to the four of them again, facing the evil, come what may.

Pure had taken the time to tell him what was happening.

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“One hour,” Jayd told him, her eyes tearful. “And Norwich will meet the same fate as Auroriella. Doomclaw has promised to slay one dragon each hour until the princess surrenders herself. But that will break the circle of dragon riders forever!”

Rayn fell on the floor, allowing his staff to clatter away from him. It was too much. Too much for one so young to have the entire world relying on his judgement for the second time in two weeks.

But his heart had not yet died. Perhaps this was what it meant to be a man? To deal with every responsibility, no matter what the hour, and no matter his personal desires. He cried out to the divine and his vision faltered, he felt like he was suffocating.

And in an instant the darkness lifted. It was the high priestess, her hand on his head. She spoke, “I see an orb of pearl being covered with a great darkness. It is dying, till a light of gold surrounds it. What does this vision mean? Is this from whence will come our deliverance?”

For a moment there was silence.

“Thiaz,” Jayd said.

“Thiaz? Oh, yes, Thiaz!” Pure jumped from one foot to the other. “Mendelain! She promised to help! They have dragon riders, hundreds of hundreds!”

“Thiaz, yes, we must call Thiaz,” Rayn agreed.

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Jayd turned to the oracle, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear, *Teacher, can you contact Thiaz for us?*

Interplanetary communications are impossible without the dragon orb, it replied.

“Do they have a dragon orb on the Southern continent?” Rayn asked anyone who could answer.

“No, this world only has the one in the fortress,” Pure explained.

But it gave Jayd an idea. She explained, *Rayn, join with me, use your staff. You have done this before. We must send our spirits into the room below the observatory-*

How do you know about that? Rayn asked her through the teacher.

Because I study! She shouted in reply. *Pure, we'll need your permission to use the dragon orb from here.*

You have it, she replied.

It must have worked, for a moment later Rayn felt his body become light and he was standing in the room of the dragon orb once more. He saw Jayd, his half-sister. She was not dressed as a dragon warrior in her spirit but as a beautiful young maid of the Celtwyld, her hair braided with feathers, her smile determined and radiant. He had never seen her spirit like this before, he found her pretty enough to be momentarily distracted.

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She, however, was not. *Rayn, wake up the orb, talk to Thiaz. Come, I will stand watch.*

He obeyed her. He reached out towards the orb, he willed it awake.

“Hello? Oh, hello?” The scholar of Chalcedonah stated with excitement.

Not now, Rayn replied and severed the link.

Thiaz, he needed Thiaz. He reached out and the orb glowed a dim gold.

Thiaz.

He reached. And reached. But he could not find Thiaz. Not without his body, not without his staff actually being in the room.

He returned quickly, leaving Jayd standing guard. Everyone in the Southern temple was looking at him. Jayd’s body sat staring at the teacher quietly. She still had blood on her hands where she had tried to tend to Darkwing’s wounds, her dragon armor was scratched and her hair a warrior’s mess. His heart went out to this young child, struggling to free a world just as much as he was, yet she had not fainted. He admired her strength.

“Speak!” Rhoc ordered him.

“Ah! Thiaz, I need more strength.”

“I can...” the high priestess began, then stopped. He felt divinity in her words, recognized its light in her thoughts.

“Auroriella.”

A priestess gasped.

“This is her task alone,” The high priestess muttered with sorrow. Rayn knew it was true.

“I will fetch her,” a priestess said.

“Hurry!” Rayn yelled.

Another priestess spoke, “She weeps herself to sleep and wakes each hour screaming. Surely she cannot help you.”

“A priestess in the fire knows strength beyond the human measure,” the high priestess spoke as though it was an old saying of their people. “She has met the gaze of the eyes of the oracle before ... before it was altered. She can do this.”

It was still a good hundred breaths before Auroriella arrived. Her cheeks sunken, the light of hope lost from her eyes. A Southern priestess held her by each arm, and a third carried her deep crimson staff in a shawl for fear of touching it.

No one spoke when she entered, but the dragons had woken up. The high priestess stood back, allowing Rayn to speak though his voice broke, echoing his fear for her spirit.

“Auroriella, we need your help. We need to make a... bridge between our world and Thiaz. We’re going to call on them for reinforcements but we have so little time!”

She looked up at him, a strange expression on her face. There was curiosity and pain. As though a part of her could not believe he was asking for her help, and the other part didn’t care.

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Auroriella sighed. “My dragon is dead. How, how can you expect me to be able to help you?”

“You must try, for the fate of Pearl,” Rayn said.

“They have Stormbreath,” Pure said.

Rayn wondered if that was the name of Norwich’s dragon.

Auroriella gasped. Then her eyes grew angry, “We’re wasting time talking!”

The temple seemed to disappear around them, but still Rayn could see Auroriella as though she was only a few paces away. Jayd was still waiting in spirit in the dragon orb room and looked relieved to see him.

Come, we must get to Thiaz, he said.

We? Jayd asked.

Good point, keep guard.

There’s a lot going on down there. I’d say we have less than half the time he gave us.

Rayn stared hard at the orb, and felt Auroriella’s wisdom and power flowing into it.

But it was not enough.

He turned and saw her sobbing.

“This is all your fault, Rayn!” she suddenly screamed at him.

He felt his spirit straining at her rage, which seemed quite capable of harming, indeed, undoing him in this place.

“You said leave no one behind, but you did, didn’t you? You left *Bell* behind!”

He saw her spirit rise up and take him by the throat.

In a way he did not understand, he felt his life force dying. Jayd leapt up and tried to pull Auroriella’s hands from his neck. But her grip was like stone, beyond imagining in its strength.

“I’m... s...sorry,” he tried to gasp out.

Yet she squeezed tighter.

“She was my heart, my life. My *being*. And you let all that slip away from me!”

“Not him, Doomclaw! *He* is your enemy here,” Jayd shouted.

Auroriella acted as though she couldn’t hear her.

“My dragon,” she whispered.

Auroriella, I am so sorry, Rayn told her in his heart, hoping she could hear, hoping she would know his feelings. *She gave herself that you could live. None can form this bridge but you. Please, please let me go.*

He felt her grip loosening, and her tears began again.

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I know, she said. You just don't know what it's like, to lose your soul like this. The sun will never shine for me again.

Even you can learn to love once more, he told her, his heart reaching out towards her in sympathy. She shook his compassion from her like fallen leaves.

Fine, you need a bridge. So be it, if it is to be the last act of Auroriella, priestess of the Vestran!

Strength exploded from her; so bright he heard it shatter the stones of the temple where her body dwelt. A deep brown light flowed around her, like the strength of the earth or the power of the most ancient of trees.

All our lives they told us the light of the priestess should be green, Auroriella mused, like a warrior summoning strength for battle, and it has taken years of lying and pretending and self-denial to become one of them. But I was never a green. I am a deep brown, like the earth we walk on, and I am Auroriella!

She almost pushed him all the way out into space and onto Thiaz with nothing more than her will and the strength of her staff. Rayn found himself trembling on the floor of the dragon orb room on Thiaz.

Two guards snapped to attention.

“High wiseman, Rayn, what-”

“There is no time, where is the queen?”

“Giving audience in her throne room, but surely-”

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“It will do,” Rayn said. Instinctively knowing the way by divinities hand, he spoke to her directly, *Queen Mendelain!*

“Rayn? How are you doing this? I’m a little bit-”

I can only beg your forgiveness, for our need is most dire. Our fortress and our dragon riders have been captured by traitorous rebels. They are planning to execute dragons if we do not surrender to them immediately. Please, please, if you can... you must send a force of your dragon riders to confront them.

The queen paused. Rayn felt her mind grow distant as she conferred with others and thought deeply.

How many? She asked.

A score, ten and ten. He replied.

Twenty. Good. We can send help within the hour.

That will be too late, how many can you send within a hundred breaths?

How long is a breath?

He showed her.

I will be there at the hundredth breath with a thousand dragon riders.

Oh, that is surely too much.

Perhaps, but it will do the job!

Indeed, Rayn replied. *I will be ready by the hundredth breath, beginning now.*

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He heard her shouting, ordering her people to war, as he left. Rayn felt his body become light and he raced back to Jayd, then took her spirit with him safely back to the temple where he would inform Pure of their plans.

He was so excited he didn't even notice the gentle warning tingle of the staff in his hand...

"How long?" Pure asked.

Auroriella struggled to sit up. "For as long as I live, I have tied my life force to the bridge. For as long as I live you will be able to speak to those on Thiaz." And she found enough strength to smile.

Pure hugged her again. "Thank you, thank you for all you do!"

Rayn stumbled, still weak from his wounds. "Ah, well. Good news. Within a hundred breaths, ninety or so now, a thousand dragon riders from Thiaz will be here to help us!"

Pure squealed with delight. "A thousand? That'll show those rebels!"

"Even so," Jayd said, "How are we going to stop the rebels executing prisoners as soon as they arrive? It took us an hour just to float down, how are they going to get to the fortress in time?"

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“I got the impression that wouldn’t be a problem for Thiaz. As for stopping the executions, perhaps a diversion is called for,” Rayn said.

“What kind of diversion?” Pure asked.

Jayd smiled. “Just leave that to me.”

Jayd smiled to herself. Everyone loved Rayn; he was tall, wise, manly. But he didn’t know a thing about the fortress or how to break someone out of a makeshift prison there.

She had ninety breaths to get Norwich out of prison and to set the dragons free.

She moved her spirit into their room. *Norvich, dragon riders, prepare yourselves for battle!*

They looked around, except for the Western warrior who stood as though stretching himself. At least he got it.

The prison was built from a room, bars hastily wedged into the floor; probably by dragon’s hand. They had blocked the other door with an iron bar so that no man could lift it.

But the fortress, herself, had strength beyond men. With a subtle shifting of the floor and walls the door cracked apart with a loud shuddering.

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The guard shouted, his companion stood up to tell others but he was no match for the four enraged warriors. The other guard ran shouting, but he did not get far. A corridor became a wall at Jayd's command. She had known the fortress could rearrange herself like this for many weeks, and wondered then if it would prove useful.

Apparently it was.

The guard was bound by the prisoners in moments.

Seventy breaths.

Jayd began to lead the troupe down towards the dragons. It was difficult work, she had to keep her eyes ahead and once or twice they took a wrong turn. Jayd would change the wall, turning rooms into corridors, always careful to make sure the riders only encountered one rebel at a time. It was a tribute to their skill that they were always victorious.

Sixty breaths.

Two guards. The dragon riders defeated them in near silence.

"These do not deserve to wear the sacred dragon rider's armor!" Twoswords complained.

"Let us rid them of it then!" The drunkard mumbled, handing out an arm brace.

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The moment Norwich fitted it, by the gift of the dragon riders he was able to order the rest of it to fly onto his body and place itself there without effort on his part.

Fifty breaths.

They made their way towards the far end of the clearing where the imprisoned dragons lay chained.

What is your plan now, mistress of the moving walls? Norwich asked with a grin; he seemed to be enjoying this life threatening challenge.

We need to free those dragons, carefully. Jayd replied.

What, with these swords? Norwich asked.

I... I don't know. Perhaps with dedication you can free one of them?

I don't know either.

Forty breaths.

Wait, Jayd realized. There, Icewing, rode by the boy archer. I am sure if he freezes the chains they will become brittle, then perhaps the dragons can sunder them.

It's worth a try.

Carefully Norwich and the Northern Warriress worked their way along the wall, each time pausing at Jayd's command as a watching dragon turned its head about. They made their way to Icewing, who stirred at their approach.

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Stay down, Icewing, deliverance approaches! Jayd told the angry dragon.

He turned his head slowly towards the approaching warriors, and they began to cut his leather muzzle off.

Thirty breaths.

With an almost reluctant sigh, Icewing breathed on his manacled fore claws and neck brace. The ice froze around them. Norwich made his way quickly to where Stormwing was awaiting death.

The other imprisoned dragons began to lift their heads.

No, stay down, everyone! We're trying to mount an escape, she told them.

They lay their heads down.

A moment later a dark black dragon, the one called Ethnomancer, turned to look at the imprisoned, a troubled look on his brow.

Twenty breaths.

Ethnomancer turned towards Doomclaw who was surveying the landscape with a kingly pose. He was talking with another dragon, one they knew as Deathwalk.

“Now!” shouted Norwich.

In an instant, Icewing had shattered his manacles and raised his head. Norwich raced towards his dragon as fast as was mortally possible.

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“No!” Roared Doomclaw, and with a raised wing leapt to end both Norwich and Stormwing.

But was struck in the chest with a gale of ice.

The rebel dragons turned. Deathwalk stalked up to Stormbreath, whose face paled at the approaching dragon’s terrible gift. Plants nearby wilted and died in his presence.



Deathwalk

Suddenly Doomclaw laughed. “You think, rider, that you can stop us? This little outbreak has only bought you time...”

Grinning, Deathwalk took a step back to allow Doomclaw his moment.

Norwich stepped between the tied up Stormwing and the rebel Doomclaw. “You, dragon, have earned your death today!

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For the murders of Lathwing and the Northern prophet who would not bow to you, for the murder of Bell of the Vestrans, you must die.”

Doomclaw only laughed. “Do you really think you, a tin plated human, can best the mightiest of beasts? Let us have some sport then!”

Doomclaw rushed at Norwich, who had drawn the famous two handed sword of the dragon riders. There was only one rule when fighting an opponent that could slay you in one hit – don’t get hit. And Norwich knew that rule. He dodged masterfully, leaping in under Doomclaw’s belly and forcing him to back up. The scything wing came down, and sparks like fire flew as dragonrider sword collided with steelbone. Norwich guessed Doomclaw’s next attack and falling to the ground, raised his blade as Doomclaw impaled his own claw upon it. He roared in surprise and horror.

None had noticed the golden lights forming in the sky.

Norwich stumbled to his feet, bleeding from several small wounds where the monster’s claws had penetrated the famous dragon rider’s armor. Doomclaw bent down in a warrior’s stance, preparing to breathe.

It would be their doom, for even if Norwich dodged it, Stormwing couldn’t.



In that moment, Norwich showed just how much a tactical advantage they had: the advantage of being a dragon rider, not just a dragon friend. In one fluid motion, he spun about and

slashed out at the muzzle which held his dragon. There was a crack as an ivory tooth was sundered, but the muzzle was shredded. In that instant, Stormwing breathed back.

Fire met cyclone, and the force pushed Doomclaw over.

“Kill the dragons!” Doomclaw ordered.

“Look to the sky!” Norwich said, and everyone did. Thankfully, even the rebels.

There, riding down from the air, were the thousand dragons of Thiaz. They brought incredibly fast chariots of gold and bronze, swift boats of iron, and a massive boat with twenty sails that had caught the treads as easily as dragon wings.

Thiaz had arrived.

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Bright beams of golden light fell from the sky, paralyzing the rebels and preventing them from murdering the remaining dragons where they lay. Fire and stone flew around as the rebels fought desperately against an overwhelming force.

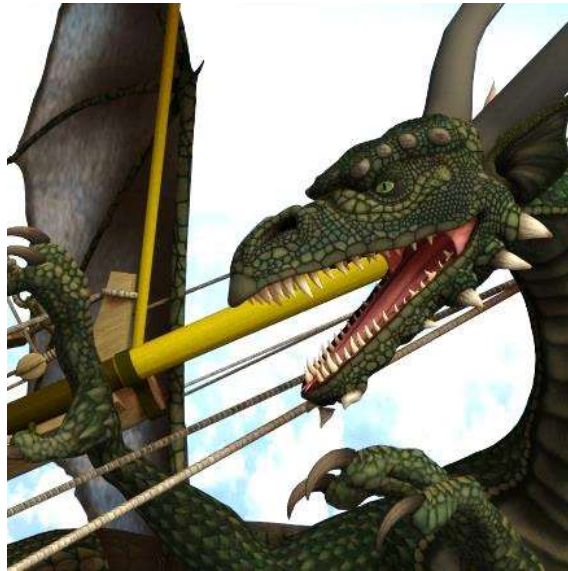
“Retreat!” Ethnomancer ordered.

“No, NO! Stay and fight!” Doomclaw shouted, but he was clearly outnumbered, and outclassed by the might of Thiaz.

Two dragons of the dragon riders, Icewing and another from the Southern, leapt from the prison to pin him to the ground. The battle was brief as golden dragons fell from the sky to grapple and imprison every last rebel dragon. Even the jailer, that could move through stone, was no match for a similarly gifted Thiaz elite.

Jayd smiled as the vision faded and her normal sight took over, carried on Darkwing with a victorious cry as they entered the fortress.

They had won.



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Ethnomancer versus a priestess or 'adept' of Thiaz

The fortress of Pearl

Three days had passed.

Three days since the fall of the rebels and the liberation of the fortress from beyond the clouds.

Three days since Snow disappeared.

Rhoc drummed his forehead on the table in frustration. He didn't know what was happening to her, and every hour he was forced to wait made the pain in his heart grow worse. Fairystone at first had tried to comfort him, then cheer him. Now she left him alone.

What were they doing to her on Ethphraim? Was she safe? Did anyone know? Did she think of him, or was she crying herself to sleep at night? Was she able to cry at all...?

He didn't know, and it made him angry. With nothing to do but wait, he had taken to hitting his head on the desk, and no one bothered to tell him to stop.

But what truly frustrated him was not the waiting, but the not knowing. What had happened to Rayn and Pure and Jayd? The mighty of Thiaz had arrived and imprisoned the rebels in their own chains immediately. Then, though there was clearly no need, they had sent for more reinforcements. Then more.

By now, day three, over ten thousand dragon riders, mostly all gold, flew through the skies of the fortress from beyond the

sky. And they'd set about rearranging things immediately. Any who protested their actions were put from the fortress.

Thiaz had saved them. Then Thiaz had conquered them.

Then Thiaz had informed them that the golden threads were closed once more, and that no one would be going to see Snow.

Three days without knowing!

With a thunderous crash, Rhoc brought his head down with such force that the table shattered like glass. Sharp splinters imbedded themselves in the clay walls of the hut where he and several others were forced to wait at the bottom of the mountain.

He'd waited long enough.

Snow drifted into a lazy consciousness. She could not see anything, but she could hear voices. She decided to keep her eyes shut, but was she dreaming? She could make out their words as though they spoke her language; was it a gift of the Divine? She listened.

