

The Dragon Riders of Pearl

Book 3

Return of the Plague

By Dr Joseph Ireland

“Dr Joe”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

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TO:

Robert Ernest Ireland, who first taught me to love stories.

And

Julie Margaret McGuire Ireland, who first taught me to love.



Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	v
Table of Images	vii
The Plague Returns	1
The Best of Sanmarellis	8
Invited	20
Plague.....	28
Prebeasts.....	37
From Pure’s Perspective.....	44
War at the Cave	47
The Rain.....	61
Call.....	64
Jayd.....	70
Rhoc.....	78
Quest for the Empress	87
Snow	97
In the cave	106
The Portal of Ethphraim.....	111
The Empress of Argentus	116
The Dragons of Ethphraim	128
Ethphraim.....	142
The Gathering of Argentus.....	146
Regarding Love	153
The Best of Argentus	161
Rayn.....	169
Night	181
Hope Starlovecrossed.....	202
Departure.....	204

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

First Things First	207
Council	212
Womanhood.....	224
That Evening	236
The Hidden.....	241
Time to Die.....	258
The People of Sanmarellis.....	266
The City of Lights.....	284
The Hour	296
Reckoning.....	312
The End.....	321
Appendix	322
Kinds of Dragons.....	322
Environments.....	323
Body forms	324
Dragon sizes.....	326
Dragon matrons / patrons.....	327
Dragons.....	329
People	337
Places	346
The nine tools of humanity.....	349
Blurb:	353

Table of Images

A Plaguecursed Cricket	1
Sanmarellis	3
At the orb.....	7
... by which they could communicate with other worlds across the stars	16
The honoured chieftains Twoswords and Norwich.....	17
She travelled by Lightning.....	30
Prebeast	37
A dragon v's a plaguecursed dragon.....	38
A young prebeast Behemoth wanders among the giant trees of Sanmarellis.....	43
... and when she did, she travelled very quickly.....	49
The gentle, valiant trapper was now a monster, king of monsters. ...	51
Jayd and Darking on Sanmarellis.....	59
Jayd and Darkwing.....	70
The Glacial Matron of Argentus	123
Nessie, the aquatic standardform, a hidden dragon of Ethphraim....	132
The Brown Tyrant.....	160
Farwing forms a portal - A stylistic rendering in the Neuwella art form recently developed on Thiaz.....	249
Snow was unprepared for the attack of the plaguecursed serpents, and Windfyrth in the distance races to her rescue.....	252
At the door.....	287
Tiger Hak. "This time his transformation seemed a bit more... monstrous.".....	297
Doomclaw, the Redeemed	309
An Aquatic Drake	322
A feathered Tatzelwurm of Argentus	324
A Runescaped (mutant) Standardform of Sanmarellis	325
Starwing, sage and scholar	335
A Wiseone's Staff.....	350
A mist form dragon practicing his art.....	352

The Plague Returns

Pure screamed.

“Put it down! Put it down Starwing!” she screeched at the foreign dragon in panicked fright.



1 A Plaguecursed Cricket

“What, I-” Starwing muttered in confusion as the plague riddled cricket leapt from his hands.

“No, crush it now!” Rayn ordered.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Wait, I don’t-” Starwing stuttered.

“Now!” Rayn and Pure screamed at the same time.

There was a noise, like the sudden intake of breath, and then the image filled with glistening lights of Starwing’s unique dragon fire.

“I got it!” Starwing, the dragon of Sanmarellis, told them, “... Lo Trues! I think I got it...”

There was silence.

“That,” Starwing muttered, “that wasn’t what I thought it was, was it?”

Still there was silence.

“Guys...” the dragon asked, uncertainty growing in his voice.

Pure began to cry, yet it seemed to snap Rayn out of his distraction and into action. “We need to get to Sanmarellis, now! Starwing, you must separate all who have had any contact with that cricket and the fallen object immediately. Do you have any purification rituals?”

“Ah, no, True. We don’t even have humans on our world, K?”

“I knew that,” Rayn chastened himself. He breathed in, trying to quiet his anxious heart, beating out fear with every fevered thump. The plague... the plague...

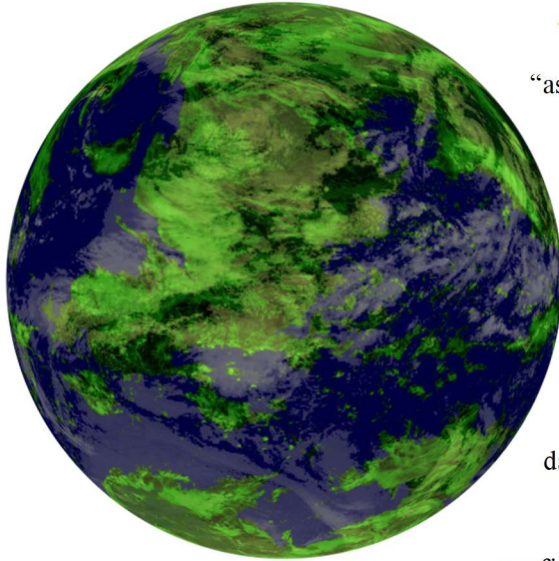
“The Plague is on Sanmarellis!” Pure screamed.

“Come on!” Jayd, his younger sister, or half-sister really, shouted at them. “This is no time to wallow in fear! We have defeated the plague before; we will defeat it on Sanmarellis too! Pure, call up the armies, summon the strength of the seven worlds. Have them send warriors, and as many wisemen as they can spare. We will take the fight to Sanmarellis!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

For a moment Pure stood there, and then straightened. “Yes. This must be done.” She stood up, and all could hear her thoughts clearly projected towards Farwing, her dragon; oldest and patron of all dragons on their world, the beautiful world of Pearl. *My dragon, call a conclave! Summon all dragon riders! The plague has found a way to the world of Sanmarellis. We must go to his rescue!*

An instant later, though Farwing was well and truly out of the room where they stood, they felt his mighty call that would stretch around a world. They heard the thundering screech that rent the sky. Through their bonds with their dragons they felt the call to conclave. The largest on their world, ever, and the first with the might of the dragon riders.



“Rayn,” Pure said to him, “assemble the wisemen. Summon them all. Tell them no duty, no funeral, no missive is so important that it can match or own – except delivering babies. Call them. Get them here by dawn!”

“I will!” He shouted, confidence growing. Doing what she asked took no effort; he just willed the message into the aged staff in his hand. The countless runes down shaft glowed, each the name of a wiseman who wielded a similar staff with faith and goodness throughout the human / dragon empire. The staff lit up and Rayn immediately sensed the message

2 Sanmarellis

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

being sent, relayed through the staff as each wiseman, priest and priestess under his command received the message. They had questions, many questions, but there was no time to answer them right now.

“Jayd,” Pure commanded, “go to Rising Ahx, high chieftain of the fortress. Tell him the warriors will be leaving at dawn.”

“But dawn is at least six hours away,” Jayd replied, she had a much better grasp of how Pure measured time than Rayn did, “it will be too late.”

“That is why you will be leaving within the hour. With as many wisemen as you can gather. Get to Sanmarellis, get to them now. Heal all you can.”

Jayd nodded.

“I am ready.” Rayn replied, well aware his skills and faith would be needed on Sanmarellis as soon as possible.

“No, I need you –” Pure began, and then stopped. She looked out the door, and then changed her mind. “You are right. You are needed there more. Go. Go right now.”

Rayn nodded.

“What of you, princess?” Jayd asked. “Surely you are not thinking of coming into battle again, are you?”

Pure looked at her sincerely, then at each of them in turn. “Yes. I must. We cannot lose any of the seven worlds to the plague, not again, not like Amarii. The life on Sanmarellis... it cannot be found anywhere else. It is a treasure above gold, or pearls. I am going to travel to Thiaz. I am going to gather the best warriors and priests I can. I am going to heal Sanmarellis of a plague that found its way from here, to there. And I’m going to take the fortress.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd raised her eyebrow, a little dubious.