"We've kept them both sedated for three days, general," a woman's voice said. "They haven't given us any trouble but we haven't begun the operation yet."

"Why not?" A man replied, his voice old, yet powerful. "Don't you know where to begin?!"

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She paused before answering, her voice cold, “Of course we do, general. What we lack is the authority. The president and chief of staff have been apprised of our interesting find. They seem to be delaying, for what reason, I can only guess.”

“If I had to say,” the general replied, “I would guess they’re waiting to see if anyone arrives to claim them. Three days is a long time in anyone’s book.” He sighed. “These two caused over four billion dollars’ worth of damage, killed two civilians and injured dozens of others. They owe us something. If not them, then those that sent them.”

The woman was silent.

“So,” the general continued, “You’ve got nothing to report then?”

The woman gave a thin and shallow laugh, as if to mock the old man. “Passive scans reveal the undeniable evidence of an empathic, and possibly telepathic, connection between the girl and her pet. If we could only begin the dissection...”

“I know,” The general agreed. “Have you had anyone from psy-ops look at it?”

“Indeed, he arrived two days ago. An officer Carlson I believe. He had only one recommendation: let them go immediately. I think you can understand why that isn’t an option.”

“I can,” The general replied, then took a few paces, “but this beast - a real dragon... unbelievable! The folks at Historical are

having a field day; to find their research validated after all this time.”

“That – could be dangerous,” the woman replied.

“I know. But if there really were others who cared, don’t you think they would have come by now? It’s been more than three days. I’m pressing for the research to begin immediately, but I’m not the only vote that counts. You may have to wait another day, at least.”

The woman sounded displeased. “Perhaps it is for the best. This connection they share is unlike any the division has encountered. They share a synchronicity that defies explanation. I am confident harming one will pain the other. And the dragon’s mind is... curious to say the least. Even given its spatial limits, it appears to have nested complexity similar to a fractal.”

“What are you saying?” The general asked.

“One popular hypothesis is that it contains the memories of its ancestors.”

The general was silent a moment. “I’ve known stranger things,” he said.

“Please, general, I want to begin the operation as soon as possible. There is so much we need to learn.”

“Give me a day,” he replied. “I have some friends down at business administration; let me see what they can do.”

“A day then,” she said, with what sounded like a smile.

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Snow's mind fell back into unconsciousness.

Rayn was livid. He didn't even feel hungry any more. He'd been fasting ever since the Queen of Thiaz had chosen to become his enemy, claiming the fortress of Pearl, casting out he and every other warrior. But that wasn't what was making him so angry. They had imprisoned Rhoc.

Rayn walked up and beat his staff on the entrance to the fortress. A voice called down from above. "Be gone, priestling! This is no longer your place."

He felt his anger welling up inside but knew he would get no further unless he held his temper. It was not time for violence, and the citizens of Thiaz which now filled the fortress were powerful indeed.

"I claim an audience with the queen," Rayn shouted back.

The man laughed.

"I seriously doubt-" he began but stopped short.

A moment later, the great door began to open.

Several of the men behind him, bold warriors of the Celtwyld and Norwich, stood up. Rayn knew what they were thinking. They were waiting for the chance to run into the fortress and claim it back with violence.

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Rayn also knew they wouldn't prevail. The people of Thiaz were vastly more powerful than the rebels. No blood had been shed, those of Thiaz considered the warriors and wisemen of Pearl so primitive that it was beneath their dignity to do so. In response, Rayn had spent every waking moment counselling with the chiefs or doing something he should have done much more – looking into the eyes of the Southern oracle. It had sharpened his wisdom, cutting back on the constant noise he didn't even notice had filled his mind ever since he first looked at it. He'd learnt countless abilities of the staff and many more that its wielder could hold that he'd never before considered – healing like never before, seeing things that were hidden, commanding the minds of men. But he didn't need its teachings to know this was not the time for violence.

Rayn held up his hand to stop Norwich and the others.

“Wait here,” he told the anxious warriors. There were scarcely a hundred of them, and six dragons, camped outside the gate.

He wondered where Pure was. Jayd was with him, and Auroriella with her people. Snow was lost, and Rhoc imprisoned in the fortress. But Pure had been taken by the people of Thiaz and had not been seen in three days.

Rayn handed Norwich his staff. “Keep it well,” he told him.

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He entered the fortress, the fortress that had originally descended from beyond the clouds, without his dragon Ironfang. He was greeted by twenty of their golden warriors; gleaming long spears and ornate shields surrounding him.

He was submitting himself as their prisoner now, he knew that.

As he entered, Rayn was shocked at the changes that had taken place in the fortress; the people of Thiaz certainly knew what they were doing. Great battlements had been set up, the stone warriors moved into a defensive position around the outer walls. It was clear they intended to use the fortress not only for protecting themselves, but for an aggressive attack of some kind.

Most soldiers who labored there just ignored him, though a stared momentarily. They were too professional to mock him openly, though he saw it in their snide expressions.

He walked, head up.

They took him to the high council chambers. There the Queen of Thiaz waited, all her best and royal advisors beside her, and a bevy of the strongest guards standing watch. She sat at the head of the table and to her left, sat Pure. She was glowing a deep, almost regretful blue. To her left a handsome Thiaz prince sat: closely.

Watch him, thought Rayn at Pure, wondering if she could hear his heart, *do not trust the kindness of Thiaz*.

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Her face was strained, her eyes sorrowful. She looked at him as if to say, *I did this. I brought this upon us all.*

He gave her a soft, encouraging smile.

“Rayn!” The queen of Thiaz smiled warmly. “Why did you not bring your staff? Surely you know we will respect your authority among your own people?”

A thousand angry words edged at his mouth; a thousand accusations of their crimes. But they knew all that already. And if the stones thrown by men and dragons did not teach them yesterday that Pearl wanted to claim her fortress back, what would? Pearl only lacked the strength.

“I have come to free Rhoc,” was all he said, managing to keep his voice humble.

Pure gasped.

Then man to her left turned to watch her, his face sympathetic.

The Queen sighed, but it was a hollow, insincere sound. “He tried to break into our fortress. He damaged two dragons and killed a guard – though he has been revived already. Your Rhoc has shown aggression and intention to harm and needed to be detained.”

“I have come to release Rhoc,” Rayn repeated.

The Queen paused before continuing. “You know why we did this, don’t you Rayn? Your people are too primitive. You’d

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never have the skill to learn and master this fortress on your own. You needed us to come and claim it, and we alone will be able to protect the seven worlds. You have made all this possible. You can be proud!”

Rayn was silent.

“Fine,” she said with an angry and impatient voice, “Be that way then. Don’t you see? We are good people. We are kind people. Go get your friend, leave in peace. And leave the saving of humanity... to us.”

Rayn was silent. Bowing, he turned to leave.

“Rayn!” Pure cried out in dismay.

He stopped and turned to face the Queen once more. He knew he could not take Pure from them. They still needed her, though he knew not why. But there was something else he knew, and that he needed Pure to know.

Two Thiaz priests rose to protect the Queen with their staffs. They feared he might try to curse her.

He smiled. “Queen, I am pleading with you this one last time. What you are doing is wrong. You should not take our fortress from us. In divinity’s name, please. Please take your warriors, take your dragons, take your priests, and leave. I am asking you because we owe you this one kindness for saving us from the rebels. But you must leave.”

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Pure sat slowly down, a look of understanding crossing her face.

The Queen laughed, then her high council laughed with her. “That’s it? That’s all you’ve got? ‘Please?’ Oh, Rayn, you simple child. You have no idea how to defend your world or save your people, do you? Go get your friend. Take him away from our fortress. Never return.”

But Rayn noticed that the Thiaz prince, the one who sat by Pure, did not laugh. Was he really such a cunning foe, attempting to work his way into Pure’s trust and confidence? Or did he really feel something for their cause?

Rayn turned and left.

They took him down through the fortress, through places he had never been. The streets were clean, the lights were lit, the statues moved about as though preparing the place for war. It was a hive of activity, and above every corridor and street way lay the golden banner of the conquerors. At one point it was difficult to hide his tears.

They took him to a dark dungeon. There he saw the rebels. The dragons were kept in dark, low stone crypts. The entire wall that faced the corridor was a strange curiosity; it was though it was a sheet of glowing water, small motes of light like fireflies

moving around the surface. No dragon seemed willing to touch that wall. He noted them, all the dragons that had been rebels. All were there, except Stormclouds who appeared to have escaped capture yet again. They were silent and afraid. Only one dared look at him, and it was not even Doomclaw.

Ethnomancer.

He looked at Rayn, his face a strange visage of regret and longing. He bowed his head and nodded.

He was trying to tell Rayn something. Something that Rayn felt was very important.

But he had not time to speak to his former enemy, for there, strung up at the far end of the room like a trophy, was Rhoc. His hands and feet were encased in some kind of diamond stone. His head hung low as though his spirit was broken.

Rayn raced to see him, calling his name as Rhoc's guards let him pass by.

Rhoc looked up, his face a visage of anger and vengeance. Rayn realized if he'd tried to hold the boy before calling his name, he might have shattered his skull with his own.

Rhoc was far from broken.

"Snow!" He said in desperation.

"I know," Rayn said, "I know."

Rhoc struggled.

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“They’re going to let you out now. But we need to leave peacefully. Is that agreed?”

Rhoc nodded, his eyes growing wide as they fell upon one of his jailors – Rayn guessed that he had slain that man earlier today.

The understanding of Thiaz was truly great.

“Peace,” Rhoc said, staring at the man.

The soldiers of Thiaz suppressed a mocking laugh.

“Peace,” Rayn repeated.

They unchained him and led them out.

An hour later, they stood alone at the fortress walls while warriors of Pearl ran to greet them like heroes.

Rhoc was free.

Pure sat on the bed in the bedchamber that they had given her. She was trembling and afraid once again.

Rayn had been there. After three days her prayers were answered: Rayn came in.

And Rayn did nothing.

She wept again.

Had divinity really abandoned her?

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She knew they would be taking her with them. She was their great prize, their trophy of war.

Was she truly alone?

Caspina laughed to himself; his sister was angry, and a little afraid.

“He’s planning something. I just know he is... if only I could figure out what it is!” she told him in private that evening.

“They’re still massed at the front gates. He’s having dinner with his soldiers and the dragons. You could look for yourself if you even half tried.”

She looked out the window, silent.

Games within games, Caspina thought.

“Have you thought about why you really want the fortress?” Caspina then asked her.

“Of course, and if that blasted princess would just make the announcement, we could be on our way already. We control the threads from here. We can go anywhere we want. And should the plague ever resurface, we are in the best position among the seven to deal with it. You know that.”

“And then what?” He asked her, allowing his frustration to show. “Then, when the plague runs again from world to world,

what will happen? You will abandon this fortress. You don't want its power, or glory. You just want another layer of safety for our own world. That and owning the most powerful fortress of the seven worlds combined as another trophy to mark your rule."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Mendelain said. "You know it's nothing like that. Thiaz alone has kept its wisdom, marked its technology. We alone can defend the worlds from the plague."

He paused before continuing. His sister was a dangerous player. He had learnt long ago not to underestimate her or to hand her too great an advantage, as those of Pearl so foolishly had. "I've seen the long history, haven't you? We left them, you know, Thiaz had closed its threads long before Pearl shut the whole system down for good. We abandoned them to their fate."

"That's ridiculous," his sister, the queen, protested. "And if we did, it was only because we knew the cause was lost already."

"Perhaps, perhaps," he pondered, leaving her to doubt by not disagreeing.

It was all part of the game.

"You know why I've called you up here, don't you Caspina?"

He sighed, this was the uncomfortable part.

"You know," she continued, "that if you don't get that speech from her soon, the priests are going to have to force it from her. You don't want that to happen. I know you don't."

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He sighed. He had been a fool to play this game, a fool to let her see how much he liked the girl from another world. Yet Pure was not like other girls: So innocent, so ... pure. She didn't know how to play games. And thus, when they'd called out to Thiaz for help, she hadn't thought it through properly. She had been prepared to risk their whole world to trust those they'd only just met.

They got what they deserved.

But the queen, his younger sister, still did not have everything she wanted.

"You like her," she accused.

He smiled, but did not deny it.

"And so you are going to get her to give that little speech. She has to publicly yield the entire fortress to the might and glory of Thiaz so that we can protect her primitive and innocent world. That's the only way. As soon as she makes that speech we can be away from this dark and gloomy planet. Oh, how I hate the clouds! But you'd better do it soon, Caspina. I wouldn't want to involve the priests... Remember, you are the gentle way."

She allowed her words to hang meaningfully in the air.

Still, he had to wonder. Why was she making him do it? Why provide a gentle way at all? Pure had taken to weeping in his arms each night, begging him to make a difference and make his people leave.

He didn't know why his sister made him play these games.
He was getting sick of them.

Ethnomancer

Rayn conferred with Norwich under a veil of a very specific sequester. *Make them as blind*, he'd pleaded with the divinity which guided him, *if our cause is truly just, let them see us, but see us as the fools they expect us to be.*

"What is your command, wiseman?" Norwich asked.

Rayn breathed in deeply. "Ethnomancer."

The assembled chieftains and dragon riders, those that remained, shook their heads in disbelief.

"What do you mean?" Rising Ahx asked.

"I found him in the jail with Rhoc, Doomclaw, and all the rest. I do not know what the queen intends with them or why she does not execute them all already, but I saw a look in his eyes... We need to speak to him."

"But how?" Rising Ahx asked, his own eyes darkened with his fear and frustration at failing before the might of Thiaz. A hundred thousand dragon riders – it had never been seen. And when it was, it was because of their failure. "They have altered the fortress; they prevent the teachers from speaking to us. Their

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swords are sharp, piecing even dragonhide and armor. How can we hope to storm in there and ... chat to a murderer?"

The assembled chiefs mumbled their agreement.

"There must be a way!" Norwich insisted. "And if Rayn feels it must be done, then it will be done! We will find a way."

The chiefs were about to disagree, or agree that they would die trying, when a girl spoke up. It was terrible dishonor for a woman to speak at the chief's council, or it had once been, and this female wasn't even a woman yet. But Jayd was also a dragon rider and held much respect among them.

"There is a way," she said, and once she saw that they would listen, she continued. "I have found I can still talk to the teachers, even at a great distance. Before all this trouble started, before the rebels, I learnt about the moving walls and the talking air of the fortress. So I asked her-"

"Her?" Rayn asked.

"Yes, the fortress," Jayd insisted without apology. "Female. I asked her to create a kind of space within the teachers that would allow me to move only my spirit though the walls. Just in case, you know, in case Pure ever... succumbed to evil."

"You plotted sedition!" Norwich gasped in horror.

All were silent.

"Very, very clever." He finally smiled, and all the chiefs nodded.

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Jayd smiled.

Rayn did too, her cleverness and foresight may have just saved them all again. “Can you do it now?” He asked.

She nodded, looking understandably a little nervous as she faced the wall of men who stood in council this night. Then she took off her dragon helm and breastplate, and placed a cloak on her shoulders. Rayn took a moment to recognize the cloak and felt chagrined that he had not immediately recognized it. It was a wellness cloak, the kind he may have used last month to steady the chills or assist a woman in giving birth. He doubted, now, that there was any true divinity or understanding that rendered such clothes effective beyond a person’s belief that they did. But if anything, it showed Jayd didn’t need great understandings tonight, she just needed them to believe in her.

She sat in the middle, by the fire.

Rayn bowed his head in prayer.

She didn’t let him, or anyone else, come with her. Since the Queen of Thiaz had come to power in the fortress, they had changed everything. There were passwords and terrible guardians made of spirit alone. Jayd had to prepare herself thoroughly. She also had to be careful that she left a way out, or the hidden priests

of Thiaz might trap her spirit in there forever. She did not want that to happen.

Jayd waited, and then donned her spirit in the same robes the quiet guardians all wore now. She flew through stone, looking down at the corridors. Using Rayn's description she made her way towards the prison chambers. She did not stop to ask the teachers for directions, she knew that doing so would make the hidden priests aware.

She felt the presence, as though far away, of all the wisemen, the chiefs, and the people. She knew Rayn was near and felt warmed by his enormous faith in her.

She was going to find her enemy, yet he was also an enemy to her enemy. Perhaps, even for just a moment, he could become a friend.

When she found the prison her first instinct was to cause the rebels to suffer. They sat in their stone cages, waiting for the death they had earned. She could cancel the food orders for this evening; maybe bring the walls down on them; but there was a more important cause here tonight than revenge.

Ethnomancer.

She found him whose intelligence was legendary, whose talent lay in manipulating a bizarre form of darkness. He was lying on his side in the cave.

Say nothing, she told him.

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His breathing quickened but he slowed it once more. He spoke in his heart, whispering, *Who are you?*

I am... I am... can you not tell who I am? She did not want to speak her name in this place.

I can, he replied.

One saw you today, he thought you wanted to speak to him. I have come to answer that call.

She felt an overwhelming sorrow rise up within Ethnomancer. She knew his tears were falling freely.

It was me! He said. *I... I am the reason there are not sufficient dragon riders to drive off the golden dragons at this time. The fault is mine!*

His sorrow was almost overpowering. She could only assume such tears were falling freely from her own eyes as well and hoped the chiefs would not be too concerned. *What do you mean?*

Doomclaw, he was so convincing, sooo sure of himself. I couldn't help but believe him. I wanted to believe him. Deep in my heart lay a hatred for humans, four thousand years and seven ancestors, all knowing their pettiness and betrayal. And then came the conclave, and I will not deny that I was every part as displeased as Doomclaw. To take a rider was to become a slave, I truly believed it. I swore with him to do everything I could to stop the matron from forcing us to submit to the humans.

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He swallowed bitter pride and seemed to be waiting for her to speak, to judge him, to accuse him of his murders. But she said nothing and soon he spoke again.

Then I felt it... then I knew my time had come. I was to be the twenty and seventh dragon to be bonded to a rider. I knew it! Oh, how I hated myself. How I fought it. So we sought the old lore, we learnt that as long as one of us failed to bond as one of the first thirty riders, we stood a chance at preventing others. Because after the thirtieth rider bonded, the energy would increase in the world and there was nothing we could do to prevent any dragon who desired a rider to take one. We found a long forgotten herb that could numb the terrible magnetism of the gathering, but it was not enough. One night, filled with self-loathing and rage, I stole after the source of my contempt and I found him, my rider...