“You all have your orders, now go!” Pure almost shouted.

They turned to leave, and Rayn froze. At the door stood Prince Caspina, refugee of the planet Thiaz that had, not one week ago, tried to steal this fortress, the fortress where they now stood.

“That is a bold plan,” Caspina said out loud, “but one cannot help but wonder at the necessity of it all. If the plague is on Sanmarellis, why not let it run its course?”

“That is just like you, selfish Thiaz!” Rayn said, anger almost choking him.

The prince, who looked older by six or so years, didn’t seem offended in the least. “I just think we need to be practical about these things, or at least, be able to give others a good reason why they should risk their lives and potentially their world for someone else.”

Rayn’s blood boiled, a feeling this over-calm man too often provoked in him. It was as if he took danger in his stride, as if life itself were some game he grew bored of at times, so sought to make it interesting by annoying others, “My princess has ordered it, the justice of the Divine demands it. I will follow-”

He felt a gentle hand on his arm, and turned even though he knew it was Pure.

She spoke, “Caspina, contact your people. Tell them what we are planning. Tell them to be ready in six hours. We are going to save Sanmarellis. Do the countless lives mean nothing? The rare and ancient plants that have blessed every other world and that may still one day prove to be medicines? I tell you, for if nothing else, we are going to save

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Sanmarellis because this time we will *win*. The plague is beneath us. It is defeated on this world; it will be broken there too. This time, this time, we will win. And Thiaz will want to be part of that victory.”

The prince nodded, conceding her wisdom. Stepping forward he began to talk to the dragon orb that was at the center of the room, willing it a gentle gold that meant he was talking to his home. A home that would likely not welcome a prince that had risked his life to deny a queen bent on stealing a fortress. A queen that was his sister.

Pure went to join him there. “Go, Rayn, there is no time for conversations. Take any you can find. I will open the threads that lead between the worlds in a hundred breaths. Save Starwing. Save Sanmarellis.”

Rayn nodded, and watched as Pure, whom all considered his unofficial betrothed, and prince Caspina, the exiled prince from a world of thieves, stood alone in room together to try and summon help. He hated himself for leaving her there without a chaperone. He hated himself for the grudging respect he had for the courageous exiled prince. But most of all, he hated himself for the stab of jealousy towards them he felt, that none of them would even notice as he rushed out to save a world.



3 At the orb

The Best of Sanmarellis

There wasn't enough time.

There would never be enough time.

Rayn and Ironfang hit the air around the world of Sanmarellis with unexpected fervor. Both were anxious to deal with the threat of the new plague, risen there for the first time in this world's entire history, as soon as possible. Both wanted to stem the rapid advance of the disease before it grew out of hand. Sanmarellis had no experience with the curse, no ... immunity... as Pure might say. It would be dusted in a week without their help, without Rayn's help. Every moment mattered, for as more life succumbed to the affliction its opportunity to infect others grew dramatically.

Every breath mattered.

They must have seemed a ball of fire, careening down from the sky, Ironfang protected by his wings and Rayn by his faith. Even so, it was an anxious hundred breaths before they and the sixteen dragon riders that travelled with them reached the land.

They found Starwing, waiting for them, by the fallen craft. It was, indeed, Pearlian in design yet stitched together as though with broken flesh and torn sinew. At its center lay a single silver capsule, an escape pod, though it still looked very much like a coffin to Rayn's eyes.

Ironfang, his dragon, said nothing but simmered with anger at the fallen craft. Anger, and humiliation.

"Lo, sky up Trues! Bright day be see'n ya!" A voice called. It would be Starwing, sounding even more cheerful now they were here.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I am Rayn,” he introduced himself, probably unnecessarily. “Let me see the wound.”

“ ‘Tis but a scratch!” Starwing smiled, but Ironfang noticed the mild tremor hidden inside his voice.

Rayn examined the wound. It was light, but already swelling. It still seemed amazing to him that even though the iron skin of dragons could fend off every weapon of men, a simple cursed cricket had pierced it. Perhaps there was some demonry, or poison in their bight?

“Can you...” Starwing muttered in muted breath, “... is there anything you can do? You’re a human. I like humans. We don’t have any humans around here. We-”

Rayn hushed him. “I will imposition the Divine,” he promised.

“You’re a little like that other girl who came here,” Starwing seemed to enjoy sharing his thoughts out loud.

Uttering the words of faith he poured out his healing waters on the wound. It sealed almost immediately, and while Starwing sighed with gratitude, Rayn still felt tense.

Is the plague defeated within Starwing? He asked.

The answer was no.

There must be some other wound, or perhaps the poison had already spread in his veins? Ironfang offered, speaking directly to Rayn’s heart. Rayn gave Starwing the whole water skin to drink, which he did quickly and gratefully.

Is the plague defeated within Starwing?

Yes.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn and Ironfang simultaneously breathed a great sigh of relief. Now all that remained was to purify the rest of the entire world.

Standing on Ironfang's back they rode into the clouds. The sky of



The sky on Sanmarellis was a sapphire blue, covered with beautiful clouds that stood up on each other like heaps. But Rayn had very little time to take in the beauty. He needed, well, he needed rain.

Reaching out he took hold of a nearby cloud, and it swirled towards him. It was a trick he'd learnt from the teachers after the deception of Thiaz. Or was it? That didn't seem quite right, but he didn't have time to ponder. Raising his staff amidst the thin mist that soon wrapped around him and his

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

dragon, he willed the light, the power, the ‘nano probes’ as Thiaz might call them, to begin infiltrating the cloud and multiplying within it. He would make the heaped clouds as healing waters.

Then, to his dismay, he saw the clouds dissipate, the warmth of the land beneath him pushing the water apart.

So he tried harder this time, wrapping a much larger cloud around him. Yet again, the winds tore his cloud apart.

Why does the spirit of Sanmarellis deny you?! Ironfang muttered.

Rayn slapped his forehead in self-abasement. Of course! He had been in such a rush that he did not remember the rituals of welcoming he had recently discovered. Now he knew better than to operate on a world without seeking its permission to be there. Sanmarellis would clearly know that. No wonder he was having no success with the clouds.

They plummeted towards the earth where Starwing was watching them. He held his silence, but Rayn could almost hear his dreamy voice saying, *No rain, Trues? Were we expecting rain?*

The other dragons were silent, hunting about for plagued earth or creatures with great rigor.

Rayn bent down, quieting his heart for the ritual. He kissed the earth, and opened his heart to the wisdom of Sanmarellis, begging it to welcome him and all the others that would soon be coming in an attempt to heal this world.

In the next instant he was thrown to the ground, losing all sense of his body, or of his own screams. He was wrapped inexorably in the most powerful fear and horror he had ever known. A mindless panic drove him to

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

utter distraction as Sanmarellis enveloped him in his thoughts, in his very being; a planet that knew it was threatened with death.

Amidst the shattered images and overwhelming emotions Rayn was shown an image he knew was important, but held no meaning for him. It was of a cavern, enormous in size, to rival even the greatest halls of the fortress. The cavern was silent, like a crypt, and a raging horror of death assaulted his emotions. All around every wall, layer upon layer buried hundreds deep, were coffins. Coffins the exact size and make as those that once housed Pure, before she awoke. A single concept penetrated his mind and shook his being, though he did not know what it meant: *They live, they live, they live...*

“Something has happened to Rayn.” Pure announced, not even wondering how she knew; Sanmarellis had a dragon orb, the fortress had a dragon orb, she was the Princess of Pearl. She could know.

She looked out at the gathering forces. They were coming with impressive haste, as though driven with a sure knowledge that this was the cause that had troubled their dreams for the past few weeks. The horror was finally upon them.

She sighed. Sanmarellis; beautiful, unvisited, *Sanmarellis*. The life there could be found nowhere else in the cosmos; one of the few worlds where it had spontaneously begun not once, but thrice. Thus the abundance and variety of life was unmatched anywhere. This world had made life comfortable, at times even possible, by sharing its great blessings with other worlds.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

And now all that was under threat.