His voice trailed off with memories too dark to share, feeling too powerful for words.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill him. He trembled before me but would not take his eyes from mine. He knew what I wanted to do, but did not fear it at all... I don't understand! Why did he not run?! It would have been so easy if he would have just ran! So I left. I pretended he was dead.

And Doomclaw watched me. He knew it was me, and so did the others. So I hated men all the more. The dragons gave me

honors; they kept me in their inner circle. And now... now we are fallen. Our cause is lost and not even you can help us because... because of me.

Yet now, he did not weep. He only accepted the depths of his failure.

Then a thought struck Jayd and she realized what Ethnomancer was trying to tell her. *You mean... if we can get your rider to you, the joining can recommence? That we can claim new dragon riders!*

Maybe even a hundred thousand more... there are such on this world, and more. More than enough to challenge the arrogance of our enemies!

But first we must get your rider to you.

That, or you must kill me.

Then that is why they spare you. Jayd realized.

Perhaps. And if it needs be, I will end my own life, though it is almost impossible for a dragon to do. But... my rider...

I know, Jayd said, finding a touch of sympathy within her. *You cannot risk further harm to your rider, even if you are not bonded. Ready yourself, you will have your rider within a night.*

Ethnomancer trembled with hope. *It is more than I deserve. Here, let me show you his face.*

Alarms sounded.

Something about the effect of the young man's face on his dragon's heart, or the effort of sending an image through the spiritspace of the fortress, had triggered an alarm.

She did not even wait to hear him say, *Go!* before she was gone.

Race to find a man

"I will find him easily. He is on the Eastern," Jayd told the anxious chiefs.

"When can you leave?" Rising Ahx said.

"We can leave now," Rayn replied for her.

She trembled with sudden weariness. This was very serious, and it was not certain what Thiaz knew. She clutched the cloak, unwilling to remove it even though they'd brought her the armor again. Was it more than she could handle, or had an unseen minion of the fortress stolen part of her soul from her?

A moment later another woman stood before her, the Northern Warrior, a dragon rider. She folded her arms in front of her and said nothing.

But in her gaze Jayd found her strength renewed, and throwing off the cloak, called the armor to its place.

The gate of the fortress began to open.

Darkwing and Ironfang were already outside.

Rhoc stood to go with them.

"No, Rhoc," Rayn said, "divinity bids me that you stay."

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Rhoc looked angry and confused.

“They will think you are fleeing and grow suspicious. If you stay, it will confuse them a lot, I think,” Jayd told him.

Rhoc trembled, and thundered back into the tents.

“He is a storm about to break,” Rayn whispered.

“I fear for whatever he stands on, should that happen,” Jayd agreed. “Come, let us ride!”

“How will you return?” Rising Ahx asked them.

Rayn only pondered a moment. “There is a dragon; he will be an ally to the cause. With what the teachers have taught me in the past few days, I am sure I can call him from anywhere now.”

It took time for Farwing to form his hole in the air, it always did. But Jayd and Rayn, with their dragons, were through it before the second heartbeat once it was prepared.

Prince Caspina watched the circle of lightning forming where Pearl’s patron dragon, Farwing, forged a portal within space. He already knew it was towards the Eastern continent, his authority was enough to pluck such knowledge from the hum of wisdom that filled the minds of all military personnel that served under him. The portal talent was not as well known on his home

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world, and had never been seen to be so very large, but it was not new science to them.

He did not need to see the two elite forces of Thiaz being dispatched to follow them. Rayn and Jayd, wherever they were headed, and whatever they would do, Thiaz would know.

Then his smile fell as his mind became aware of a third thing. A terrible thing. It was his sister's fear. She had given up waiting. He had run out of time.

“Do you think we have been followed?” Jayd asked him through the helmet.

“I know so,” he replied. “I need you to find a way to lose them.”

“Done, and done,” Jayd replied. “The canyon.”

How it was that Thiaz made two grown dragons and their adult riders invisible to their eyes was something Rayn desperately hoped to know one day. As it was, they had no option but to speed towards the narrow cavern in the wide wilderness that Jayd indicated. They were there in moments, speeding through the narrow rocks at breakneck speed. Darkwing was much more maneuverable in the darkness, and Ironfang found he had to brace himself against the hard stone walls to keep up. They

raced along for a good hundred breaths, but nothing seemed to be following them. Rayn began to wonder if they really were being pursued.

They're riding in the air above the cavern, Ironfang informed him.

Rayn felt very foolish. Why would dragons chase them into a cavern when they can simply, and safely, fly above it?

Rayn could only pray, *We have done all that we can do. Please, Divinity, help us.*

He thought desperately, wracking his brain for a way to escape their invisible pursuers. Suddenly his staff gave a gentle light blue spark, and the next thing he knew, a bolt of lightning tore from the sky about a thousand paces behind them. In that moment, they heard a man and his dragon cry out.

“Hide us!” Jayd commanded, and Rayn did so, sequestering them. They rode on for a few moments more, then Rayn felt a great weight lift from him as though the enemies had marked him, and lost their marks.

They still had to hurry.

Using the secrets of the high winds, Jayd guided them within a hundred breaths towards the place that she felt Ethnomancer's rider was waiting.

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They found him in less than an hour, living alone in a broken house, a gaping hole torn into the roof. In the front garden two new graves were dug; one very small.

Rayn knew in his heart that this was the place as soon as he saw it.

Their dragons landed, and Rayn stepped off. The house was alone on the prairie and it looked as though the man who lived there must be as broken as his house. The night was silent.

Rayn walked in, calling out. He heard a noise from the back of the house. He walked, led by the light of his staff.

A man called out, "Who are you? Have you come to kill me?"

"No," Rayn replied, smiling at Jayd who'd stayed guard on Darkwing. "But to save you. I bring you good news, you are about to become the next dragon rider of Pearl."

A man came to the door, blinking against the light.

"I know the dragon you are speaking of," he replied, "he came here two weeks ago and tried to kill me."

"I know," Rayn said, "but he could not, for you are part of him."

"Then how could he kill my beloved and my son?" The man replied bitterly.

Rayn was silent. He could feel this man's fear and betrayal. He knew there were no words to reclaim his loss. Praying for

wisdom he spoke the only words that seemed to make sense. “Because he had lost his way.”

The man was silent for a moment. “You’ve come to take me to him, haven’t you?”

Rayn nodded.

The man walked into the light; a young man, with black hair and dark eyes. He had not been sleeping or eating, it would seem. Not in two weeks. He walked to the far wall where a sword lay.

“Good. For when you do, I will use *this* on the beast.”

Rayn was about to argue, but then reasoned that if Ethnomancer died, as he justly ought, at the hand of this man it would still serve the cause of the joining. Jayd had told him so.

“Fair enough. Prepare yourself, we should leave immediately.” He shared the Northern prophet’s blessing with the man, and tightened his cloak for travel.

The broken man did not even claim a robe for himself.

“I’m ready now,” the man said.

Rayn nodded.

“Come, ride with my dragon,” he offered.

But the man paused as soon as he saw Ironfang. “I had always imagined dragons as beasts of power, untamed forces of nature. All my life I had imagined riding one, riding above the clouds of the sky where... I saw lights. Then when one came and

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spared my life but not the lives of those I loved, so I dispelled all thoughts of ever riding one. Now... this one is tamed?

“Tamed? No. But honest. He will bear you well. You will, however, require some warmer weather for the trip. The air is quite cold and damp up high.”

The man nodded, then returned a moment later with solid winter gear and a couple of thick blankets.

“I neglected to ask your name,” Rayn said.

“Call me Fallen,” the man replied, though Rayn knew this was not his name. His spirit was dark; he intended to dispense justice tonight. He did not seek healing, he only wanted revenge.

Rayn could guess how this night was going to go.

Fallen carefully climbed on the mighty Ironfang, eyeing him warily, and allowing his gaze to fall on Jayd for a moment longer than was wise.

“Who is she?” He asked.

She drove her dragon around and answered him herself, “I am Jayd, bold dragonrider of the Central, second in command to the Princess Pure, and rider of the shadowmaster *Darkwing*.”

Rayn noticed just how amazing she looked, clad in dragon riders armor, a long spear at her side. If he didn't know any better, he would say she must have looked just like the famous warrioress Leth from the fable must have looked when gathering the tribes

to meet the treat of the bear nomad hordes. She was an inspiring figure.

Fallen nodded.

“Come,” Jayd said to Rayn in a very commanding voice, “we need to get out of here before our enemies find us.”

Rayn nodded. They took to the air. He sent out the message of his prayer and they waited fifty breaths but then, to his great relief, Stormclouds arrived.

They looked at him warily. He nodded in greeting, and Rayn relaxed. Clearly they were once more working for the same cause tonight.

“Now, this will be a little rough,” Stormclouds assured them. “We’re going to have to take several short and annoying trips to get us all back to the central continent. I assume that they will already have the fortress’ defenses ready. So I’m going to try a never-before-attempted double dragon jump. It might hurt a little.”

“What is *that* dragon?” Fallen asked, his wrapped sword stowed inside his cloak.

“Nothing you need to worry about, but hold on and have faith,” Rayn replied.

“Why?” Fallen asked, a touch of curiosity hidden inside his deadened voice.

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The flash of red and angry smoke did little to hide Fallen's unbidden cry of surprise and fear as they left his tiny house far, far away.

Stormclouds was right, the alarms started immediately. Dragons poured from the fortress, some were incredibly fast. They had him grappled in moments.

Ironfang pulled up steeply, turning sharply away and fleeing towards the waiting safety of the dragon riders of Pearl, who took to the air quickly. On Ironfang's back, Rayn's staff glowed brightly.

No one seemed to notice Darkwing as he descended gently towards the dragon orb room. No one seemed to notice the pair of cloaked occupants on his back. They leapt into the room in almost perfect silence. There were four other men in there: priests, or scholars.

They were no match for the true wiseman of the fortress and a desperate and broken herb farmer of the western continent. They fell quickly.

Rayn was bothered at giving his staff to Jayd, but he knew it had to be. He had still managed to sequester Darkwing, himself and Fallen, and now the two men prepared to make their way deep into the fortress.

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Rayn nodded as the farmer kept watch at the door.

The dragon orb was silent when Rayn tried to speak to it. He then realized, with some sorrow, that it would only speak to those on Thiaz. It had been changed. There was no way he could speak to Pure who was hidden somewhere in this fortress.

Or was there...

... wasn't there a bridge of some kind, a bridge that would allow him to communicate with anyone between Thiaz and Pearl? A bridge built by a woman who had wanted, at one time, to kill him?

He sent his spirit to Thiaz, but spoke to no one there. They appeared to be concerned about the sudden loss of voices from Pearl, but he did not let them see him. He found Auroriella's bridge with almost no effort – none seemed to have noticed it, and led himself back to Pearl.

Maybe he could not talk to any on Pearl, but any on Thiaz could, and for all the dragon orb knew, that was where he was.

Pure, can you hear me?

Rayn! Her anxiety filled voice struck him.

He saw her then, with his spirit. She was in a room, a kind of cage of metal and light. They had her surrounded by seven adepts – the name for the priests of Thiaz, but their usual gold ornaments were highlighted with black. They did not touch her,

and her clothes were unruffled. But they were hurting her none the less. They were trying to force her mind to change.

Rayn's rage boiled inside him.

His passion must have warned them for a priest straightened up and turned as though to look at him.

Rayn vision raced back to the observatory. He had to find Pure.

Fallen looked at him in concern.

"Change of plans, we need to find someone first."

Fallen just shrugged.

Rayn looked about him, and in a moment found one of the adepts' staffs. They looked a lot like the staff he used.

It was sacrilege to touch another wiseman's staff without permission, but they were dead, at least for now. They had brought their unrighteousness upon themselves by trying to steal the fortress from them, so he hoped divinity would support his cause. He picked up the staff.

For a moment it fought him, trying to prevent his spirit from entering it. But Rayn was adamant, and the staff eventually succumbed. It took on his familiar light blue color, but he willed it back to gold again.

Dressing in the robes of the priests, they hurried down.

Rayn was led only by the voice of his heart, a desperate sequester about him trying to make them look like the men they

had slain. They passed by hundreds, most who bowed or saluted. One tried to talk but Rayn immediately said, “No time right now,” and they let him pass.

It was a desperate plan.

They wandered a good half hour, deeper and deeper into a fortress now flowing with the soldiers and workmen of Thiaz. He hated what they were doing to the place.

Eventually they came to the room where he knew Pure was being held. Two guards waited at the door.

Inside, a young woman screamed.

Rayn wasted no time; throwing his will into the golden staff, he willed the guards to rest.

His staff turned bright blue.

Fallen seemed to guess his intent and had the door open in a moment with a swift kick.

An alarm sounded.

Rayn walked in, all pretense of disguise lost. He cast the abominable robe of the priest aside, revealing his own robe and sash.

The adepts inside only had a moment to register the danger they were in. Two stood forward and attempted to block him. But with a flick of Rayn’s wrist, they flew through the air and were crushed into the far walls. Another two drew knives but Rayn threw darkness at them. One resisted, and rushed him but was cut

down by Fallen's blade. The final three closed ranks, two of them throwing fire.

He stepped through the flame and commanded them in the name of the divine to flee for their lives.

The two did.

The last stood, a curved knife at Pure's neck. "You cannot prevail here, tribesman! We will force a confession from her, then..."

The man struggled, his face looking confused as the blade he held suddenly turned by his own hand, to face his throat. This was a new trick Rayn had learnt. The divinity struggled around him, surging into him as though disobeying the man's own will. He lunged down to stab Pure but could not get close enough. His other hand tried to prevent the blade, yet it drew closer, and closer.

"You were warned," Rayn said, then quickly ended the man's life with his own knife.

"Careful, there is a wickedness about this cage," Fallen said.

Rayn nodded, he could feel it too. Pure sat, she looked healthy but her breathing was shallow and there was such a fevered look in her eyes. It seemed she could neither speak nor rise from the floor.

"Arise," he commanded her.

She could not.

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“Release her,” he commanded the cage and laid the staff on it. It split open.

She jumped up and ran to embrace him. “Rayn! Oh, it was awful, they were inside my thoughts; there wasn’t anywhere they couldn’t go. They said they’d do such terrible things if I didn’t give them what they wanted.”

“What did they want?” Rayn asked as they headed for the door. Her strength had returned but her limbs seemed momentarily numb.

“They wanted me to give them the fortress. They wanted a public announcement for all their people. They wanted me to say that I was happy to give them the fortress. But I didn’t Rayn. I didn’t!” She said in desperate triumph.

“That is good-” Rayn began.

And then the far wall fell away to reveal over thirty armed soldiers of Thiaz and their prince.

Rayn pulled Pure behind him and raised his staff.

Then the Prince clapped, and it stalled Rayn a little. “Well done, well done Rayn. You fell seven of our best priests with nothing but a staff and a swordsman for support. We do underestimate you, don’t we?”

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“Let me go and I will spare your lives,” Rayn said.

“No, I am supposed to say that I will spare *your* lives,” the prince replied in a bored voice.

“You lied!” Pure said.

The prince seemed hurt. “However do you come to that conclusion, Pure?”

Rayn didn’t like the way he used her name, like a toy. Not like the princess that she was.

“You said I wouldn’t get hurt, that nobody would get hurt. You said that, you did.” And she sounded far more angry than Rayn expected.

The prince shifted uncomfortably. “True... true...”

Rayn wondered why he did not argue, why he did not claim, ‘That was only if everyone did what we told them to,’ but the prince did not say that.

“I am sorry Pure, but this is... ah!” The Prince stuttered, as if he didn’t even believe in himself. “What are you doing here Rayn? Why have you come here now?”

“Don’t tell him,” Pure whispered. “Games within games. He’ll use whatever you say against you, he will.”

Rayn could feel Fallen agree.

Rayn looked at the prince and at those that stood by him. He saw an attitude of complete calm within the young man, indeed,

as if this was all a game. But he also recognized something else... what was it? A desire to quit playing?

So Rayn decided to be honest. "Come and see."

The room was silent.

"All right then, wiseman of the Celtwyld. Show me."

The prince led the way; quickly it would seem, down to the prison cells. Pure did not let go of Rayn's hand, and Fallen did not let go of his sword. The prince had commanded twenty eight of his armed guards to stay and tend to those injured in the room. Thus, two armed guards walked behind them, leaving the prince, apparently unarmed, in the front.

He is a very calm player, Rayn thought. *Either that, or a fool.* Rayn watched, him, anger simmering within. "What I want to know is why."

The Prince hardly turned around. "Why what?"

"What have you done this? Why has Thiaz tried to steal the fortress?"

The prince laughed to himself. "Oh, I imagine the good queen fancied herself a new fortress."

Rayn was enraged at his bravado, the callous way he talked about the torment of his people. He grabbed him by the shoulder and felt the guard's hand on his own half a blink before. They were good guards.

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The Prince suffered Rayn's hand, then turned to allow it to fall away. "What I tell you is the truth, good wiseman, though you may not believe it. The Queen wants power and the fortress will give her that. Once she had forced a confession from your fair damsel here, she intended to take this pretty boat back to Thiaz. But that will not be the end of it, I assure you. She has ways of seeing the gold and other precious things of a world. She means to claim it all, for Thiaz."

Pure turned to look at Rayn in shock.

"How can she be so... avaricious?" Pure asked.

The prince smiled at Pure's choice of word. "There is an old saying among my people, 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'." He smiled.

"On Pearl we have our own saying," Rayn said, "'Power is service'."

"You *all* believe that?" Caspina asked.

"No," Rayn confessed. "Just the wise. We use it to remind ourselves not to abuse our own authority. Those that do are punished mightily."

"Indeed. And, sadly, I think that is what the problem could be here. She knows she is not supposed to be here, but she also knows: she answers to no one. There are none to rein her in. She is the most successful queen of the last two thousand years, and our people are greatly prosperous. So... now I come to think of

it, perhaps it isn't power that corrupts, really. It's the thought that you can get away with whatever you want. That you answer to no one. That no one is able or willing to stop whatever you choose to do, not men, not gods, not angels. Not even the people as long as they are kept blind to your deeds, or support them. And now she has an entire empire that loves her, and supports her."