But there was more to it than that. More to this battle than a simple needed victory. She didn't dare mention it to anyone yet, or even to admit it to herself. But it was the very reason why Pearl had shut down all interplanetary travel at the first hint that the plague could ever arrive on Sanmarellis. For every reason of life and being in the universe – it *had* to be stopped there.

Hundreds poured into the fortress, dozens riding on their newly bonded dragons. Since the defeat of the rebels not a week and three days ago thousands of new dragon riders were bonding together with their dragons across the world of Pearl. Now they gathered here in their haste for their first mission. It was the most glorious moment in the history of Pearl, and she felt honored that she had lived to see it.

“Jayd!” Pure shouted, sensing her in the throngs, but concerned that their eyes had not yet met. A moment later and she arrived, looking up at her from down in the courtyard below. Jayd; the second dragon rider of pearl, heir to the might of the dragon riders, and a woman not to be underestimated. And to Pure, a true friend.

Pure sent her words through the band at her brow, a trick long forgotten, but remembered now the minds of the tribesmen were opening up. *Something has happened to Rayn. You must go to Sanmarellis, take any who are prepared.*

I... yes, my princess, she agreed.

It frustrated Pure to know she could not know what Jayd was thinking about when she paused – only the projected thoughts were shared.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Princess, Jayd began, are you sure we should open up the threads already?

I do not fear the plague, it has not had time to take the dragons – or so I believe. I do not believe it can spread yet. You must go to Sanmarellis. I will come as soon as I can, but just in case... we will take the fortress.

Jayd looked around at the gathering throngs and paused in disbelief. *You will take... everyone?*

For this purpose it was made. Only together can we protect the seven worlds. It can travel between the stars even without the threads, even as the boats of Thiaz if they were willing. And it is there that we will go first. We need their help, and they... they will need ours.

Jayd nodded, and with a commanding screech echoed by her dragon, she flew up in the air and began shouting orders. Within a heartbeat seven dozen riders were ready, the entire elite inner circle of thirty included, except Farwing and Pure.

Yet only seven dozen ... that could never save a world.

It would take ... millions.

Rayn heard himself scream uncontrollably as something touched his lips. It was cold. It was real. It tore him from the oppressive nightmare he revealed in: He was touching a spirit of another world, and it filled him. In a sense, it was a union he did not want to end, and his consciousness a blessing the world of Sanmarellis did not want to let go.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He flung his arms out, but powerful claws held him down. He felt his dragon roaring his name, and slowly he began to return to the world.

He heard Jayd calling his name, and peace filled him. Slowly, his vision began to clear.

“Rayn! Listen! Listen to my voice!” She called.

“It’s all right,” he said, trying to sit up against what must have been Ironfang’s irresistible might. “I am back. I am back.”

The light in the room had changed. How long had he been wrapped in Sanmarellis’ tortured spirit? Hours?

“What became of you, my rider?” Ironfang pleaded.

Rayn begged for water again before speaking. “I touched his spirit. The world. Sanmarellis. I was there; inside him... he is terrified. He knows the plague is here... there is something he’s trying desperately to protect, more than any other life form on this world, or perhaps... *because* of every life form on this world.”

The words didn’t even make sense to him. Rayn put his head in his hands.

“Whatever do you mean?” Jayd asked.

“The humans of Sanmarellis...” Rayn marveled.

“Whaaaaat?” A voice demanded. It was Starwing. “Humins? Naaaw. No sky be see’n the humani for thousands... what, there are humans here?”

“But there are... or there *were!*” Rayn insisted, still filled with the fear and passion of a dying world. “Beyond count! Two hundred, hundreds of hundreds, of hundreds of hundreds!”

“We’d be know’n if... hundreds of hundreds...” Starwing seemed to plead.

Rayn nodded, “And they are all in terrible danger.”

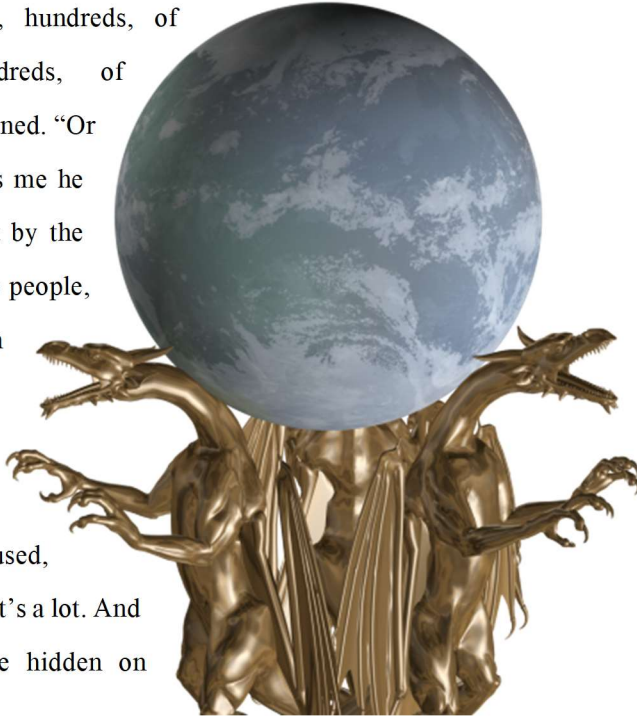
Jayd sat quietly in the darkened treehouse that was Starwing’s abode. She reached out at the glowing orb on the table, turning it pearlescent white. Reaching out, she willed her spirit into the orb, and a moment later found herself standing in the great hall underneath the observatory. Pure was there, with hundreds of warriors trying to organize a war.

Pure turned to face her instantly, stilling the conversation with Twoswords and Norwich. “What news?” she asked.

“Two hundred, hundreds, of hundreds, of hundreds, of hundreds.” Jayd explained. “Or so says Rayn. He tells me he has had a vision, sent by the world itself. There are people, hidden on Sanmarellis.”

“Two... hundred billion people?” Pure mused, almost to herself. “That’s a lot. And he tells you they are hidden on Sanmarellis?”

“Yes, and I believe him.”



4 ... by which they could communicate with other worlds across the stars

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Twoswords and the high chieftain shared a puzzled glance. No one else in the room seemed to notice her spirit was even here.

“Well, can you find them?” Pure asked.

Her heart swelled in sorrow, “I cannot. I have tried and tried. Something is blocking my gift; I suspect it is a prayer of a wiseman, uttered long ago. I cannot pierce it.”

“Then ask Sanmarellis.”

“I dare not touch the world spirit to ask, though Rayn promises to try once his strength returns. Yet... we all council him against it, so deep was his suffering! His cries were so great; each could feel him channeling the pain of this world... It was like a nightmare from which he could not be awoken. We tried with all our might, and were only *just* able to bring him up from it.”



5 The honoured chieftains Twoswords and Norwich

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Pure was silent, “I am surprised that even happened. What is Sanmarellis thinking? Perhaps with the added wisemen you have there now? Six is it not? Perhaps it might be worth another try?”

“None seem willing, and I do not blame them. They are saying that Rayn alone has the strength to weather this troubled world’s spirit.”

“Then he must try again, soon,” Twoswords replied. “If there are people on Sanmarellis, even if it is only their graves, they *must* be protected.”

Jayd nodded, but was lost in her own thoughts. She saw her brother, writhing uncontrollably at a troubled world’s fears. Until today she did not even know it could happen, but so much had changed in the past month she wasn’t going to let it surprise her. Yet the sight of it... it was almost more than she could bear.

Pure’s voice cut her from her reverie, “What are you doing there Jayd? How goes the plague?”

“We hunt; dragons of Pearl and dragons of Sanmarellis as one. They are flocking to our call. We found one here, I forget his name but will call him Farvoice. He talks to all upon a world within their hearts, like a conclave. I’ve never seen this talent, but he heard us coming, and we told him what was happening. He is still a week away on the wing, but he told every dragon what was happening. We hunt the plague with every resource we have, though the discoveries are few.”

“What do you mean?” Pure asked.

“A cricket here, a snake there. For a world that has never seen the plague they seem remarkably resistant to it. Perhaps we will prevail here yet sooner than you think?” Jayd remarked, allowing hope to gild her every word.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Pure was silent a moment, “I will take no risk either way. We need all the strength we can muster.”

“Rayn has found a new thing... rain,” Jayd smiled at the irony. “He is teaching the wisemen now. Every time we find a creature they bathe the forest all around in torrential, healing rain. I have never seen such a thing, it is beautiful to behold! Wisemen and dragons, washing the land continually.”

“And tell them to dig,” Pure instructed them, “make sure you check under every rock, and down to the length of a dragon’s tail.”

“Even so, it will not defeat the plague while we hunt it.” Norwich pointed out. “We must drive it from that land forever. And to do that it will take a hundred thousand wisemen, and a storm that covers an entire world.”

“I don’t think even the fortress has strength enough for such a miracle,” Jayd replied.

“A world to be covered in rain, and a planet torn with fear? No, this is beyond our strength,” Pure agreed.

“Then whose?” Jayd asked.

“Thiaz alone may achieve this,” Pure replied, and didn’t hide the bitterness in her voice.

Invited

Pure heard the approach of the prince even before she saw him. Caspina, dishonored noble of Thiaz, justifiably looked a little nervous: he had said little in the half that they'd travelled here. He had said nothing since she'd ordered him to announce their imminent arrival on his home world.

Was he worried about her using the threads again? He'd wondered out loud before if Thiaz wasn't aware something was happening, and had legions of dragon riders prepared at the threshold of their atmosphere – perhaps prepared to launch an invasion of another world? Perhaps prepared to humble Pearl once more?

But she did not care. Their world would be dust soon too if they didn't help her.

“Why?” Caspina suddenly asked.

“Why what?” She demanded to know.

“Why? That look on your face. It is set, determined. As one who seeks revenge. We are going to my old home. My father still lives there. Why would you show that grim determination before we return to the place that I once called home?”

She glanced at him, *Such a clever man*. “Because I hold a secret,” she told him, instantly regretting that she had, yet knowing now it was told... she was obliged to play the game.

But he did not look like he wanted games, “I cannot allow you to harm my people, in spite of all they have done to you.” His face turned red, was it anger, or shame?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“No. Not at all, Caspina. I have a secret hidden inside. I know the real reason why we would all rather die than let the plague take Sanmarellis. It has nothing to do with the treachery of Thiaz – though I bear them little love right now. But I cannot bear to see their beautiful world dusted either.”

“What do you mean?” he begged her, yet his voice was still strong, and demanding.

“All in time...” she replied.

He stayed his voice, but his discontent was visible.

Let the prince wait, she reasoned.

Mendelain watched with raw hatred, hidden behind a façade of magnanimity and power. Yet she knew also the one truth, the one feeling that would always tear at her heart as long as she lived, the one secret all her people hid so well the moment the might of the enormous Fortress of Pearl arrived and blotted out the daylit moons. She was afraid.

Thiaz had always been eclipsed by Pearl. Mendelian’s ancestors had chosen their world generations ago for its wealth, not its size; Copper, citrine, and golden sunlight of a far surpassing in quality over anywhere else. All here in abundance beyond what any other world had ever promised – that, and a comfortable atmosphere that would quickly be taught to honor the breath of humans and dragons.

But Pearl... had grown faster, stronger. They made friends quickly. They honored their promises. They kept the law and peace between the seven worlds by virtue of their industry, and not their royalty alone. And when they

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

somehow managed to bring together the industry of their burgeoning world to create the greatest star fortress ever seen, it had taken them only a lifetime. Something which, in over five thousand years, Thiaz still had yet to achieve.

So when that fortress appeared in their sky, Thiaz knew fear.

But no one showed that fear. They all fell silent.

The fortress did not wait, but rode immediately to the limits of the air.

Mendelain had to admit, she lost her words. There were adepts of power, dragon riders who could match the skill of a dozen of the new riders of Pearl, a hundred royal guards around her. The entire council was there too, all gathered. Having newly stripped her of most of her powers it was a miracle that they allowed her to keep the throne. Perhaps her daughter would one day live to reclaim some of the noble house of Thiaz's dignity and power? Her traitorous brother had more respect among this people than she now did. The bitterness swept up in her, a bile of hatred that tasted in her mouth.

Thus she, alone, of her people finally found her voice to speak. "Welcome," was all she said.

Yet she well knew lights of power would mean nothing against the kilometer thick hull of the fortress. It had firepower enough so that the walls of glass that could protect the citadels of Thiaz would not last a moment under their glare.

If Pearl had wanted, she could have conquered the galaxy by now.

It was a sobering thought...

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn sat in the tree house of Starwing, not putting any effort into listening to the young dragons' ramblings anymore, but that didn't seem to bother the dragon in the slightest. The rain soaked down on the land. It was clear Sanmarellis had heard his voice. The spirit of this world was trying to help him, trying to help them all. But they were only eight dozen warriors, and five wisemen. Could they really stop the plague against an entire world?

The local dragons were gathering in great force. Hundreds, tens of hundreds already. They hunted with the riders, excited and confused, angry and hopeful. They had not seen humans in all their lifetimes, or their parents. Humanity, and the bonding, was a memory their ancestors shared. It meant the dragons might be lonely no more. It was hope...

But was it hope in vain?

Was Sanmarellis all but dying?

Ironfang nudged his arm, knowing his thoughts. Rayn's strength had not returned, and that gave him real cause to worry. He had left the planet's nightmare. He had been inside a dying world and returned. But it seemed to have taken all his strength with it, and yet... he needed to go back. He wondered, was there strength enough inside him still? Or would another journey inside take all his power, forever, and he would never find his way to return to Ironfang? He didn't think a world that supported life would really allow that to happen, but Sanmarellis... was in such great fear.

And why did *he* need to return? Why would no one else dare?

But even with his waking eye now he could see them: rows upon rows, endless coffins of death. He dared not shut his eyes, for when he did, every once in a moment a face would appear before him. They looked asleep, but

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

they sounded like they were screaming; memories of their lives, their names, who they were.

What they would become if the plague ever found them.

Jayd came in then, riding in on Darkwing's night gift. He seemed wounded.

"We took a dog, or it might have been a dog," she replied to his unanswered question. "It was only just taken by the plague, but what strength! The beings of this world are powerful indeed – we have great need to fear this world being taken by the plague."

"It seems to have given you a bit of trouble!" he jested, yet his voice had lost all its strength, and there was no feeling in his words.

Jayd seemed to understand him anyway, "Rest on, Rayn. You already have done what no other can do."

Rayn shook his head. He did not want to believe that.

"It has already been two days since the cricket," Darkwing said. "The princess would have left Thiaz now."

"Thiaz," Rayn grumbled, still not entirely convinced of her wisdom in trusting them once more.

"I think ... she wants their wisemen." Jayd guessed out loud, taking a seat beside him and stoking the fire. "She thinks she can convince them to help us heal this world. They know your prayer Rayn; they have studied it more than we ever can. I suspect she wants their help to wash this world. Wash it all over."

"That would be good," Rayn finally admitted.

"How can it be done?" Jayd asked.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I don’t know,” Ironfang confessed for them both. “But it might be more important to ask... will they?”

Jayd was silent.

“Welcome,” was all Princess Mendelain of Thiaz said.

Pure was silent, and angry. *‘Welcome’?* Whatever did she mean by that? *Welcome to your doom? Welcome to Thiaz, we’re sorry and going to help out any way we can? Welcome now give us your fortress for good this time? What did ‘welcome’ mean?*

“Don’t let her get to you,” Caspina whispered. “My sister is cunning, but she knows she has nothing to bargain with now. The fortress is here, and they know with a word you could heat the air till it left the world, or pull the seas till they filled the cities, or move the fire under the world till the earthquakes slew all who lived on this proud land. They will not try anything too underhanded, not while Pearl holds all the cards.”