"You think they will let her get away with anything?" Pure asked.

"No, she is no tyrant. But you know, even before she met you, she knew she wanted to conquer worlds. Pearl is just the first, because from here you control the threads. From the day you met she had her forces mobilized, had the scholars talking about 'Protective measures', in case you proved to be hostile. She never said, 'Take over', never used the word 'conquest'. Then when you suddenly rang up with an open invitation to bring in unlimited military forces to put down an uprising... well, let's just say it was like folding your minion line in a game of 'Vathfei'. And that's just what life is like for her – a great game." He sighed. "Always looking for a way to win, for the advantage, the winning gambit. Games within games..."

He turned and walked on, leaving them to their thoughts. Another fifty breaths and they were outside the prison cells; the guards there gave a proper salute which the prince ignored. Then they went in.

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The rebels hissed at the sight of them, and Rayn was sure many would have dashed their teeth against the strange standing pools of water that held them if it didn't bring such pain.

He saw Doomclaw, he simply stared at him with a threatening glare, but he did not hiss.

And then Ethnomancer.

Fallen cried out at the sight of him, raised his sword and rushed to the standing pool. Ethnomancer drew back.

"Murderer!" Fallen cried, though his language was probably lost on those assembled. "You killed my wife and suckling child! I will kill you for all you have done to me!"

Ethnomancer stood back, seeming surprised.

Then he nodded and laid his bare neck on the ground.

Rayn heard Doomclaw stand.

"Let me do this!" Fallen begged Rayn.

"Very well," Rayn replied. He stepped forward, holding out his staff towards the waters.

The prince looked on with curiosity; a Thiaz soldier shook his head silently in disbelief.

But Rayn believed the waters were his to command. He touched the standing wall and they receded.

The Prince unfolded his arms, his face a visage of shock and surprise. The guards drew ready.

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But Fallen just stood there. “You killed my family! Why? Why did you do that!” He shouted, brandishing his sword.

Ethnomancer said nothing. He just awaited death.

Long moments waited when the mighty Ethnomancer could have attempted to escape. But he did not. Fallen approached him and raised his sword high. Then lowered it. Then raised it again. Several times Fallen raised his sword but it seemed he could not bring himself to strike death in his foe.



Then Fallen put his hand on Ethnomancer’s scales, as though preparing himself for the final blow that would end this murderer’s life. Instead, several heartbeats went by while he caressed those scales. Then his hand began to wander towards Ethnomancer’s skull.

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“NO!” roared Doomclaw, bashing his fearsome skull plates on the standing water. He was thrown back violently. “No! I order you all to stop this, stop this at all costs!”

About half the rebels threw themselves violently in their stone cages. The prince looked about with calm interest, the guards tightened their grip on their weapons in fear.

And then they heard a man weeping. A moment later, a dragon joined him.

There was a jolt of sudden power as forgiveness and understanding filled the room.

Fallen and Ethnomancer joined.

“NO!” roared Doomclaw.

“You!” Ethnomancer shouted back at Doomclaw, his head thrusting out of the cage. Fallen jumped on his back without a thought. “You lied to me! This... this is living! This is worth dying for!”

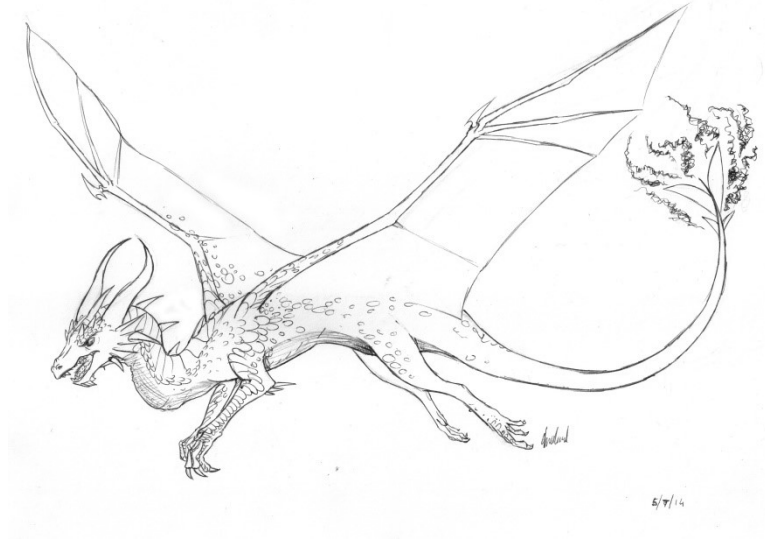
And admitting he was still a prisoner, Ethnomancer slowly retreated back into his stone cell.

The dragons were silent.

The prince was silent.

“Look,” Pure said in wonder, pointing at the prince. A single tear fell from his eyes.

“I have never known a bonding...” he said. “I had no idea this was what it could be like. Look! They are as one...”



Ethnomancer - sage and mystic

A moment later the prison doors flung open. In stormed the queen, the most royal guard, and a hundred soldiers and priests.

“We are lost...” Pure mourned.

“Not yet,” Rayn replied. He could feel it, the change all around the world.

“What have you done, brother?” the queen yelled at the prince.

He turned to her fiercely and spoke with determination, but not threat. “Oh give it up, sister!” He told her, and her face flushed red with anger. “This is not our world to claim.”

“You wish all the worlds turned to dust? How-”

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He interrupted her, probably the only person on her world who could. “Just give it up, your conquest is unjust.”

She stepped forward, trying to speak to him sweetly. “Whatever do you mean, brother? Have you slept well? What is this you are saying?”

“Don’t waste your time trying to discredit me,” he told her, smiling as though already victorious. “You brought this on yourself. I want you to leave this planet to their own, give them their fortress back and make things right for once!”

“You fool!” she shouted. “Don’t you see what’s happening? She’s got to you, hasn’t she? Tying your heart, and now you need help. I-”

“Give them back Pearl or I will make your actions public. Let us see how the good people of Thiaz feel about you plundering a world, stealing the greatest fortress in the system, and torturing their princess!”

She was silent, staring at him coldly.

Rayn knew the prince had crossed a line, but he silently thanked him.

The guards stood, silent.

Then the queen laughed. “You fool, Caspina. You place your affections above the safety of your own people. You are in breach of your oaths and rebellion against your queen. Guards, take him!”

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The elite moved to claim the prince, while his own two guards stood to defend him. The prince didn't move at all.

Rayn knew an opportunity when he saw one; and an ally in the enemy of his foe.

He decided to protect the prince. He struck the staff along the floor, willing protection for all who stood against Mendelain. A golden dome surrounded them. The elite tried to break the dome with both sword and lightning, but they could not.

"Impressive, wiseman," the prince said, moving to stand beside him.

Rayn nodded in reply.

The queen smiled in self-righteousness as her two adepts, stood forward. They had the markings of those of elite ranking among their kind, with patterned jewelry along their glowing robes.

"Well, you've got your work cut out for you now," Caspina told him.

One high adept commanded and a pillar of white light tore from the roof, striking the golden sphere. It shimmered but did not break. The high adept looked surprised.

The second began muttering a curse at Pure, and Rayn was truly disgusted. Were they really using the powers of divinity to curse those that were innocent?

That made them guilty of demonry.

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With a flick of his wrist, he knocked the man to the floor, which was a little disappointing to Rayn since he'd intended to smash him into the ceiling. The other adept raised his hands but Rayn did not wait to see what evil his faith would unleash. With a thrusting forward of his borrowed staff, he brought judgement on the man who knew not right or wrong, only obedience. The man's staff snapped like a twig, burning him in its fire, sending him crashing back into the soldiers.

The other adept stepped forward and thrust his staff into the shield.

Rayn wasted no time and stepping through his own golden shield, smashed his staff into the side of the old man's head. It was clearly a move none expected or had observed before. The wounded high adept fell to the floor.

"Right!" The queen shouted.

"Enough!" Rayn declared, and the golden orb spread outwards to knock all her allies to the floor. She stood, alone, undefended.

Rayn walked right up to her.

"I cast you out," he told her.

She laughed again, bold even in defeat. "You can't do that."

"Actually, he can," Caspina told her. "Are you blind? This primitive and uncultured wiseman just bested two, no, nine of your highest ranking adepts and thirty or so of your honor guard,

and I don't suppose you've been watching what's going on outside, have you?"

With a wave of his hand, images formed in the room, seeming to be made from the air itself. They showed the fortress and at the gate, Farwing had formed not one, but five portals. Within each a land was visible, each showing a different time of day. Farwing had formed a circle across the world. Into and through it, hundreds of dragons flew. Hundreds of hundreds.

The Prince continued talking to her and what few of her assistants remained conscious. "The great gathering of the dragon riders of Pearl has recommenced. Within a day, possibly less, there will be half a million armed and angry riders outside the fortress gates. Now we can take them, it is sure, but are you sure you want this to go down on your record?"

She looked at him darkly.

"Give it up, my queen. What have you to bargain with?"

"I still own the fortress," the queen said. The fortress' walls began sliding into place at her whim, sealing the exits. Her hands and hair began to glow in a dreadful, iridescent gold.

The Prince sighed. "You don't really want me to do this, do you?"

"I am queen of both Thiaz and Pearl, and I will go down in history as the greatest queen the seven worlds have ever known!"

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The prince sighed. “Asthred, reset all Fortress systems to date stamp 14.19.54-” he began.

“No!” The queen squealed.

“-stop her talking-” the prince asked Rayn in the middle of his speech.

She cursed, “You are ban-” but stopped as Rayn, holding two fingers out in front of himself and not touching her at all, ordered her mouth to close.

A nearby priest began muttering a counter prayer. It didn’t last long with the butt of Rayn’s staff connecting with his face.

Caspina continued, “And lock all authorities with princess Pearl and her will.”

Suddenly the Queen of Thiaz was lifted high up on a stone pillar. Jagged stalactites formed above their heads. “I am Queen of Pearl! I-”

She stopped suddenly as the top of her pillar changed from a platform into a slide. Squealing, she fell to the floor. In their minds, they heard Jayd laugh.

He had forgotten she might be watching.

The prince had just enough time to finish what he was saying, quickly. “And at her agreement, order all the guardians to violently eject all non-allied of Pearl from the fortress. Go.”

The young queen crashed to the floor, the unconscious elite managing to soften her fall.

Then she pulled out a bracelet and pointed it at Caspina.

The prince gasped, crossing his arms across his chest. His guards drew their blades to protect him.

It was obvious now nothing would make her give up; she would cause a war and lose every life in her empire, before she gave up.

“You don’t want to do this, sister.” His voice soft, his head held up proudly.

“Oh, I think I do,” the ambitious queen replied.

“No, I really don’t think you do,” Pure replied.

Queen Mendelain, what is the meaning of this? A voice sounded in their minds.

The queen gently gasped, and looking at the device in her hands, quickly tried to hide it.

“Who is that?” Rayn asked.

Pure laughed. “A clever man once told me that power itself does not corrupt, but the thought that you are no longer beholden to others for your deeds. The thought that it doesn’t matter what you do, you’re above the law. Well, Queen Mendelain, you are not. You think we are primitive and you are right, for we are. But we are much wiser than you think. A dear friend has built a bridge between our world and yours, and I have been using that bridge to broadcast your actions to your own people. You just couldn’t

hear them screaming at you ‘til I lowered the protections you placed on the link.”

“What? No! You... you...” Mendelain could find little to say right now as she knew her every word was being broadcast to her governing council back home.

Honor guard, bring the queen to the council immediately!
The old man’s voice commanded.

What few could, stood, and taking her crown, tied her hands behind her back.

“I won’t forget this,” she hissed at Pure.

“I won’t forget this, either,” promised Pure.

And the queen was taken from the room as the remaining guards tried to help each other up.

What about him? Jayd asked.

They all looked at the prince and his two guards.

Caspina shrugged. “My sister has lost momentum but not power. She will have the senate eating out of her hands in a year’s time, I am sure. This will just be another play in her game. Yet she has lost a lot of her reputation. They will see she is and always was, just as corrupt as the rest of them... I suppose I should be getting back.”

“My liege,” the soldier at his right said, “you are a dead man if you set foot on Thiaz, at least for many years.”

“True, true,” Caspina sighed.

“Stay,” Pure ordered him.

Rayn raised an eyebrow.

“I... hmm.” The prince seemed to be unable to know what to say. “I don’t think I’ve earned your trust.”

“No, you haven’t, and Caspina?”

“Yes?” he said with a smile.

She walked forward, and a glistening flame sprang to life in her hand. It danced with multi-colored hues, yet still bore much heat. The guard shifted nervously. Then, with a mighty roar, the flame exploded out at the prince, barely missing him as he cringed wisely away. Tufts of the fire danced in the air around the prince and his men, before eventually disappearing. She walked right up to him, till he was well within arm’s reach, and she still burned with purple fire.

“If you ever lie to me again, well... let’s just say you’d better not lie to me again.”

He stood to face her, nervously, and nodded.

“You sure it’s wise to stay?” A guard asked.

He looked down at Pure and gave her a wry smile. “I do. And you?” The Prince asked the guard to his left.

“Where you go, I go,” the guard replied, saluting formally.

“You?” He asked the guard at his right.

“I... have family...”

“Yes, yes, Tollueo. You should go.”

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“Thank you, your highness. I suspect, however, the queen will be greatly displeased with my conduct today.”

“You should go, beg her forgiveness. You only carried out my orders,” Caspina said.

“Besides,” Rayn wondered, “we may need a friend on Thiaz, at least one.”

The prince smiled. “I had already considered that.”

“As will she,” Pure observed.

“Games within games,” Caspina smiled.

Flowers for Snow

Rhoc roared with impatience.

Pure was staying; they needed her to guard the fortress which was rapidly filling with hundreds of dragon riders and thousands of warriors once more. And they needed her to open up the golden threads when the hour arrived that Rayn chose to return.

Rayn, Jayd and Rhoc were going, along with their dragons, to Ethphraim. Rayn had decided to bring along Norwich, Twoswords, and the winter warrioress for backup, just in case. He had to smile, their small team was leaving in the same moment the Thiaz were retreating, which was surprisingly soon after their disgraceful ejection from the city.

Still, Rhoc was impatient.

A moment later the threads opened up, and to the dignified silence of the dragon riders of Pearl the plunderers of Thiaz finally left - empty handed.

Rayn felt sad to be leaving this mission to last. But they needed Windfyrth, and they needed Snow.

Rayn watched as he and his companions were lifted up on dragon wings through the clouds. A few breaths later, he found himself streaking towards a dirty blue orb that could only be Ethphraim. It was a mess. Rayn cast his eyes across the world and

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found very few places hidden from his view. Either they had no secrets or they knew nothing of the sequester. Perhaps they knew nothing of faith? But his staff gently tingled as if to teach him otherwise.

He and Ironfang drew back so that Jayd could lead them towards the place where Snow was being kept. It was a hidden fortress in the mountains, with gates of iron and towers of stone; dozens of men and carriages of metal patrolled the only entrance.

They landed to the sound of sirens and alarms. Men, armed with short sticks of black, pointed at them in fear from behind their barricades of stone. Great rods of black, which Rayn assumed to be similar to catapults, pointed down at them and their dragons from the stone towers.

After a moment of watching each other a voice spoke, somehow magnified through the air, "Hold, intruders. I am the General. Deliver your weapons and you will be treated as friends."

Rayn pondered this then shouted in reply, allowing the divine within his staff to magnify his voice even more powerfully than the general's. All on the mountain would hear it as though he spoke right next to their ears. "We have come to deliver our companion and her dragon. Deliver her to us now for we are willing to leave in peace."

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There was silence. “Please, lower your weapons. Let us talk.”

They have her, Ironfang guessed, and they’re not going to give her to us. They have already wounded her, if she is not dead. Hear; there is shame in his voice.

I agree, Rayn replied. “We will not surrender our weapons. We have come to take our companion from you. Now.”

“You have entered our world, our airspace and our community, and now you threaten us? We do not want war but we will defend ourselves-”

Rhoc roared. He too, could tell the general was stalling. He had brought the greater dragon riders’ armor. He was twice the height of the tallest man there.

Rayn replied, “Stop lying about your good intentions and give us our friend and her dragon immediately or we will take her from you. What have you done to her, I wonder, that you feel to keep her from our eyes? What have you done, that puts such shame in your voice?”

There was a pause. “You cannot come here and threaten us! This is our land, she landed among our people, and she caused great trouble and death in doing so. She, too, must answer for her deeds, as will you if you choose a path of violence. There will be no opening doors until we open a diplomatic discourse-”

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Rayn had heard enough of this man's shame. Allowing divinity to guide his sight, he closed his eyes. Speaking out loud to Ethphraim, who guided his inner vision, he saw where they were keeping her. Allowing Ironfang to translate his words to the other dragon riders, Norwich and the others circling high overhead, Rayn spoke to the men on the mountain. "I see her tied to a bed, her life hovering over her. Her innards are laid open. Her dragon does not breathe."

The general was silent.

Rhoc roared. He leapt from his chariot and charged at the iron wall.

They began shooting at him, they knew he was going to attack. Yet it was... almost laughable. They appeared to be using some form of small stones or chunks of metal thrown at great speed and number from their short black rods. They might have wounded a warrior but they were less than the rain to the dragon rider's armor.

Honestly, little stones? Rayn wondered. *Is that the best they've got?*

Rhoc needed no further encouragement. He leapt on the great gate of blue iron and, wedging his fingers in the gap, began to haul them apart. They resisted him so he gripped one and tried to pull it towards him, the metal smearing like mud yet glowing

with heat. So he reached his entire arm in and prepared to haul it out of the stone mountain.

Then he was covered in fire as two large stones rushed down from the catapults to strike him. For a moment Rayn could not see Rhoc, but he was not afraid.

“Enough,” Rayn said, and with a word of faith, jammed all their weapons. The warriors looked at their black rods in anger and confusion. Rayn was thankful they knew so little of faith and the divine.

The mountain cracked and Rhoc hauled with all his might. There was a great screeching noise, like the sound of a dragon crying out for war, as the enormous metal door strained against its bonds. Wisely, the nearby soldiers ran.

The door exploded outwards, the dragons raising their wings to cover their riders from the rubble.

“I suggest you leave our way clear!” Rayn shouted to the soldiers of Ethphraim.

We will stay out here, Norwich told him through the dragon rider’s helm, and let you know if there are any reinforcements. Be sure to call on us if you get into any trouble!

“Thank you,” Rayn replied.

He heard the general shouting; shouting orders of violence and hedging up their way, shouting words of war. Rayn felt for the old man’s soul and, reaching out, was surprised to find it

virtually unprotected. There was a ring, given to him by a woman who once cared for him, but their connection was very weak. *Go to sleep*, he told him, and without any protection, the general simply did what he was told.

The corridor they entered through was large enough for the dragons so they meandered down it. The little stones the soldiers occasionally strove to use against them bounced ineffectively against the dragon's hides.

"They're not very fond of us, are they?" Ironfang laughed.

Rayn smiled, then looked at Jayd. "Find us the best way to Snow."

Jayd nodded and pointed. "That is the best way." She grinned.

They entered a branching corridor and found themselves in a huge room. It was filled with strange iron birds, large enough to carry two men inside them, and several odd iron carriages. They looked like turtles, only with a trunk. In the center of the room there was a large tower covered in black rods. It was clear that this place was a place for war.

"Which way now?" Rayn asked.

"That way," Jayd said, pointing to a strange silver door along the side of the room. The door split down the middle, and to the left a pair of crystal triangles sat.

Then the tower began to spew fire on them all.

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Destroy that tower, but save the humans alive. Rayn asked Ironfang as he dismounted.

Ironfang laughed with delight as he, Darkwing and Fairystone began to rip the room apart.

Rayn, Rhoc and Jayd looked at the door, and just before Rhoc could wrench it open, the crystals lit up and the doors opened to reveal a small room.

“How does this help us?” Rayn asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jayd replied as the sound of screeching metal reached them while dragons tore down the weapons from the tower.

They walked in and examined the room. Several other crystals were lined up along the side of the wall and Rayn immediately knew Snow was at the lowest one. Rhoc joined them, the small room tilting as he did.

“Perhaps the room can take you places?” Jayd guessed.

“It will take us to Snow,” Rayn confirmed.

Rhoc grunted.

They pressed the lowest crystal and a moment later the doors began to slide shut on their own. Rayn watched as Darkwing lowered the crown of his head towards a trunked turtle and it spewed fire on him. Then Jayd giggled. They did not see what happened next but they could all clearly hear the sound of a

metal turtle being torn gleefully to shreds by an enthusiastic dragon.

The crystals were lighting up in order, confirming they were heading in the right direction. Suddenly, about halfway down, there was a clunking on the roof and then a strange yellow air began to fill the little room.

“Oh, please,” Jayd mocked the soldiers of Ethphraim, and activated her bracelet. They waited a breath while they travelled on, yet then the room suddenly stopped three crystals short of their destination.

“We walk?” Rhoc guessed.

“They’re making this very entertaining, aren’t they?” Jayd smirked.

“They shouldn’t, people are going to die,” Rayn replied. “I thought I told you to find the best way?”

“Well,” Jayd replied as the silver doors began to open of their own volition, “that depends entirely on your definition of ‘best,’ doesn’t it?”

An instant later she was inundated with a firestorm of the little stones. She activated her other bracelet and began to float out the door. The soldiers of Ethphraim were shouting. Then Rayn heard a woman’s cry of war and several heavy thuds.

Rayn offered for Rhoc to leave, but he insisted Rayn go first. By the time they got themselves organized the fight was almost

over. Jayd was flying, moving so fast the stones barely touched her. Kicking and punching, she subdued every soldier in moments, and there were over twenty.

They waited until she'd finished them, and that was when Rayn noticed how her armor was changing to suit her. It had grown, not wings, but fins to help hold the air underneath her.

With the last man subdued she stopped, and grinned at them broadly. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and Rayn couldn't help but smile back, despite the severity of their mission.

"Which way now?" He asked her.

She pointed down a sloping corridor.

They moved on, but halfway down the floor suddenly filled with lightning, great white bolts scarring the dragon armor. Iron doors slammed down from the roof to trap them. Their suits grew heavy and stopped responding to their will. Rayn fell to one knee and had to take to holding the wall to steady himself.

Rayn feared. Given time, this tactic would likely best them.

But not for long; Rhoc began ripping out the floor. In moments, the lightning had ceased, and Rhoc roared a challenge to them all. The armor awoke again. Within seconds he had torn the great door of iron asunder like fine tree bark.

They entered a new corridor, and passed by some more rooms. Then, down the corridor, shouts and the sounds of

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weapons being set up. It was obvious that their enemies were preparing a last defense. Rayn stood forward.

Then Jayd tapped him on the shoulder and pointed down. “She’s down here.”

Rhoc shattered the floor with his fists, a solid piece of stone and metal blasted aside.

“Or we can take the shortcut.” Jayd smiled.

The soldiers called out, and started leaving their places.

Again Rayn noticed few of them had any protections. “Enough, lose your way,” he commanded, and they began to stumble about. One of them, with a little cross on a necklace of silver, resisted. But the others had little or no protection at all and Rayn had to marvel at their ignorance.

First Jayd, then Rayn lowered themselves to the final level.

Rhoc gasped.

They were in a very clean room with white curtains and glass walls. There were strange silver machines and what could only be implements of medicine. And there, in the center of the room, was Snow. She was strapped to a strange metal bed, there was blood everywhere and her insides had been laid beside her as if for study. Windfyrth lay silent at a dragon sized bed below, similar implements of death strapped and now unmoving beside her.

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Rhoc roared, the sound of a broken man. He immediately rushed to save her, brushing aside the glass like cobwebs that shattered to the floor. He stepped out of his dragon armor and cradled Snow's head tenderly, his sobs filling the room.

"Who has done this? Who has done this?" Rhoc seemed to ask the divine.

"Her," Jayd replied.

Rayn spun around and found himself looking at a silver mirror. Yet the sight granted by the dragon helm showed him a woman in a blood stained white coat trying to sneak away into another of the little silver rooms. With a thrust of his staff, he dragged her, screaming, through the air. She shattered the glass and landed at Rhoc's feet.

Rhoc turned to face her. He could feel her dreaded fear as Rhoc's tear stained and distraught visage turned on her. His face turned white, his teeth bare in a gathering monstrous rage.

The voice from outside, the general, suddenly filled the air once more, "Intruders, stand down or—"

Again, with a thrust of his staff, he willed the voice to silence. Several objects, like bronze trumpets, around the walls fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. It might have been how the general was speaking to them, but Rayn didn't care.

Rayn held up his hand to stop Rhoc from crushing the woman.

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“Can you...” Rhoc plead to Rayn, forgetting revenge and pointing instead at Snow. “Can you ... do?”

Rayn looked at Snow and felt peace. If the priests of Thiaz could bring men back from the dead, so could he. “Yes,” Rayn replied, “there is something we can do.”

The woman was silent on the floor and Rayn hulled her to her feet. As soon as he looked into her eyes he could tell she was in a large way responsible.

And thus, she would be a large part of the solution.

“Put her on the silver table next to Snow,” Rayn ordered.

In a heartbeat, Rhoc had grabbed the woman and thrown her through the air, smashing her down on the table. She cried out in pain but Rayn did not need to pray to know Rhoc had broken her lower back in his enthusiasm.

Rayn spoke to her in her language, “Why?”

“I...” she stuttered, in pain. “I’m sorry.”

Rayn was not impressed. “You should have been more sorry yesterday. You knew better. Why did you do this? Was it to satisfy your curiosity? Is that why you didn’t flee as soon as we arrived? Or did you know you were guilty, and thus had a great debt to fulfil...”

The woman’s eyes filled with tears. “No, please, I can give you knowledge; I can tell you all I know! My people, they are powerful. They have money!”

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Rayn shook his head. “Who are you, people of Ethphraim, that you do not take personal responsibility for your choices, and thus do not believe you deserve your punishments?”

“No, NO!” She screamed.

But Rayn had seen enough. He ordered Rhoc to force her to hold hands with Snow. This was an old prayer but he had seen it worked by his own master many times, though usually the old man used his own hand to save from death. Now, because her debt was great, Rayn knew the woman’s own life force and blood would suffice.

He muttered the prayers, and the woman shrieked. Rayn said nothing, knowing the process did not hurt, the woman was simply terrified. But Snow’s complexion immediately began to improve.

Rayn moved to look at Snow. They had taken much out and in their haste, tried to replace it. Muttering old prayers of power he watched as the organs and sinew began to pull themselves back into place, as he knew they should. But then he noticed there was something missing, they’d taken her liver. One could not live without a liver, or where would her faith reside? How bleak, how desperate of this people to leave all but a liver!

Suddenly, a new prayer formed itself in his heart and he knew what to do. He knew divinity could grant a special request for the redemption of this world and their deeds. Rayn looked

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around until he found what he needed, a white robe, like the one the terrified woman wore.

Rayn rolled it up then dipped in it Snow's own blood. He began to pray, it was sacred, and long, with symbols he barely knew and strange commands that were entirely new to him. But when he was done, the robe had transmuted. He knew this was the first his people had used this prayer in thousands of years; he had created a liver, for Snow. He knew, deep down, that the understanding that could transmute base matter into a living organ existed even though he had never heard it spoken among his people. But by divinity's will today, it had been done.

The woman had fallen silent in wonder, though her eyes could scarcely focus, so much blood had she given away. Within the reverence of silence, he placed the organ within Snow and waited while her skin mended itself. Naturally Windfyrth's own healing had matched her own.

The woman looked at him in wonder and fear. Rayn could see, however, that her soul had been touched. A part of her, deep down, had woken up. He took pity on her. She was a part of a complex system, a rigid culture that did not believe in things they could not explain, or see. She was opening her eyes to greater things.

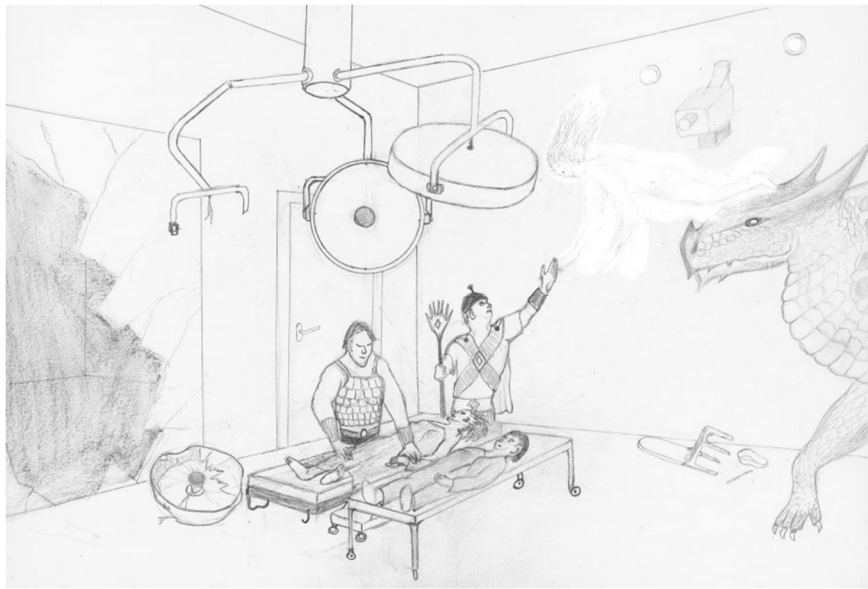
So willing her peace and life, he touched the staff to the top of her head, and with a loud snap her bones and nerves mended

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themselves. It was as if the staff had chosen to do so itself. Though he also knew she would have much bruising, and a scar to remind her to be humble.

“She is still asleep,” Jayd said, bringing him back to the present.

Indeed Snow was and Rayn wondered why. Then he saw her spirit, floating by the roof, smiling at him, and smiling at Rhoc. He reached up his hand and she took it. Guiding her gently, he returned her spirit to her body.



The desecration of Snow

And she breathed and lived once more.

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Rayn stumbled backwards with weariness. He could not believe how much these exertions had drained him, taking, as it were, his virtue and strength as payment as well.

“I am so sorry,” the woman said to Snow.

Rayn ignored her. His work was not yet finished. Jayd helped him stand up straight.

There was something troubling him from the silver cabinets with dancing lights at the far end of the room. He knew at once they held a record of all this people had done, of all they’d learnt from harming Snow, and thus her dragon. He reached out, and saw this knowledge like a weed, flowing around their world. He willed them gone, and the weed began to die. He felt the staff tingling as it sent its power across the information network of their world. He didn’t know by what miracle it was done, but it was. Their theft had been purged.

Then looking into the woman’s eyes, he allowed the staff to take from her the understanding as well. He left her still a scholar and a medicine woman, a type that they called a surgeon. But the only memories he left in her, in regards to the treatment of Snow, was the moments of self-doubt and regret, the moments where her humanity had surfaced and she had doubted her cause.

It would be punishment enough to remember her guilt.

There was a violent explosion, and the general burst into the room, his armed guards with him.

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“Don’t know when to quit, do they?” Jayd observed.

“Surrender, there is nowhere to go!” The general commanded.

“No, general, wait!” The surgeon pleaded, but her fellow Ethphraim ignored her, his soldiers spreading out around the room.

Rayn spoke, filled with anger, “Who are you people? What have you done? We are from one of the seven worlds, who millennia ago bound together in faith and trust. We bound together to defeat a terrible plague, a plague which has now resurfaced in all its horror! We sent her, this innocent child to warn you, to prepare you, to reawaken your teachers, and to help you find your dragon orb. And what have you done?”

In that instant, Windfyrth revived. She exploded from the ground in a terrifying rage, hissing at the Ethphraim, cursing them in every language she knew. Yet she stumbled, as though her wing was wounded.

Then she spotted Snow and leapt to her side. Snow lay gently in Rhoc’s arms.

Windfyrth looked back at the soldiers, murder in her eyes.

Rayn knew he had to stop her. He knew these men had to be witnesses of the brutality of their own world, and of the strength and power of the dragon riders. He knew if they died, they would

never learn that lesson. And of the others in their world, they might never ally themselves with Pearl.

But he didn't know what to say. He had seen Snow turned inside out, he had seen her spirit set free. *How* could he ask Windfyrth to forgive all that?

Slowly, the wounded dragon began to draw her breath against the armed men.

Suddenly Jayd flew up and protected them with her own body.

Windfyrth paused, then gasped as Snow leapt up and buried her face in Windfyrth's arms.

Jayd said nothing. Perhaps she couldn't?

Perhaps she didn't need to.

Windfyrth and Snow were one again. Windfyrth choked on her sobs, then roared. All morale failed the trembling guards.

Then she breathed instead on the far wall, releasing a shower of deadly bamboo spines that penetrated it deeply, much deeper than their little stones seemed to be able to.

They trembled but none of them dared move.

"We will leave now." Rayn said. "But first you will witness the might of the dragon riders!"

He pointed up, *Rhoc, I need your strength*. In the silence of their hearts, Rhoc knew exactly what to do. He pressed the back of his hands together as he did when opening the front doors.

Rayn pointed his staff at the roof and the stones there began to glow blue, then crack, then they splintered, raining shards of steel and rock that covered the once white room with grey dust.

An instant later Jayd called the might of the wind, filling the room with a cyclone, yet they were protected in its center. Rayn had never realized the devastating power of the wind as it quickly helped to overcome stone, tearing it from the roof as well and pressing all but themselves to the edges of the room. Rhoc strained as never before, and Rayn reached out to the divinity who guided him to seek strength from the world of Ethphraim himself.

And the mountain split open from heart to roof, the entire fortress of the humans laid bare from the center.

Their dragons, high above, called out in greeting.

Immediately the four humans leapt on Windfyrth, who, scratching and clawing, made her way up towards the light. She cried out in victory and exultation, her voice growing stronger by the minute. Within less than a score of heartbeats they were free.

Darkwing and Ironfang carried Windfyrth aloft between them, shedding no tears for the destruction they left behind them. Within moments they were heading towards the sky, meeting with Norwich and the others gratefully.

Norvich spoke, "We were attacked by two great roaring metal birds of fire but bested them so easily we decided you would not need our help down there." He said, also seeming

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puzzled by the weakness of the Ethphraim. “I am glad, however, that it seems we were right.”

“As am I!” Rayn replied. “Ethphraim, it appears, will need the most guidance of all. But I think, for now, it is best if we leave them alone.”

Norvich nodded.

And as seven riders, they disappeared into the stars.

The final victory

Auroriella watched the celebrations with an empty heart. It had been a week since Thiaz's defeat. It had taken that time for the council of the chiefs to decide their world was safe enough again, or perhaps they'd wanted that long just to organize this rowdy and noisy celebration. Thiaz had torn out every tree and Pearl had had to employ the guardians to plant new ones. Thanks to the prayers of the wise, the trees were doing well. Animals were finding their way back to the fortress in hordes, particularly due to the talents of the most celebrated dragon rider that evening: Snow of the Celtwyld.

She sat with Auroriella on her left at the head table. They had given her, the Southern priestess, another seat of honor among the dragon riders, but it only served to constantly remind her that her dragon was dead. The dragons cavorted like children around the edges of the firelight, all but Ironfang who didn't seem to know how, and Windfyrth who seemed to prefer the company of people. Windfyrth, who now never let Snow out of her sight, an arrangement they both seemed pleased with. Snow was well healed but still bore a simmering anger and indignity that Auroriella knew would taint her view of Ethphraim forever.

Auroriella was brought out of her thoughts as Rising Ahx, High Chief of the tribes and council to the princess, stood. All

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those assembled began to fall into silence even before he'd cleared his throat. "Children of Pearl, tonight we rejoice!" And the company cheered. "Tonight we give praise to Divinity which saved us, and to raise the banner to honor all those who served her so well. Time would fail us to name all who have earned glory in this battle, but a few, perhaps, bear special mention in the presence of all."

They cheered anew.

Rising Ahx motioned with his mighty hand towards their table. "First, we have to thank Snow and her dragon Windfyrth, who bore the torments of Ethphraim with a nobility to rival the mightiest chiefs! Then they turned their back to their enemies without vengeance, showing a restraint worthy of the divine. I give you Windfyrth and Snow!"