Pure huffed.

Even with nothing of value to bargain with, Pure still suspected the deceptive queen of Thiaz would find a way to turn profit.

“Thank you,” was all Pure offered the queen in reply.

For a moment there was silence.

“Thiaz welcomes the fortress of Pearl to her beloved skies,” Mendelain had finally found her voice, it seemed. “You will find we are a peaceful people, and only hope our trade-”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Pure cut her off, while the prince and several of her councilors tried to beg her to silence. But Pure was incensed. “Sanmarellis is *dying*, and you want to talk of trade? Is there no *honor* to be found in Thiaz, *anywhere*? I am come to gather the wisemen, to claim the might of the dragon riders of Thiaz by their oath to the seven worlds on the day of their founding!”

Mendelain was silent. A man, presumably the leader of the council, started to speak. Pure had forgotten his voice and what he looked like already.

“Princess, we are honored. We will gather all we must for the fulfilment of our oath, and half again that you may know the people of Thiaz deal with integrity.”

Pure pondered this. Surely not every heart on Thiaz was corrupt?

“You understand the need of urgency?” She asked him.

“Of course, by next week-”

Something in her gasp silenced him, and the half a million riders in the sky.

Pure was trying to come across as a calm diplomat, a clever gamer, a stable soul. But at his comment her resolve completely snapped. “A week? You... old man... know the risk, don’t you? Where were you four thousand years ago when the sky bleed red? Where were you when the Perish rode in on the boats of men to claim every world... but your own? Where was the mighty warriors of Thiaz in that day? Have the riders of Thiaz no *courage*!”

Caspina held down his hand, silencing the orb and allowing him to speak to her alone, “Do not provoke them, Princess. The riders of Thiaz are obedient, but they are also the finest, and most experienced of all riders in the seven worlds. You do not want to provoke their wrath...”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

His voice trailed off as a sound reached the Fortress. It was a hundred thousand voices all raised in indignation and challenge. With it rose an unabated resentment, a chilling anger. But it was not directed at Pearl... but at their own leaders. Everyone could feel it: the riders of Thiaz were rising to the challenge.

Caspina was silent.

I fear the government of Thiaz has underestimated the wisdom of their dragons, Farwing, her beloved dragon, whispered to them all.

When Pure spoke, it was to an entire world, "I leave in six hours, with every abled dragon rider and wiseman who will join me. We are going to save Sanmarellis. We are going to stop the plague this time! Yet we cannot do this alone. Pearl cannot stand alone against the plague! We need help; we need the riders of Thiaz in *all* their might!"

Their leader might have tried to say something, but someone held him down, was it the queen? It didn't matter, for they would have ignored him.

With a sigh of relief Pure sat down. *The riders of Thiaz **are** coming!*

Plague

The injured were coming in quickly now. Another day had dawned on Sanmarellis, and Rayn had known little sleep. Now, it seemed, the last of his strength was being called on to heal both dragons and riders. As yet, no dragon of Sanmarellis had been taken by the plague, though two were slain by the disease-infested beings. How quickly it took those of this world!

The reports were strange. The beasts who succumbed to the plague were moving quickly, reaching out to cover wide territory with inexplicable speed. Though it seemed very few of Sanmarellis had a natural susceptibility to the plague, when they were taken they became particularly strong, and responded strangely to the healing waters. Most died, but a handful, it was strange to report, exploded.

He had no explanation for this.

At first it had looked like they were winning, but now that hope was fading fast. Help had to arrive, and it had to arrive soon.

“High wiseman!” a voice called in a strange tongue. It was one of the dark skinned riders, from the Eastern continent of Pearl, a wiseman of their people. He was assigned to help Fallen, the western farmer, and his dragon Ethnomancer, the redeemed rebel dragon, “Come quickly!”

Rayn stumbled to his feet. Jayd moved to help him up. He stood with great difficulty, drawing all the strength he could from his staff. Yet it seemed so little. Had he not paid the price the Divine asked of him yet? Or perhaps the staff drew its strength from the world, and this world was in no state to help him?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd half carried him, his arms draped around her shoulder. Her face was set like a warrior, showing no fear, only determination.

She had fought this war before, and she had seen it won.

He took courage at that thought.

They took him outside, and Ironfang lowered him to the ground. There they found Ethnomancer lying on the ground. He was wounded, but not greatly.

Then he saw Fallen. His innards were laid out. His assistant, the dark priest, put what little medicines they had remaining to use.

“What happened?” Rayn asked in the mans’ language.

“It was a small, furred animal. I’d never known anything so small to attack with such ferocity!” The dark priest replied. “It almost buried right into him, but he pulled it out with his own hands! I do not know by what cause he yet lives.”

Rayn’s heart faltered at the sight. He knew what he had to do, what he could do to put a man back together. But it would cost his strength. There was a very real chance... it would cost his life...

Ethnomancer looked up at him, unable to rise: not for his own wounds, but for his pain at his rider’s injuries.

There must be something Rayn could do to help.

He held on to the other priest’s staff, hoping to find in him the strength he lacked. He lit his staff, perhaps for the last time, and held it over Fallen. He might not be able to raise the man, but he could at least stave off death. At least he could give him a chance to heal...

... but the plague was inside there too, and Rayn was so...

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

A sudden bolt of lightning spilt the sky. Rayn only had a moment to look up before living horror presented itself to his eyes. It was a dragon of Sanmarellis; plaguecursed. And it clearly travelled by lightning.



6 She travelled by Lightning

There was only time to register the horror before it attacked.

Ironfang must have guessed its next move, and blocked the blow even as the lightning dragon teleported to their left flank. Rayn heard the bones of both dragons splinter, but plaguecursed knew no pain.

There were others there, but would they respond in time? Rayn awaited the final blow.

Lightning and thunder exploded all around, but no death. Rayn looked up and saw then why. Ironfang had fallen across him protectively, but in the sky raged the dragon Stormclouds. Rayn didn't even see him arrive, but dark and angry smoke did battle with plaguecursed lightning. Two dragons

seemed to dance in the air, slashing yet landing no blows. Both would appear, and disappear. And dive and dodge. If Stormclouds hit Lightning it would be a good thing, but it was certain that if the Lightning struck Stormclouds, even once, the battle would be over.

“Heal him!” Ethnomancer shouted.

It took Rayn a moment to realize what he meant. He reached out, and poured the last of his strength into his staff, willing the healing waters to reclaim Fallen, willing the body to heal, the skin to mend. Willing the man who was a soul of a dragon, to live.

The world drifted into silence. He heard Jayd screaming, telling him to stop, but he couldn't. A dragon of Sanmarellis was taken by the plague, and it could teleport anywhere it wanted to. It had to be stopped. Now. At all costs.

His world fell dark. He felt his soul begin to lift up from his body.

Then he felt it. A power. An enormous, incomprehensible power. It resonated through all his being in an instant. He felt like a mote of dust before a cyclone, so incredibly nothing he was. Yet so great was this power that it could easily hold him, like an eggshell made of spider silk, and he would not break. It held him perfectly in its enormous power.

He had vastly underestimated the power of the spirit of Sanmarellis.

He became aware of a blinding light, and opening his eyes found it to be his staff. All around him a terrible, torrential rain was falling. The dragon in the air shrieked, but fought bitterly on. Stormclouds was hitting her now, trying to bring her down. But she was so strong, even stronger than the plaguecursed of Pearl.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn trembled helplessly at the power of Sanmarellis that flowed through him.

And in the next moment he saw dark, billowing clouds of black rising up from the ground all around him, but not touching him. He heard Ethnomancer chanting, but his gift could not reveal the language. In a handful of heartbeats the dark clouds billowed up from the earth, and reaching up, engulfed Lightning as with a claw of smoke. She shrieked a monstrous, baleful cry. She tried to teleport away, but seemed unable. Stormclouds broke her jaw, and in a moment the plaguecursed collapsed to the ground.

Ironfang moved back.

“Touch her not,” Ethnomancer ordered, “for she is in *my* power now.”

Indeed it seemed. Wherever the clouds strayed beings seemed to lose all strength, or even the sense of feeling within their own bodies. No one was willing to stray within the power of commanded by Ethnomancer.

“You have done well,” Fallen complimented his dragon, fully healed.

“How is it possible?” Rayn heard Jayd asked. “How did you heal him Rayn? How do you stand?”

He could not reply.

“It is the gift,” the dark priest said, his voice softened in reverence, “this world has heard his prayer. It sends him his strength.”

Rayn nodded. There was *much* power in this world yet.

Lightning shrieked. Rayn could see the waters slowly healing her, taking out the poisons, washing down the swelling. Soon, she would be whole again.

“I have not seen this dragon before,” Ironfang stated.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I’m not surprised, you only just arrived here,” Rayn told him.

But Ironfang was not impressed, “Then how did she know where to find us?”

The truth of it struck Rayn to his spirit. How?

“Tell me,” Rayn asked Lightning, while other dragons arrived to guard her, “how did you know where to find us?”

Her milky eyes looked at him, knowing his words, refusing to answer.

Rayn knew he would have to force the words from her. “Who?” He demanded, raising his staff, requiring her to answer him.

She roared in defiance.

“Who?” He shouted, “I demand the truth, by the spirit of Sanmarellis!”

Again she roared, but it was a strange sound. Not at all like a dragon. Like a being much smaller, but still dangerous. Like a hunter... like...

“A tiger?” Jayd said.

It took Rayn a moment to realize what she’d already realized.

“TigerHak...” Darkwing growled.

Jayd nodded, tears in her eyes.

“So,” Ironfang uttered in their silence. “Now we know who was in the silver cylinder that came from Pearl to his world.”

“This changes everything!” Rayn yelled. “The plague is still aware, even if it only the awareness of a half man. We are in terrible danger, we-”

“Rayn, shut up and stop panicking!” Jayd told him.

He fell silent, and thought. “The plague is acting intelligently. I know what it is doing now. We thought they were simply running away. But they are not. They are knowingly and deliberately spreading the plague as far and

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

wide as they can! They know we don't have the numbers to prevent the spread of the plague, so they count their small losses while spreading the disease everywhere!"

The lightning dragon roared.

"And now TigerHak knows we know it too," Jayd chastened him for thinking out loud.

Rayn was silent for a moment, then walked away in the driving rain till they were out of hearing shot of the captured dragon, "Yet who knows how many spies he has already?"

"We can't win this," Starwing muttered, speaking their fears. "Their number be grow'n, and ours on dwindle."

"There is a way," Rayn promised him. "We can still win. But it may take the combined powers of the seven worlds. We need wisemen, and riders. I have been shown how. We can call down healing rain all over this great world, and hunt whatever small pockets of plague remain. We can win this, we must!"

The dragons roared in encouragement, and many took to the wing, renewed in faith and strength to hunt the plague wherever it surfaced. He did not let his thoughts be known. *If, of course, Pure arrives with the fortress in time.*

Pure gazed out the window, fists clenched in frustration.

A dragon. A dragon had been taken by the plague. This could only mean that the golden threads must remain closed. If the plague spread

beyond Sanmarellis, by any means, any world would quickly be overrun. The worlds would be dust again, and all alliances broken.

She looked out the window at the gathered forces, the great hordes of Thiaz elite. They conducted themselves like warriors. It was clear they intended to impress her and, perhaps, apologize for their Queen's attempted theft.

Or was all their good behavior just another game?

"Come," Caspina said invitingly. "These thoughts do you no good. Come, play another round with me."

She didn't turn, but huffed, wondering again why she suffered his company so much during these days. Was it his familiarity with the great number and power of his people, or did she just feel safe with him? Him, and his footman that always went with him. In honesty there were always advisers from the tribes, and wisemen of the fortress, in the room with them. But Pure found herself drawn to his company, and found his advice was often the soundest. Was it because he echoed her own thoughts? No, he disagreed with her more than any of her other, fawning advisors who clearly would rather die than displease her. In a sense that level of ... dishonesty... was unhelpful.

Caspina, on the other hand, was... helpful.

And she needed him to make sense of the half a million soldiers from Thiaz that lounged in her fortress. They waited, refusing to even touch the teachers for fear of offending her again.

"I wish we were there," Pure said, gazing out at the stars as they moved painfully by. With the threads down they had to do it the old way, the human way. "It will still take a day to arrive on Sanmarellis."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Indeed it will, so you might as well pass the time with games.” He smiled, trying to brighten her.

She scoffed.

“You are too much a warrior,” he chided her. “But even the warriors know when it is time to relax.”

“I cannot,” she told him.

So he came to the window, and stood beside her, and helped her watch.

Prebeasts

“Pull back!” Rayn shouted.

They were two wisemen down now. The plague, knowing they were aware, had launched a dedicated attack – a mixed horde fully bent on their destruction. The beasts they could fight, and the birds were dealt with by the flames of dragons. But of the *prebeasts*... they could do little.

The prebeasts were unlike any known on Pearl, or seen on any world except in the pretimes. Yet here on Sanmarellis they had survived, and thrived. Great beasts, reptile in appearance, some far larger than dragons. Some walked on all fours, yet were as tall as any tree on Pearl. The juggernauts had three horns and their charging was unstoppable. There were hugelings with great spines or club tails. Then there were the behemoths. They were truly enormous, and would walk ponderously, their tails flicking about constantly like whips, or at least they would until the plague claimed them. Those that did not die from the transformation



7 Prebeast

became horrors; fast, vicious, uncaring for their own lives.

Then there were the raptors. All walked on two legs. Most were as small as a dog, but some were as tall as a dragon. They were armed, great

spikes on their thumbs, or toes like swords, or massive heads with hundreds of knife like teeth.

The prebeasts were a horror, and they seemed particularly weak to the plague.

Yet it was not the dozens of small raptors that worried him enough to flee – the swords and staff were dealing with them. It was not even the two huge raptors that could pin a dragon down from the sky, which was how they'd lost a wisemen in a single savage attack. It was the titanic juggernauts, and the unnatural speed with which they raced towards them.

He knew they had to flee.

Dragons took to the air again, trying desperately to swipe aside the bloodied claws of the plaguecursed. The rain drenched them all, causing the beasts to shriek in agony, yet making it harder to fly away.

“What about her!”

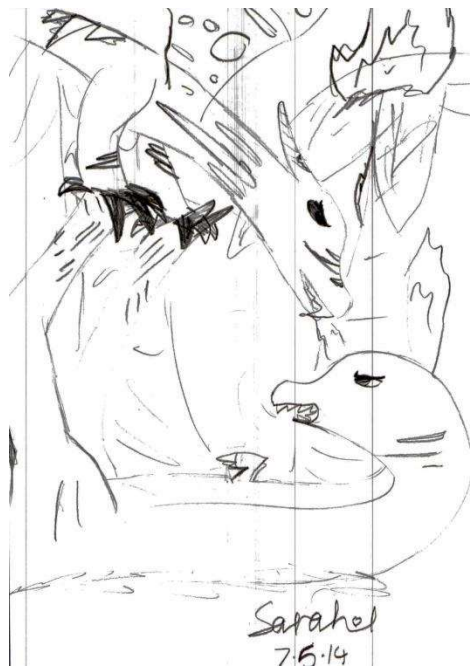
8 A dragon v's a plaguecursed dragon

Darkwing called, indicating towards Lightning.

Ironfang was climbing

fast, so he only had a moment to decide. She was healing, but still needed a day. The prebeasts were all around the ground now, but seemed unwilling to attack her. Did they still consider her one of their own?

It was unlikely that she would ever heal from the plague.



Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He turned away from her, and she cried out in dismay.

The other dragons, including dozens from Sanmarellis, flew away from her in silence.

It had to be done, Ironfang consoled him, his own broken bone newly mended by faith.

Rayn was silent.