The warriors, riders and wise ones cheered and clapped, each in their own way. Many reached over to pat, bow, or raise a glass to both dragon and rider.

Then, out of turn, Snow stood up to speak. None seemed to mind. "Thank you, this is all very kind. But we would not have survived without Rhoc and Fairystone, Jayd and Darkwing, Rayn and Ironfang. They saved us from the mountain prison, breaking it in two! I did little but wait. I thank you for your kind words, but Rayn led the rescue to the mountain, and it was he who led the hunt to find Fallen who now rides with Ethnomancer!"

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Auroriella thought about the two bitter allies, Fallen and Ethnomancer; refusing to celebrate, they had not even attended this evening. Though the solid bite marks still healing on Ethnomancer's tail where Wildblizzard had almost bitten it off the first chance she had might have dissuaded him as well. The dragon was still tormented by his actions, and Fallen his only hope. It was not clear how that relationship would work out, if at all. Surely no two had ever had a more painful bonding in all recorded history.

But the people were cheering, and then Rayn stood. The congregation fell strangely silent before the undisputed high wiseman of the fortress. When Rayn spoke, he felt no need to shout, "Thank you, Snow, you too are kind, and must not discount your sacrifice as any less than the nation of heroes here tonight." People thumped their tables in support. "But I was, as we say, simply a staff in the divine's hand. Let us not forget all that was given. Jayd here has been much more than a companion in arms. Her gift at finding, none can match. Further, she deceived the guards of Thiaz in risking her life to carry my staff. She guided Norwich and the prisoners to their escape, and the downfall of Doomclaw!"

Jayde smiled, but refused to speak.

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Rayn continued, “She threw down the queen of Thiaz, giving the young Prince Caspina time to give us back our fortress!”

At the mention of the prince’s name, a few applauded, but not many. When Caspina spoke, it was brief and curt, as if he thought very little of his contribution that day. “Oh, don’t thank me. If anything, the cunning of the princess is what allowed us to bring the deeds of Thiaz to light. It is she that needs praise.”

It was a comment well played. Everyone who was gathered erupted in long applause, many shouting, ‘Long live Pure, the Princess of Pearl!’ She smiled and then, probably because it seemed to be how the evening was running, each passing praise to the next, each probably wishing they had time enough to thank everyone, the princess stood to speak.

And as she did, Auroriella noticed a change come upon the princess’ dress once more. Her hair straightened and seemed to glow, not purple, or red, but a gleaming white, filled with many pale colors that lit across her countenance, like a diamond in the light... or perhaps, like a pearl. “All are worthy of honor and many have sacrificed much this past month, a few even have passed the lights and gone into the next world.” The people at the celebration grew silent. “But those that are gone have left as heroes, going on to a better place. Those who remain are healed and will live to a good old age, with the blessing of Pearl. But I

fear none have lost so much, nor borne a more terrible burden, than Auroriella, priestess and first dragon rider of the Vestran.”

Auroriella’s heart leapt within her. Never did she imagine the princess honoring her. They clapped and she stood. They cheered and chanted her name. Yet she could find nothing to say through her bittersweet tears. The princess went down from the high table and placed a golden chain around her neck, a great medallion made of mother of pearl upon it.

“Without your help,” the Princess continued, “we would have never built the bridge to capture the rebels before they slew our dragons one by one. Without your help we could have never revealed queen Mendelain’s evil plans to her own people. You are my sister, and my friend. Auroriella, most honored of Pearl.”

They cheered once more, but none applauded her more than Norwich, who she had tried so hard to save even as he would have tried for her.

Yet there were no words in her heart, and so she sat once more, allowing the princess to continue her speech.

The noise of cheering seemed to fall away.

There was nothing for Auroriella to do now.

She was tired, and the bridge, whose existence was tied to her life, was no longer needed.

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The celebration continued long into the night. Eventually, when the night grew late and she felt she could bear forcing a smile no more, Auroriella left.

She went twenty paces before she felt another soul calling to her. She did not need to turn around to know it was Rayn.

He knew what she was thinking. He did not beg, he just asked her to remain.

So she turned and allowed him to see the pain in her heart.

With a deep understanding that went beyond life itself, he simply nodded, and watched her leave, the sorrow written deep in his heart.

The war was won and there would be no other war for Auroriella. She walked into the great trees of the fortress. There she was surrounded with life, the night birds calling to each other, the noise of the celebration so far away it was almost impossible to hear.

She fell to her knees, new sobs bursting from her as her brown glowing staff clattered to the soil. It was too much, the pain inside. Simply too much for any human to bear.

Auroriella looked up at the sky, the never ending clouds of Pearl warming her heart in their soft, reflected night glow. It reminded her of Bell and it seemed to her a great spreading of her beloved dragon's wings to cover her at night, even before they were bonded. And in the shadows of the silence she seemed to

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hear her speak; “Rest, Auroriella. Come to me now and rest. Your work is done. Pearl is saved. Lay down under my wing, and rest...”

Message from Sanmarellis

The funeral for Auroriella was held the next day, and surely no death had ever been more honored on Pearl. Farwing took all those that wanted to go to the Southern continent, where they buried her with her staff in the most sacred alcoves by their temple. It was a dignified and solemn occasion and Rayn didn't know whether to weep for a fallen warrior, or cheer for her release from pain.

Soon he found himself in the company of his closest friends: the princess, Jayd, Rhoc, and Snow. For whatever reason, Fallen was there too.

Rhoc spoke first, "So sad."

"Such a sad funeral," the Princess agreed, still drying her tears.

"I found it invigorating," Jayd disagreed. "I don't enjoy burying one of my best friends, for sure, but ... how can I say it? When it really is someone's time, when they really have done all they are supposed to do, why not allow them to move on?"

"Even though their time comes at such a young age?" Fallen asked.

Jayd looked him in the eye and solemnly nodded. Fallen sighed, but did not leave. Perhaps he, too, might one day heal.

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The princess shook her head, she did not agree. Yet drawing a shuddering breath she continued, “Even so, we must carry on. It is what Auroriella would want.”

“Yes, strongest of all,” Rhoc agreed.

“What can we say?” Pure asked Rayn. “What has been achieved?”

“Well,” Rayn replied, “I have spoken to the seven worlds, as much as I am able. The scholar of Chalcedonah has been promoted. They don’t let him use the orb much but they are writing letters to the people of their world. They suspect they have found a few teachers and ask our help in waking them.”

“Do they have a dragon circle yet?” Pure asked.

“Not as yet, though they should soon. They don’t lack dragons or a patron, and with the royal house all slain it will no matter who they take as a first dragon rider. What they lack is a congress. They say it was destroyed thousands of years ago in the volcanic eruptions that continue to tear their planet. They do know how best to govern their world, but it may take some time,” Rayn replied.

“How is Lelleth of Argentus?” Jayd asked, wincing as though she knew the topic would not please him.

“You allowed them to believe you’re a goddess?” Rayn felt his voice rising.

“Not really, well, not for long.”

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“Well, your priestess is still using it. She has them all looking forward to your next visitation, spreading word quietly through the teachers across her whole world that Gods have finally descended to humble the tyrants. She makes a very convincing case that her people can understand nothing else and may fall into violence and chaos if they ever find out you are not divine. She is trying to break it to them slowly, or so she says. I still think they should be told the truth immediately, but we will see.”

Jayd sighed, then grinned mischievously at her own thoughts. “Well, she does know how to govern her people best.”

He almost went to shove her for her teasing, as they might have before he became an adult, but thought better of it and just frowned. It didn’t survive long against her infectious grin.

“It is a glorious thing that the remnant of Amarii was able to flee to a new world,” Pure said. “What of their dragons?”

Jayd replied. “That is not such good news. They are tyrants, all of them. Playing with humans as a prisoner may toy with mice. They have lost their soul and, like the rebels, refuse or have forgotten how to bond with humans. It is a dangerous situation, I don’t know how it will play out.”

“The path will be difficult,” Pure admitted. “And Tourmarelle?”

Rhoc grunted with pride.

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“The dragons are teaching them,” Rayn said. “They are keen to renew the wisdom of men using the teachers and are glad you came to remind them, Rhoc. We should see change there very quickly, even though they *seem* the most primitive of all.”

Rhoc closed his fist as if to say, *Primitive, perhaps, but they are the greatest warriors, you will see!*

Rayn smiled.

“But they cannot join with their humans, can they? There are no dragon riders of Tourmarelle,” Pure said sadly.

“No,” Rayn agreed, “and I suspect there never will be. But I am hopeful that divinity can find a way.”

“You don’t think they’re dangerous?” Jayd said. “I mean, they’ve taken the plague into their own bodies. Aren’t they dangerous?”

Rhoc shook his head fiercely at Jayd.

“No offence, Rhoc, but someone needs to say it.”

Rayn shrugged. “I don’t think so, but only time will tell.”

“At least they have humans to share their lives with.” Pure noted. “What of poor Sanmarellis? No humans survived the last plague at all.”

“Which is a curious thing,” Rayn said. “They must have all left before the threads were broken, but even so, I cannot imagine why they would abandon the most fertile world of the whole

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seven. By Auroriella's reports – divinity rest her soul – it was the most verdant by far.”

“More mysteries for you to solve, Rayn, and thankfully, this time, there *is* time.” Pure said. “Ahh, to visit there! Beasts as tall as mountains, trees more than five thousand years old, and a world full of dragons longing for the company of men! I would love to visit there and take others with me, as soon as I am able!”

“Unlike Thiaz.” Rayn shared a smile with them. “The high chancellor alone speaks to me, no hidden priests disguised as scholars trying to plunder our secrets every time I talk to them. I suspect they are deeply humiliated by their queen's actions. They are talking of reparations.”

“No,” the Princess said, “they cannot buy us out of their debt, they are better behaved this way.”

“As are Ethphraim?” Snow asked.

Rayn watched them all tense at the name, especially Rhoc. “They are primitive and violent. I think we should have little to do with-”

Jayd interrupted him, which as his superior dragon rider, she was permitted to do, but as his younger sister? Whatever, Rayn had stopped caring weeks ago, particularly after she'd helped save the world at least four times now. She was looking much less like a sister and more like a warrior of the Celtwyld every day. They would have to permit her to take on the rituals of womanhood

soon and that would make her simply unbearable – legally permitted to speak her mind at almost any council on Pearl? Would there be no stopping her?

But the thought still made him smile.

“No, they are not primitive at all,” Jayd interrupted. “They are clever and cunning. Not necessarily evil and certainly not primitive. I think they will prove to be more valuable allies than you realize.”

“I would not return there, not without an army, for all the silver in Pearl,” Snow said, and Rhoc nodded. Then she continued, thinking out loud, “But I also got the feeling that they like to keep their deeds, such as what they did to me, a secret from their own people. They did not want others to know what they had done, and probably also about how you had split a mountain. They’ll call it an earthquake or something.”

Rhoc grunted, showing his fist once more as though he was looking for a mountain to go all earthquaky on right now. Now that Rhoc’s affection was clear to her, she seemed even less comfortable in his presence. She kept him at arm’s reach, and he never seemed to find the right words to say to her.

Jayd shook her head. “What I wouldn’t give to simply land with Darkwing in the center of their most populated city and start breathing fire everywhere. Now *that* would get their attention! I’d like to see them *try* to cover up that secret!”

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They laughed, but what troubled Rayn the most was that Jayd was right; perhaps they couldn't ignore Ethphraim for as long as he'd like.

"And there was no trace of dragons there," Snow said, her voice sad.

"None. But divinity bids me not to worry. Perhaps they don't deserve them, I am not told. We will have to wait to see what becomes of that world, and of the choices they make."

"Maybe we should invite some dragons of Sanmarellis over," Pure pondered out loud.

"Can we do that?" Jayd asked.

"Well, no, but we can get things started. I should talk to Starwing, see what he thinks. I wonder..." and she began to drift away into her own thoughts.

"And what of Pearl?" Fallen asked.

Rayn jumped, he had almost forgotten he was there.

Pure answered, "Dragon riders number towards the hundred thousand. Or ten hundred, hundred as our tribesmen number it." She smiled. "And more riders arrive every day to be registered and hear the news. Most return to their lands but many stay with us at the fortress. We are looking for ways to speed their return but for now we are all deeply indebted to my Farwing for his gift. Also, let's see, the council of chiefs are working well under Rising Ahx, or Windfyrth, I am not sure. The wisemen answer to

our brother Rayn here. And the dragon riders are as yet, well, mine. As is Pearl. I never expected to see this day; I was never in line for the throne while I was a child. Even my brother... well... he would have made a fine king but our family was never in line for the throne.”

Suddenly Rayn heard a message in his heart. It was Norwich, lord of the fortress in the princess’ absence. *You are needed here, right away, your majesty*, he said, sounding concerned.

It looked like they had all heard it.

“If I leave now it will create a political disaster,” Pure whispered. She was right but it annoyed Rayn, she was sounding more like the thieves of Thiaz when she got like this. Perhaps it was that annoying Prince Caspina that she hung around with so much?

“I will stay with Rhoc,” Snow offered. “You should leave with Rayn and Jayd.”

“Good plan,” Pure said, and went to give her apologies to the leaders of the Vestran.

Fifty breaths later she finally returned and the three of them took their dragons back to the fortress. They floated down to the room of the dragon orb, where they knew Norwich would be waiting.

“What is it?” Pure ordered as soon as they arrived.

He looked concerned. “See?” He said, pointing to the orb.

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It was glowing green.

“Sanmarellis!” Pure smiled.

A moment later an image formed in the orb and a voice filled the room. “Wey, trues! Look, oh! Manners now, honored princess, it is my *pleasure!*”

“Starwing, I have heard so much!” Pure replied. “How is it that we can help you?”

The dragon smiled then became serious again. The image shifted as if the dragon was holding the orb and pointing it at something. The picture began to clear. It was a silver container, very much like the one they’d found Pure in. It was only large enough for one man, except it was strapped to several other large, silver containers, held on by what might have been very badly burnt sinews and bones.

“Strange...” Pure said.

“Mystery, hey Trues! Zengfollywell tell’n it came fire from the sky this morning. I was all like, ‘not like,’ and he was all like, ‘like!’ so I was all like, ‘Well I’m a seeing for myself.’ And here I am. Strange. You know what it be?”

They looked at it, and Rayn didn’t want to speak but it looked just like the coffin where he first found Pure, only with extra tubes of fire. Enough to carry it out of the world’s air shield. Perhaps even enough to carry it from one world to the next, even without the help of the threads.

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“Oh, hey!” Starwing shouted with excitement. “Look at this foreign, no? Hey, See? What? Ouch! Hey, it bit me!”

“What is it?” Pure asked, straining to hide the anxiety in her voice.

“This,” Starwing said, and held up before the orb a little green cricket.

Rayn’s heart leapt painfully within his chest, for within the insect was the embodiment of every unnamed fear, the cause of every panicked preparation, the source of every twisted nightmare of the past few weeks.



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The little cricket was twisted and mottled, yet struggled with enormous strength for its size. And its eyes were two white globes of pus...

Appendix

By the scholar Wenthis of Chalcedonah

People

Auroriella: A talented and deeply loved priestess of the southern continent of Pearl. She is noted as being the first dragon rider among them. Her actions, or rather, inaction, precipitated the return of the teachers of Pearl. She is young compared to most priestesses of the Vestran.

Caspina: A prince of Thiaz, a young man (for Thiaz) of only 60 Pearl years (since they regularly live to over 300). As a male he is not eligible for the throne of Thiaz. While he is noted of a strong intellect he is given to some moral idealism, and thus lacks the guile expected of the more successful nobles of Thiaz. He devotes his time to pleasures as a capable musician and a known philanderer.

Dwindiwai: The name of both a people, and a particular individual, meaning 'holy mud'. Dwindiwai is the tribal leader of a small, family group of foragers and gathers of Tourmarelle who just happen to live near the site of the old conclave of the dragons. He is known as a stern and unyielding individual, devoted to the traditions of his people. His behavior in this record resulted in a deep humbling due to his inability to judge in an important issue

between his son and his second niece. He has two wives and thirteen children.

General of Ethphraim: A veteran of many wars, promoted not only for his capability but also for his rigid compliance with his superiors' wishes. He is noted for having a 'realist' attitude, and for dealing with situations for what they are and not what they should be. He has been separated from his spouse for many years, and they have two adult children. He enjoys games of strategy in his spare time.

Lelleth: The high priestess of Argentus. She was granted a vision that protected her town at a young age, and was thus chosen for the role of priestess since then. She is known for having a sharp mind and has been often called upon for her battle tactics against both men and dragons. Her culture has little respect for the contributions of women, however, and thus she struggles to convince her leaders to adopt more compassionate measures in dealing with dissidents and the needs of the general public. Her outspoken opinion has gotten her into trouble with leaders and dragons often; however, her influence among the people is considered too useful and her battle advice too sound for her to be dispensed with at this time.

Jayd of the Celtwyld: A young warrior of the Celtwyld tribes of the large central continent of Pearl. She is still technically a child, being only 15 years old, but has still achieved

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more than most others on her world. She played a pivotal role in rescuing the crown princess of Pearl from stasis, and recently helped defeat the sentient plague. She is noted in particular for being the second dragon rider, meaning she is heiress to the dragon rider conclave if Farwing should pass.

Mayor: The leader of a town of Argentus. His is actually called Pax Spada, but Jayd mistakes his title for his name. He is known as a kind yet ambitious man, who won the post at the command of the Brown Tyrant twenty years ago. His pragmatic approach to rulership under the tyranny of the dragon wars means he must often sacrifice people's lives to their petty wars, but convinces his people that to do so is necessary for the greater good.

Mendelain: The young Queen of Thiaz, only 40 Thiaz years, having ruled since birth. She quickly consolidated her power during her adolescence among the houses of Thiaz, and thus has become by far the most successful and charismatic young queen in the world's history. She wears a diadem, but rarely manifests its powers.

Pure: A name given her by her adopted culture, Pure was found by Rayn, Jayd and Rhoc around half a year ago. She was stuck in suspended animation for the past 4000 years, from the time the Perish first arrived. Now she seems about sixteen years old. Never in line for the throne, she is nevertheless the only

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surviving member of the royal family with legal and legitimate claim to planetary rulership. She takes her role very seriously and, by all reports, governs through the council very effectively. She uses a diadem of elemental control with great skill.