They flew into the skies for many breaths.

Rider, face your choices! Ironfang demanded. *We need direction.*

Rayn sighed. There was no turning back now. “We need to move to a more defensible position,” he told the assembled dragons, all those that were close enough to hear his voice on the wind. “A mountain.”

“Isa wooda thought the trees were safe enough, Trues!” Starwing mourned.

“We’re dealing with an intelligent adversary here,” Jayd called back. “He kept those prebeasts in hiding until they were needed. I think we are lucky; if he’d had more time he might have produced an army strong enough to defeat us all. Rayn is right, if we are to fight this war, we need a better place to do it.”

“Weeeell, you sah would be peekin’ on the iron peaks, true? Yes? That way,” Starwing pointed.

“The closest and most defensible position is on that mountain,” Jayd confirmed.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They were there in under an hour, but it brought them little reprieve. The horde of diseased prebeasts was still pursuing them from the ground. They could try to outrun them, but it was wasting precious time. They needed land to rest, to heal, to feed both man and dragon. They needed time.

They needed a fortress.

The mountain was indeed huge, large enough. It would do until Pure arrived.

Jayd led them towards the base of the mountain. It was rocky, with little vegetation, a dormant volcano that looked as though it had erupted only a few years ago. At the base of the mountain a huge cavern was visible.

They headed towards the ground.

“We make our stand here? Ironfang queried. “There are few places to run. The far side of the mountain might provide too steep a surface for beasts to climb, but they will corner us in the cavern if we try to flee there.

I know, Rayn replied, but he knew it was the right place.

They formed a defensive circle, six dozen dragons and riders. There were hundreds of hundreds of dragons on Sanmarellis, but the plague had caught them ill prepared. Most were out hunting the plague in small groups of two or three. It would be hours before any serious help arrived.

The raptors came first, and by now it was clear that they were being guided by some knowing hand. They did not attack, but slowly surrounded them all.

A moment later the two giant raptors arrived.

They had no time to wait.

“Now!” Rayn roared, and the warriors leapt into action.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Dragon scales were strong, but plague enhanced raptor jaws were stronger. Two fell in the first attack, but it made a difference – they were able to bring one of the raptors down. Rayn drew on every strength and prayer he knew. They light from his staff blinded his enemies, but they didn't stop. He brought the healing prayer into a light mist instead of drenching rain, but still they were driven on without any concern for their own lost lives. Yet the dragons and men held their own. In time, and accepting the loss at least a third of their number, they would surely prevail.

The ground began to shudder.

At first Rayn wondered if this was Sanmarellis sending them new deliverance, or perhaps even a greater power was coming to save them.

Then he saw how wrong he was.

The four legged. The behemoth.

It would be here in less than a handful of breaths, and it would trample everyone. The warriors saw it, and began to fear, and Rayn knew if they broke formation the raptors would tear them to shreds in moments.

“If they break formation,” Jayd panicked, “the raptors will have mastery of them in minutes!”

They needed a miracle.

Time slowed down.

Rayn prayed. He looked about. He saw his warriors boldly battling on every side. He watched the wisemen with their bright staffs doing all in their power to help them overcome the beasts. He watched as the devoted of Pearl gave their lives for a world they had never lived on.

He reached down again towards that earth.

“Rayn?” Jayd asked him.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“We need help,” Rayn replied, wondering if she said any more as his awareness reached down into the planet. Perhaps, if Sanmarellis had helped him before, perhaps he recovered from his fear by now?

He only had a moment of regret before Rayn was absorbed once more by that fear. An utter, irrepressible panic. Yet he also knew his immeasurable power, its extraordinary strength ... and with it... a wisdom. It had known this day was coming for a long time. It had ... prepared... there was something it was trying to tell him. The plague was... the plague... and the stars were dying... and tentacles reached out from an orb of green to crush an orb of gold... and of white... and the graves of the dead held the key... and...

In the next instant Rayn was thrown back into his own body with such force that it hurt. It was as if the world was saying; “And *stay* there!”

Rayn looked around. Everyone was kneeling now. The earth was shaking fiercely. The raptors had fallen over, and what few stood were slain by the flying dragons. The warriors were pointing, the dark priest weeping for joy. Jayd cried out in victory.

He turned to the focus on their attention. A massive chasm, as wide as fifteen dragons, had opened up all around the base of the mountain, encompassing it in a great crescent. The remaining giant raptor, and the behemoth, were nowhere to be seen.

“Where?” Rayn said.

Jayd stood up beside him as the shuddering in the earth began to subside. “They are fallen! The prebeasts! They were taken into the great chasm! Did you do that Rayn?”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Praise to Rayn! High wiseman of Pearl!” A warrior shouted, and others joined in his cry.

Rayn held his hand up for silence, “This deed is granted by the will of the Divine, and the strength of Sanmarellis!” He told them. “Go, there is no time for celebrations. Secure the cavern, tend the wounded.”

They stood there for an instant.

“You heard the man!” Jayd shouted. “Go! Move! Move!”

And they obeyed her.

They had survived. It was a small victory, and it would do.

“Thank you,” he whispered to a world he knew was always listening.



9 A young prebeast Behemoth wanders among the giant trees of Sanmarellis

From Pure's Perspective

Rayn looked tired again, and that worried her.

“What is your news?” Pure asked him through the dragon orb.

“They won’t stop coming,” he whispered. “We thought we had them on the run, but they keep coming. The winged lizards carry them over the crevasse, and they just keep coming.”

“How long can you hold out for?”

“A day, at least. Probably more. They can only manage small numbers for now, keeping us on our toes. We have a solid defense at the opening of the cavern, and access to the air when we need it. We have claim of the mountain, and all the land beyond the crevasse. Those deep within the cavern are healing well, the four remaining wisemen are working miracles beyond their own reckoning: Sanmarellis is truly powerful, and the hand of the Divine is strong upon us. We will prevail. I will see you again,” he promised.

Her heart caught in her throat, how she hoped he might be able to keep that promise!

“I will speed our flight. You-”

She felt, rather than heard, the fear well up within Rayn.

“What is it?” she dared to ask.

“Stoneclaw has fallen,” he replied. “With his rider. I hardly knew him... I ...”

“Have faith,” she told him. It was not like Rayn to mourn the loss of a single rider and his dragon, having lived through the war against the

plague, having lost almost his entire town. This war, this land of Sanmarellis. It was affecting him in strange ways.

“We must...” he stuttered.

I will call them, a powerful voice on their world spoke to his mind. It must have been the dragon Farvoice.

“No, you mustn’t,” Rayn replied.

But you will not prevail here alone!

She heard the approval of the others.

“Don’t you see?” Rayn shouted. “Can’t you feel it? This is what he wants! This is just what Hak is trying to force us to do! If we call in all the dragons then we leave the outer lands unguarded. The plaguecursed will slip by our defenses into the lands beyond. Don’t you see? Calling in every dragon we have is just what the plague wants us to do!”

There was silence.

Then you must battle alone?

“Weeel, keep the guile here, no? True? Get the weeop here, make ‘em here, make ‘em battle. Can’t be spreading the plague elsewhere, can they?” Starwing said.

“He is right,” Ironfang’s voice called out, she could see them all, in the cavern inside the mountain. She realized, if she wanted to, she could appear right there. Ironfang continued. “We need to hold on, keep all the fighting here so it does not spread elsewhere. We must hold on, until the reinforcements arrive. It will be a day, at most. We *can* do this.”

“The plague catches much faster this time,” Darkwing observed.

“Yes, but not as often,” Ironfang replied. “We have them at a disadvantage as long as they can only fly their few across the chasm. We can

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

take them in the air. We will hold. When the fortress arrives the healing waters will drench this whole world!”

“But what if we cannot hold-” Darkwing began to say.

“We will hold!” Ironfang roared.

“Father!” a voice called from the opening of the cave. It was the dark skinned priest from Pearl, one she had never met in person. He was speaking to Rayn. “Longstride is fallen, we are bringing him in now. Please, you must send out another wing to protect the skies.”