Rayn of the Celtwyld: Older half-brother to Jayd, 16 year old Rayn has always sought the role of wiseman of his tribe. This ambition led him to seek reconciliation with dragons in order to prevent a devastating plague from covering the land. He and his closest friends Jayd, Rhoc, and the princess, undertook a quest. Learning lessons of humility, faith, hope and love, they prevailed.

Rhoc: A tribesman of the Celtwyld, lifetime friend to Jayd and Rayn, Rhoc has continued to accompany them in all their journeys. Born deaf, he was recently healed by a new prayer by his village wiseman Rayn. He is known to be affectionately disposed to the other dragon rider Snow, but she clearly prefers to avoid him.

Rising Ahx: A mighty chief of the Celtwyld, leader of one of the oldest and most successful towns with over two thousand inhabitants.

Slippery Elhm: A great chief of the Celtwyld, whose ancestral gods favor the east as the direction the divine flows.

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Snow: A young tribeswoman of the Celtwyld, the fifth dragon rider and gifted with the ability to talk to animals. It is clear she prefers their company over humans. Snow expresses few opinions, though holds



many. Her mother and father dwell safely in the town of her birth at the foot of the mountain where the fortress resides.

Surgeon of Ethphraim, Jane Jones: A young medical prodigy of Ethphraim, rising quickly to become sequestered by her local government for secret projects involving life from beyond their world. She has a husband and two young sons.



The scholar of Chalcedonah, Wenthis: A studious and talented student of the college of Visthree, the scholar was granted a prestigious scholarship at a young age. He currently works at the university of antiquities which strives to document the history of Chalcedonah. All agree the evidence

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speaks of a golden age on their world, though accounts differ dramatically as the planet recycles its entire surface every thousand years or so.

Dragons



Dragons are infinitely diverse, yet seem capable of forming bonds of friendship with many creatures.

Bell: Dragon of Auroriella of the Southern continent. Bell can produce a sonic vibration capable of splitting stone or, apparently, being heard half way around the other side of the world. She was known to have a fondness for children and hatchlings.

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Cloudform: An educated and well informed dragon of Chalcedonah, Cloudform lost both his parents to human hunters at a young age. In spite of this, and in spite of his deep racial fear of humans, Cloudform persists in watching over the humans of his local nation, inspiring them in subtle ways. With his acute dragon hearing he is able to enjoy lectures at the university, particularly those on astronomy and history (of which Wenthis excels in both).

Deathwalk: a cruel and vindictive tyrant of the Western continent of Pearl. Deathwalk refuses to be called a mercenary, but is known to assassinate both humans and dragons for ‘rewards’. He has the ability, gained by many years of study and research, to drain the life from physical beings nearby. He lives in the desolated castle of a people he neither confirms nor denies having slain.



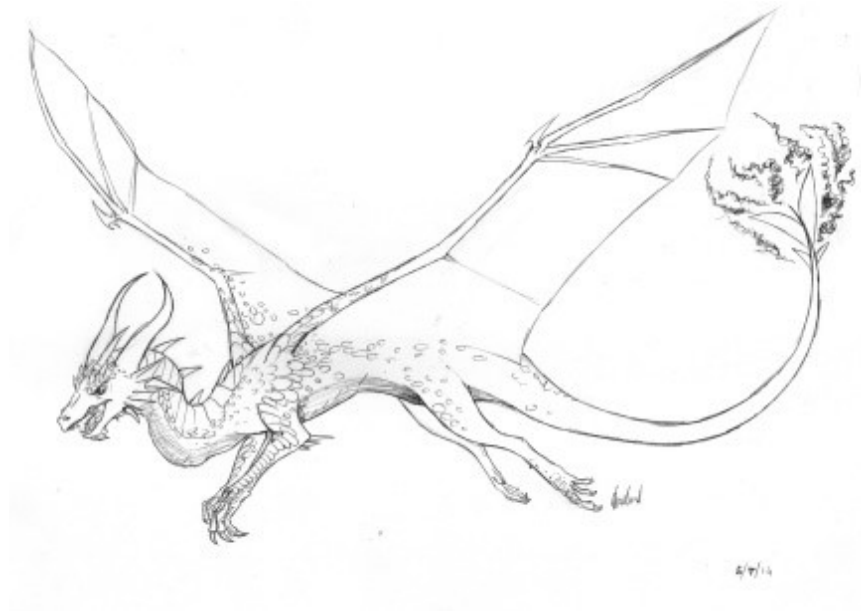
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Doomclaw: a bitter and powerful dragon, Doomclaw has become the leader of a rebel group of dragons and dragon friends. Together they



threatened the fragile peace of the world of Pearl. Doomclaw has always demonstrated fierce protection of other dragons against human threats, and is known as a very strict individual.

Ethnomancer: Sage and mystic, capable of manipulating a strange and debilitating form of matter known as 'ethnoplasm.'



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Once known as a compassionate dragon, his growing disdain of humanity has been well documented for centuries.

Hailstorm: A young dragon of the Eastern with a powerful hail breath and growing ability to control the weather, skills which contributed to his and his sister's narrow escape from Ethnomancer's dreaded gift. He has a chatty, positive, almost innocent outlook on life somewhat contradictory to the bitter, lazy, old drunkard he has claimed as rider.

Icewing: Known for his desire to mend the bond between humans and dragons for decades, Icewing finally found his human among the warriors of the northern continent. Aside from being able to move through ice, Icewing has glacial breath and the ability to freeze anything he touches.



Starwing **Longstride**
Ringingtone the 3rd. Prince of the
Afthah, rider of the winter storm,
bringer of Venn berries and level
three party animal: A scholar dragon
of Sanmarellis, known for his
prodigious memory and devotion to
intellectual pursuits. Like most
dragons of Sanmarellis, his language,
however, has evolved to the point of
being almost incomprehensible at
times.

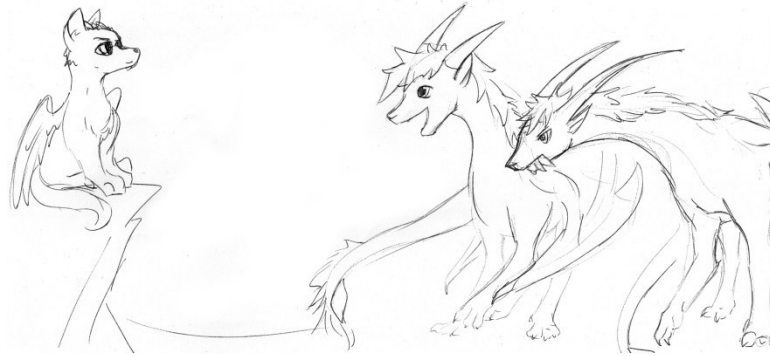


Twisted: (not his
real name). A telepathic
and very empathic
dragon of Tourmarelle.
He is deeply spiritual,
believing in the destiny
and fate of all life. His
mutations due to imprisoning the plague in his own body include
the inability to fly, breathe fire, or speak. While he has never once
manifested the power, it is suspected that he is also capable of
mind control.

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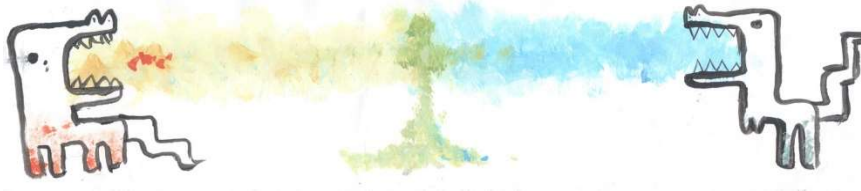
The brown tyrant: a noted influence in the balance of power on Argentus, the brown tyrant (not his real name) heralds a flaming breath full of dangerous caustic spittle that can melt through steel and flesh in seconds. Such is the agony of this power few human armies dare meet him in battle. He leads a skilled and diverse army of two hundred thousand humans. He is said to be militant, but not excessively cruel, and thus is said to have won the love of his human slaves as well as the respect of many other tyrants in the area.

Wildblizzard: A dragon of the Eastern with powerful wind and ice powers. She is also noted as being an agile flyer. These abilities alone have saved her and her brother from Ethnomancer's dreaded gift. She lives to protect her younger and much more innocent brother dragon Hailstorm. She rides with an influential merchant of the Eastern continent.



Wildblizzard discourages Hailstorm from talking to strangers

Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds



The Dragons of the Seven Worlds

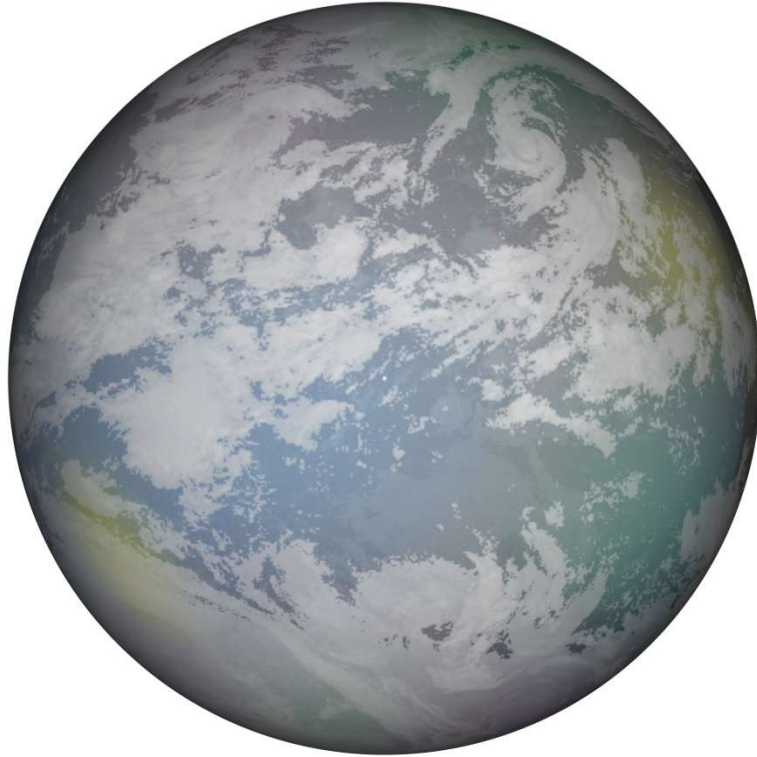
Farwing, Darkwing, Fairystone, Ironfang, Windfyrth – in order, the dragons of the central circle of the dragon conclave of Pearl. See book 1 for more details.



A nice dragon

Seven worlds – the overview

Pearl



Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

Orbit: ~364 days per year.

Rotation: 24 hrs per day.

Sun: White main class.

Gravity: 10.2 ms⁻².

Settlement: 8400 years by Pearl time.

Time since the Perish: 4000 years.

Biome: Pearl had some indigenous species of microbes and lichen prior to settlement, which were enhanced by imported species soon after. Permanently covered in clouds, Pearl has a steady climate. Its surface is half water, half land mass. With such a steady climate there are no permanent ice caps.

Moons: Two, smaller one never seen. The full moon of the greater moon still is not visible as a disk in the sky but rather as a 'bright night'.

Minerals: Generally abundant.

Technological level: Early medieval.

Cultural level: Early medieval, several large cities.

Pearl is considered the first world visited and terraformed by humanity (and dragons) stretching out from Ethphraim. Much time and care was taken to bring life to a point at which the atmosphere would support mammalian life, so it was ironically also one of the last worlds populated. During preparation several orbital bases were built, one of which became so large it easily

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outclassed every other space ship built by humanity even to date. This 'fortress' was used for research and to house humans while the world was preparing – many lived their whole lives there, never expecting to see the surface of the planet. Major settlement on Pearl began only a dozen years before the plague struck.

Pearl, so rich in habitable land mass and centrally positioned, was always expected to be the central world of the seven. This, however, has not happened.

First dragon met by Pearlians: Lifebreath.

Matron Dragon: Farwing.

(Amarii)



Settlement: 4400 years by Pearl time.

Year: 289 days

Day: 30 hrs.

Gravity: 8.8 ms⁻²

Time since the Perish: 3989 years.

Biome: Amarii presented a particular challenge to terraforming, opening new boundaries of life. A few silicoid life

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forms existed in subtle balance, which were at first integrated but sadly later wiped out by the plague.

Minerals: Almost exclusively silicon dioxide, with trace amounts of iron and aluminum.

Sun: Blue giant

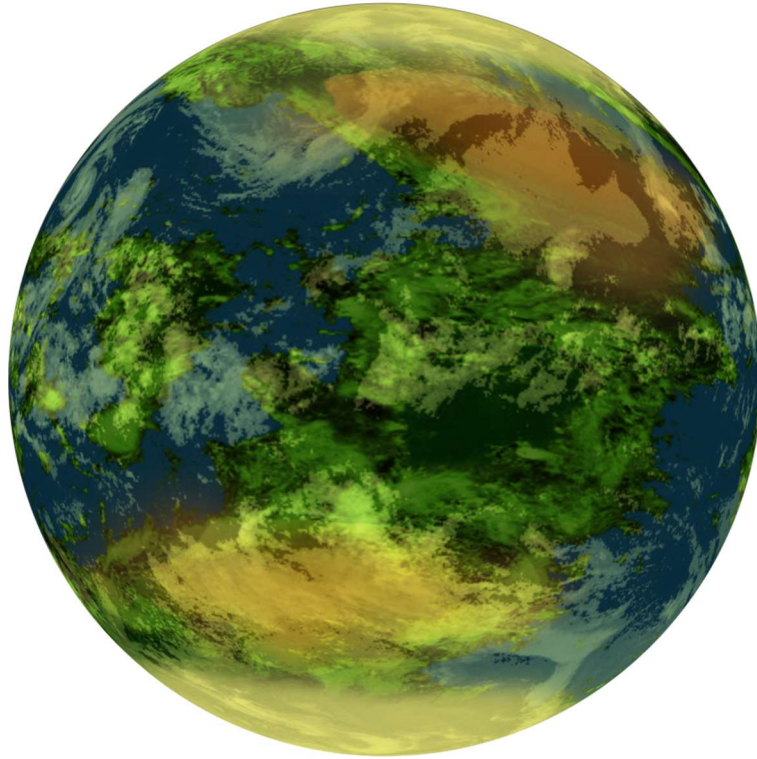
Moons: Four small ones.

Technological level: NA.

Cultural level: NA.

History: Amarii was a purple world from the start, rich in amethyst and with an atmospheric composition that gave it a noticeable purple hue. Fragile silicate life (as opposed to carbon-based life) existed in a delicate balance. When humanity and dragons arrived, they built massive biodomes to live in comfort while they researched ways to enhance the natural life to provide the abundance necessary for sustaining a world-wide culture. Enormous success had been achieved, and then the plague struck and obliterated every species, natural and enhanced. Many survivors preferred to perish with their world, the remaining survivors fled to Argentus.

Argentus



Orbit: ~375 days per year.

Rotation: 27 hrs per day.

Gravity: 12.2 ms⁻².

Settlement: 8400 years by Pearl time.

Time since the Perish: 3416 years.

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Biome: Hardy plant life predominantly adapted from conifers, cacti and microbes. Domesticated animals from Sanmarellis and other worlds abound, but they are genetically not very diverse. 38% ocean.

Minerals: Alluvial deposits of silver are ludicrously abundant. Iron is common, as is mercury which necessitated genetic alterations to the human genome during early settlement.

Moons: Two.

Minerals: Generally abundant.

Technological level: Iron age with occasional evidences of advanced technology unintentionally mingled with daily life.

Cultural level: Feudal, serving as minions under the dragons.

History: Argentus is far away from the central seven worlds but had been visited for several thousand years by humanity beforehand. It was looked at for some time as a potential site for sincere terraforming should the seven royal houses of men ever require another world. It was essentially unpopulated, though did see some use as a penal colony prior to the plague.

Argentus' fortunes changed when Amarii was rapidly overrun by the plague. The humans and dragons only just managed to create a portal sufficient to carry the remnant of the population to another world, minus the plague. However,

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Argentus was still many centuries away from being ready to support human life and in spite of every attempt, the humans were dying by the millions. Eventually a civil war broke out between the dragon riders and a new alliance of dragons who believed humans were inferior – and the alliance eventually won. They took to farming humans, which in the long run might have helped to assure their survival, but in the short term weakened humanity's faith in itself. Humans quickly lost the wisdom of the teachers, their ambition, and their independence. Soon they came to believe they really were the dragons' servants. At the same time the dragons, without the bond, became lost souls. Desiring unity with the humans that quailed at their feet, they settled on a hollow and meaningless tyranny over them. For thousands of years humans have been, essentially, slaves to dragons. This has resulted in a breed of humanity that is tall and physically impressive, yet very emotionally sensitive and docile unless they have a rigid external structure imposed on them.

The dragons are, almost without exception, tyrannical rulers of humanity. Humans are freely used in the interdragon wars like pawns. The dragons each claim the humans in their territory, using them in pointless battles for power. Some form alliance with other dragons to gain more territory.

In the meantime, humanity has lost its ability to use the teachers so technology has collapsed back to essentially the Iron

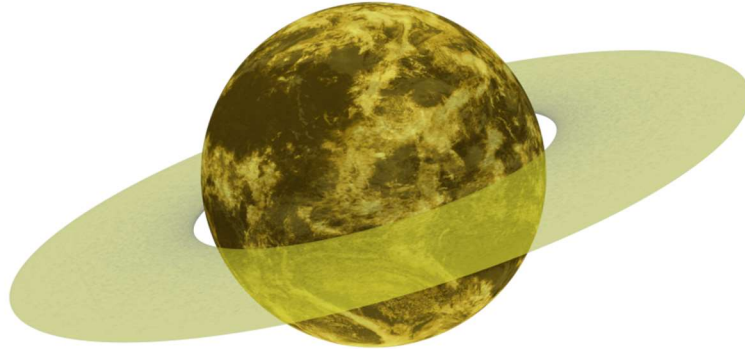
Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

Age. Now they use ancient dragon rider weapons, or weapons 'blessed' by the priests who do not know the devices they use to bless weapons actually apply future tech alterations, making the weapons able to wound even the impressive skin of dragons. The dragons, for themselves, are not much the wiser but know humanity used to rule beside them, and know a little of human technology. Once in a while a dragon will try to get a human to use the teachers to regain their technology to be used in the wars but it has never been a permanent victory. Then, seven hundred years ago, the teachers stopped working altogether and no one knows why.

First dragon met by Pearlans: The Brown Tyrant (exact name unknown).

Matron Dragon: Empress of the North.

Thiaz



Orbit: 369.09 days per year.

Rotation: 24.25 hrs per day.

Sun: Yellow main class.

Gravity: 8.98 ms⁻².

Settlement: 4900 years by Pearl time.

Time since the Perish: 3903 years.

Biome: Predominantly deserts, with large open biomes known as cities.

Moons: Six, most very small.

Minerals: Generally abundant, with lots of calcium carbonate.

Technological level: Future tech.

Cultural level: Advanced constitutional monarchy.

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History: The royal house of Thiaz, proud from before the settlement of Ethphraim, chose this world to display their glory and honor. Practical to a fault, yet also fiercely loyal and hardworking, Thiaz has always prospered.

They have the unique position on government, always choosing the first female born to the queen as her successor. The old queen slowly relinquishes her rule until her daughter turns twenty. Initial centuries of conflict between an old mother that wouldn't let go of her real power, and the daughter who was trying to exercise hers, has been generally avoided by the royal couple choosing to not have a daughter until they are very old and ready to retire anyway. Sons never rule Thiaz. How much real power the queen wields depends on the cunning and ability of the individual queen and her ability to work the politics and people of her world.

The plague never really reached Thiaz as they were able to isolate and destroy several early forms of the bacteria. They thus have held on to their technologies, such as the ability to transmute base materials into the gold they so love for decoration and war. Thiaz protected itself during the plague, severing the threads to their world prior to when Pearl shut the whole system down. It is not known why Thiaz hid from the other worlds thereafter, and that is a question they may to have answer for themselves.

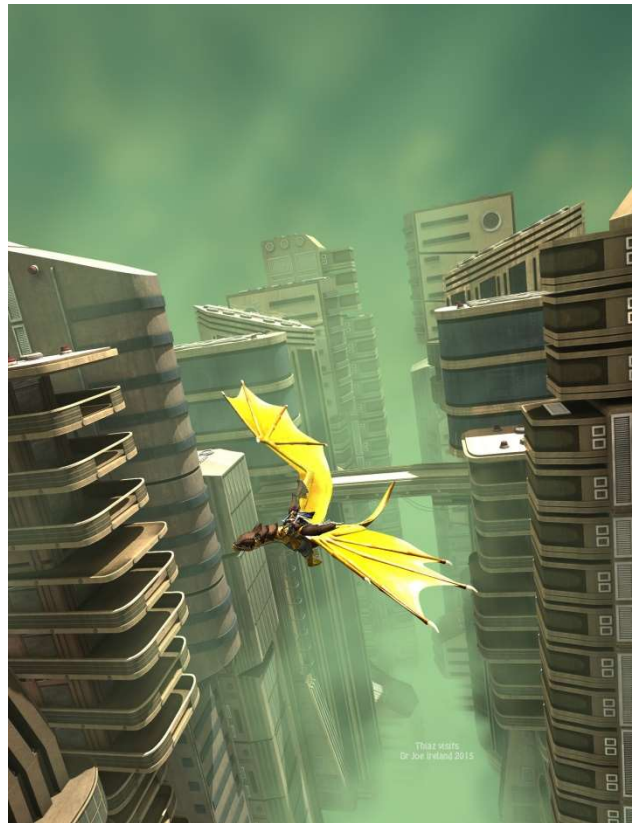
Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

Being bred to display as much gold as possible has unfortunately limited the otherwise immense genetic variability of the native dragons. They appear very tame compared to the other seven worlds.

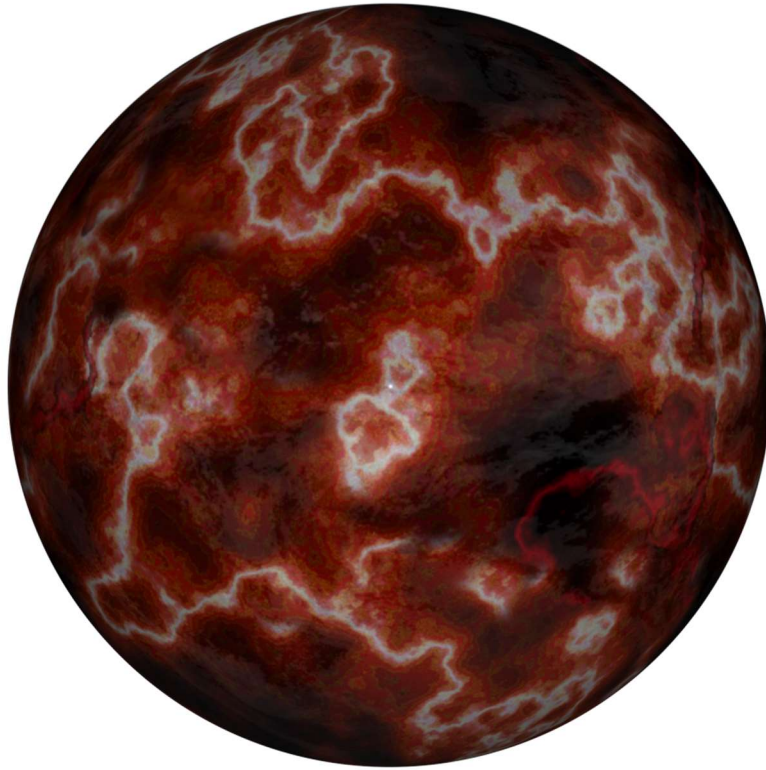
First dragon met by Pearlans: None (humans are dominant).

Matron dragon: A single individual called ‘The council’.

(During a rare moment when the threads opened up at Pearl, a lone scout of Thiaz secretly made her way to the ruins of a far outpost of Sanmarellis – finding it completely deserted.)



Chalcedonah



Orbit: ~712 days per year.

Rotation: 22 hrs per day.

Sun: Red supergiant, white dwarf.

Gravity: 8.4 ms⁻².

Settlement: Terraforming began 5330 years ago by Pearl time, settled 4900 ago.

Time since the Perish: 2229 local years.

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Biome: Volcanic eruptions are constant across the small, dry planet. The air is uncomfortable for non-locals to breathe, the locals having developed exceptional lung cleaning abilities. The entire ecosystem is based on the red dust extremophiles that survive everywhere and oxygenate the atmosphere.

Moon: Chalcedonah is actually a moon of a red gas giant, largely responsible for volcanic activity due to the enormous tidal forces that keep the planet tectonically active. But the planet was still of favorable conditions and with the advanced technology of the ancestors, considered manageable for settlement.

Minerals: Generally abundant. Though larger, stable deposits are rare.

Technological level: Renaissance, steam is rapidly becoming a popular source of energy.

Cultural level: A minor scientific revolution has begun.

Chalcedonah was the most intensely terraformed world of the seven, hundreds of years before humans began to seriously consider settling it. Life was created or engineered from extremophiles from all other worlds to create life that could survive and thrive here. It is quite young as worlds go, with violent volcanic action constantly across its surface.

When the plague hit, the humans and dragons took to building secure biome bunkers while the plague ravaged the

Dragon Riders 2: Seven Worlds

outside world for eight hundred years. They assumed the violent landscape would eventually kill off every trace of the disease, and they were right. The time of rest allowed plant species better suited to the world a small chance to diversify and cover the planet. Humans then began to explore the world outside their cities (and were talking to Thiaz occasionally too). They were releasing animal and insect species to fill the world with a biome that could support life. A minor division occurred between the people, those in the cities who had technologies and schooling, and those outside who loved to live and farm the land.

In the end, it wasn't the plague that brought down Chalcedonahn civilization, but the natural violence of the land. Every few thousand years the planet appears to undergo a particularly rough patch, tectonically speaking, and the patch after the plague was exceptionally rough. The entire face of the world was altered. Those that remained in the cities were slain, only those that could flee survived. The teachers were destroyed and only anecdotal evidence or a few minor objects remained. Over generations the farming communities lost their history and assumed themselves the planet's natural residents.

For their part, the dragons felt terribly guilty over not successfully preserving human culture from the volcanoes, and shortly after erupted in civil violence. Without a conclave to bring new riders, power factions and interdragon wars were common.

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Centuries after, ignorant humans took to hunting the ‘monsters’, embedding deep fear of humanity within the dragons’ psyche. They care for and watch over humans now, unsure of what to do.

First dragon met by Pearlans: Cloudform.

Patron Dragon: The First.

Ethphraim



Orbit: ~365 days per year.

Rotation: 24 hrs per day, (by pure cosmic co-incidence almost exactly the same as Pearl).

Sun: White main class.

Gravity: 9.8 ms⁻²

Settlement: ~6000 Pearl years ago

Moons: One large moon in dual orbit around the sun.

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Time since the Perish: 3986 years.

Biome: Reasonably diverse life since the plague first covered the land 4000 years ago. The world varied between 70% and 95% covered in water over the millennia.

Minerals: Wide variety.

Technology: Varied from tribal to modern, some early nanotechnologies.

Culture: Diverse.

History: Ethphraim was the first world populated by humanity, about 6 thousand years ago, when it was 90% covered with either ice or liquid water. From here, humanity began to explore the local worlds, encountering dragons shortly after. Ethphraim was covered by the plague approximately four thousand years ago, though it was populated for at least two thousand years before then, and was visited for tens of thousands of years before that.

When the plague swept Ethphraim only small groups of life survived. Now, only a weakened form of the plague seems to continue today, resurfacing very occasionally and not on every continent. It is easily managed now.

Shortly after the initial outbreak, however, humanity tried to build a large sky ship that could take them from what they felt was their dying world, 'drowning' with the plague, led by the

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famous captain No'e. While initially successful, shortly after vicious infighting ensued, during which all the teachers were destroyed on their world, resulting in a fracturing of humanity forever. Their technology rapidly collapsed back to Iron Age level. Sadly, due to a natural disaster several centuries later, the conclave of dragons was destroyed on an ancient city called Launtis, which was ruled by a great dragon scholar referred to as "The Bull". From that time, there were no dragon riders. Over the next millennia, misunderstanding and discord between dragons and humans resulted in the death of, thus far known, every dragon of Ethphraim.

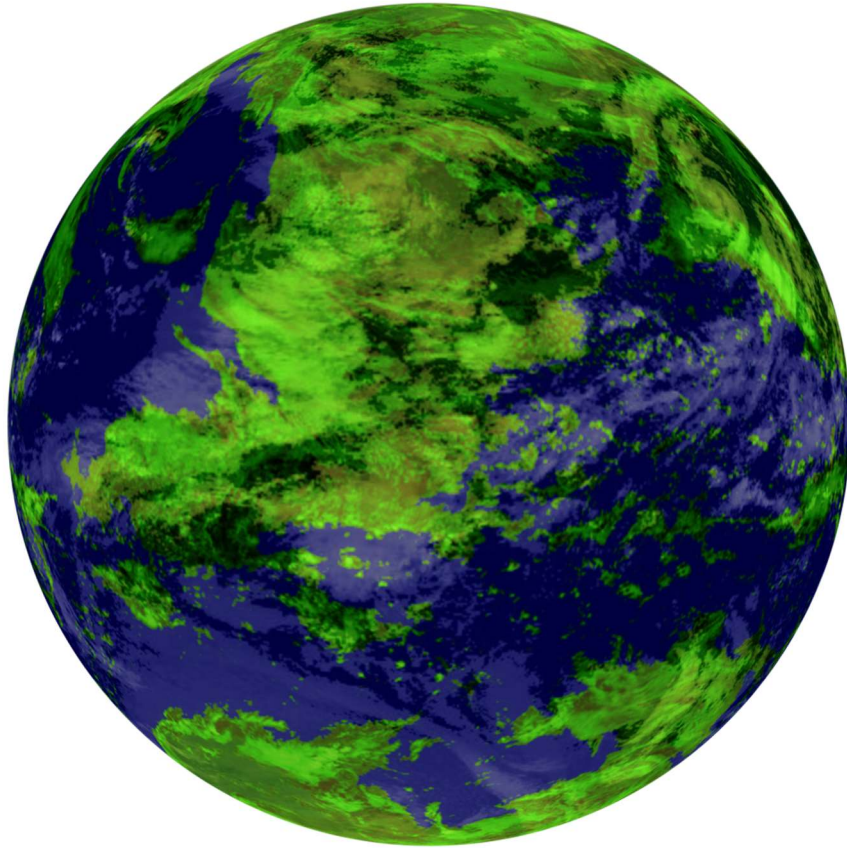
Ethphraim is dominated by a small but powerful country that keeps its own people unaware of its own deviousness and treachery using economic means to placate or distract the populace.

First dragon met by Pearlans: None.

Matron Dragon: None (once known as the 'key').



Sanmarellis



Orbit: 330.5 days per year.

Rotation: 23.998 hrs per day.

Sun: White main class.

Gravity: 11 ms⁻².

Settlement: 4800 years by Pearl time.

Time since the Perish: 4405 years.

Biome: Extensive. Unparalleled diversity.

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Moons: None, but enjoys regular comet activity.

Minerals: Generally abundant.

Technological level: none.

Cultural level: Dragons only.

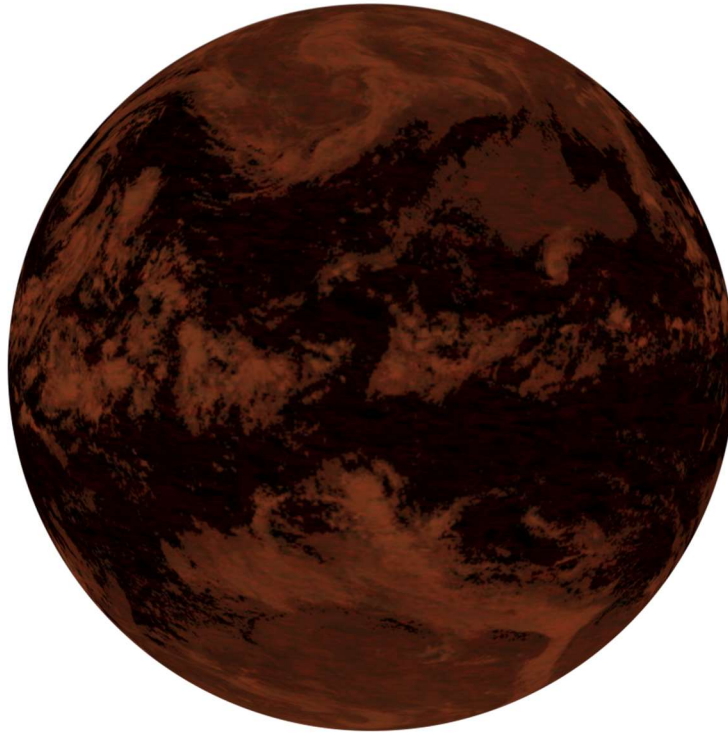
History: Sanmarellis was a celebrated find for humanity and dragons alike, and they took over a hundred years studying it before risking setting up anything. It is clearly the oldest world of the seven, estimated to be over a hundred million years older than Pearl. The biodiversity is enormous, with unique forms of life, mammals the size of dinosaurs, and giant squids which are over 200 meters long. This huge planet is 60% land, 40% water, and divided into four great continents bordered by mountain ridges (since they are all in contact). The air is filled with a constant fragrance that is both pleasant and relaxing to humans and dragons.

When the plague struck no effort was spared in defending Sanmarellis. Eventually, it seems, all the humans were either slain or fled rather than risk corrupting their paradise. The hardy dragons were left in charge but have not fared well with the isolation, and are not able to leave their world.

First dragon met by Pearlans: Starwing.

Matron Dragon: Unknown.

Tourmarelle



Orbit: 0.4 days per year.

Rotation: 112,290.9546 hours per day.

Sun: Brown dwarf.

Gravity: 8.2 ms⁻².

Settlement: 5000 years ago by Pearl time.

Time since the Perish: 777 years.

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Biome: Tourmarelle holds predominantly fungal life of extreme diversity and development.

Moons: Three, difficult to see.

Minerals: Generally abundant.

Technological level: Prehistory.

Cultural level: Tribal.

History: Tourmarelle was well established with life, for far longer than even Ethphraim, by the time it was discovered by humanity. As a world it holds the unique position in several ways. It has a day longer than its year, resulting in massive migratory patterns of local life. Its ancient, brown dwarf sun is so dim it scarcely warms the planet, the entire life cycle relying on the active heat from within the planet or the refuse of rotting vegetation. Several fungi have roots so deep that they are able to transport heat to the surface of the planet which is, thus, reasonably warm all year round. The fungi also photosynthesize the most prevalent form of light the sun provides, ultra violet, which is so abundant humans had to develop very dark skin to live without constant sunburn.

Tourmarelle bore the plague reasonably well, defending their land and people with great efficiency. However, it was a battle they knew they'd eventually lose without drastic measures. Those measures were taken when the dragons willingly took the

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plague into their own bodies, permanently deforming them and preventing the bonding, but allowing humans and the world's natural immunity to eventually overwhelm the plague. Sadly, the toll on humanity and the loss of their dragon riders was very great. Those that used the teachers grew fewer and fewer, eventually becoming a rare secret that finally died out. Dragons tried to prevent the slow disaster but were at a loss of what to do without oppressing humanity's right to choose. It may have been that the humans were lost without the bond with dragons, losing their technologies while the dragons looked on bemused and regretful.

The world now is at great peace but no human alive knows of the history of their world, and few have good relationships with the dragons who look over them. They have forgotten how to use the teachers, the congress of dragons, and the dragon rider armor.

First dragon met by Pearlans: Twisted.

Matron Dragon: Mother.

Book 3: Return of the Plague

4000 years it had waited...

4000 years, and men and dragons had sacrificed both life and civilization in preventing it from ever reaching the paradisiacal haven known as *Sanmarellis*. For if it did... there might be no stopping it from overwhelming the entire galaxy.

4000 years ... and had it all been for naught?

*Sign this page with your personal mark each
time you read this book!*