“I will,” Rayn husked, mounting the mighty Ironfang.

She could not hide the pang of pain she felt at watching him go to war, and so tired.

Hurry, he whispered.

War at the Cave

Rayn knew they could not last a day. He knew they barely had one hour.

So when the next wave arrived around midnight, he knew, in his heart ... they were about to die.

The ground shook. Something was crashing through the forest of Sanmarellis. They saw its massive silhouette against the starlit sky.

“What is that?” the dark priest uttered in amazement.

“Oh, Trues,” Starwing moaned, “... it is dark wanderer ... they ... they never come up above the water.”

“What is that?” Jayd wondered. Her voice held no fear.

“A sea serpent,” Rayn replied.

Indeed, it was. An enormous sea serpent of some kind. Its bulk was massive, to rival even the behemoth for girth, and four times their length. There was no way it could possibly travel overland of its own strength. But the plague granted it power beyond mortal strength, and it was crawling over the land, splitting trees on its blood soaked body.

“What are they planning to do with it?” The dark priest wondered.

“I don’t ...” Rayn began, “they can’t hope to fill the crevice with its body, even it is not large enough.”

“You don’t suppose they’re going to use it as a bridge?” Jayd wondered out loud.

In that moment Rayn realized... yes. That was exactly what TigerHak was planning to do with it.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“To arms!” He yelled. “Every able bodied man and dragon, to arms!”

They only had a moment. The sea serpent reared up, high into the sky, swaying. Then higher, and higher. Finally it collapsed down, biting deep into the stones of the near edge of the crevasse, shattering its own skull in the process. Yet some semblance of life was within it, for it strengthened and straightened its own body, held on with help from the raptors on one side, and its enormous fangs embedded in the foot of the mountain on the other.

The horde began to surge across it.

“Stop them, stop them!” Rayn roared. “Get those teeth from the stone!”

They rushed out, too late realizing their mistake. Hidden on the mountain an elite horde of foxes, and other smaller beasts, had concealed themselves. They rushed the dragons of Pearl and Sanmarellis. Some even passed by, and ran into the cavern behind.

The forward charge halted, for a moment there was confusion.

Then the horde was upon them.

They took up what defense they could. The air was filled with flying beasts – it offered no protection, and at least the ground presented one direction which no enemies could attack from.

Slashing, burning, warring they came. Hundreds of them now. Rayn could hardly see for the horde around them. He looked around them, only just in time did he see Starwing grab up the dark priest, and in a smear of light, as was his way, appeared instantly at the sea beasts fangs. Starwing shattered one with his deadly breath of stars, then finished it off with a blow from his powerful hind legs. The wiseman, swinging wide his staff with a

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

command of pure faith, shattered the other and sent the monster sliding back into the crevasse.

But Rayn knew the pair were doomed now. Half the horde turned back on the pair, far too many for them to fight against... and Starwing could not open his wings wide enough to travel by light again.

An instant later, white lightning split the air, momentarily stunning the local horde. A dragon was there silhouetted in the shadows. She scooped up the wiseman, and wrapped her arms around Starwing. Before the horde

could reply lightning struck again, and in the same instant the cave behind lit up with light.

10 ... and when she did, she travelled very quickly.



Blessing her courage, and blessing the name of Divinity, Rayn cried out in victory.

But looking around at the struggling men and dragons, far too few. He could have called for help. He could have brought nearly every dragon from Sanmarellis to this mountain. Then the battle would have been easy. But then... the war would have been lost.

“Look, there!” Jayd squealed, pointing, riding high in the air with Darkwing whose great speed in the darkness made him very powerful. She was pointing to the forest at the other end of the crevasse.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Intuitively, Rayn looked. And there, at the far end of the crevasse, stood a lone figure in the shape of a man, surrounded by the remaining members of the horde. He wore the tattered remains of a trapper of the Celtwyld. He threw back hood, and laughed.

“TigerHak,” Rayn said in spite.

“Get him-” Darkwing roared.

“No!” Ironfang replied. “He’s trying to draw you out, to thin out our army.”

Rayn paused, raising his staff higher, letting the light shine out. Some of the horde pulled back.

“I am sure he has some devilry prepared should you abandoned this hallowed ground, made sacred by your prayers to Sanmarellis!” The dark priest told him.

He looked at the abomination across the crevasse. It seemed to be lit with a fell light. He knew TigerHak’s only desire was to consume, to draw all into its insatiable maw and ruin all the world. It was the mind and soul of the plague, and it had to die.

Rayn reached deeply inside, looking for a solution. He found one. He remembered a time when Pure had called the fire to scare away the wolves. He saw it then, as if it was written on paper. Numbers, and symbols. Words he knew, but did not recognize. They were forming a sentence, a paragraph, an entire tome. It was the key, the methods of knowing fire and its lore in the real world.

It was the arc of fire.



11 The gentle, valiant trapper was now a monster, king of monsters.

Without waiting to ask how he knew, or if it would work, he raised his staff and called upon the power of the arc of fire. Bright, orange flames

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

leapt up from his staff, reaching out across the crevasse, yearning across the darkness. To the surprise of everyone present, they lit the sky. They burnt towards the man at the other end of darkness.

But he did not move. He simply smiled. And reaching up, dark shapes began to form in the sky.

“Birds?” Jayd screamed. “He has mastered birds!”

This rarely happened on Pearl, but here on Sanmarellis it was happening. A huge flock rose up from behind him. Most reached down to carry the remainder of the plaguecursed across the crevasse.

And TigerHak smiled, and stepped backwards into the underbrush only an instant before the flames burst uselessly against the trees.

I can no longer sense him! Jayd squealed, battling beasts in the darkness of the air.

Rayn looked out in anger. It was almost as if Sanmarellis had turned against them. Looking deep inside again, he knew more flame. With a triumphant cry it burst from his staff like a dragon’s breath. It scorched the plaguecursed, but slowed the rain.

And they kept coming.

“Back!” Rayn roared, realizing his lust for the death of the plague leader had led him into a tactical error. “Back I say, into the cavern!”

“But we are better in the air!” a dragon complained.

“Not for much longer.”

Not willing to be the only ones left outside, they complied. The dragon riders cut their way through the thinner horde at their rear and entered the cavern.

Beasts piled into the entrance.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Now what?” Ironfang roared.

Rayn drew strength from Sanmarellis once more, and working prayer he'd learnt from Ethphraim, he tore the mountain down in front of them.

The cavern within filled with darkness, and silence.

“It will be hours before they can break that down,” The dark priest grinned in victory. Great scars ran down his arm, but the healing waters mended them even as he spoke. Sadly, his leg was torn down one side where he had failed to pre-empt the attack of from their ally, Icebreath, that would take longer to heal.

“An hour, at best,” Rayn replied. “I can only hope we have the attention of the majority of the horde of Sanmarellis. Even if we die, they will be swept away in the rains that Pure will bring.”

“But what of their natural resistance?” Darkwing said, sounding worried. “They do not respond to the healing waters as well as they did on Pearl.”

“I know,” Rayn replied. “I don't know why.”

“Does the Divine speak?” Darkwing asked him.

Rayn prayed, his mind immediately filling with knowledge. “It's not the plague, it's the natural nutrients of the residents of Sanmarellis. They have different... natural machines in their blood that inhibit the response of the creatures here to the healing waters... I understand it, but it's difficult to put into our words.”

“That is a lot of knowledge,” the polar warrioress smiled, her blood soaked spear still steaming with ice. “I did not realize you had been staring into the eyes of the oracle so much!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn smiled at her jest. “I, no. I didn’t learn that from an oracle. It was straight from the Divine, though it usually takes a long ritual to get ideas that clearly. Hang on, now I’m confused. Did I get that from an oracle? Now I can’t remember!”

“Father!” The dark priest called again. “Come, Stormclouds is faint.”

Rayn turned, and fell to one knee.

“Easy now, perhaps it is time for you to rest, good wiseman?” The polar warrioress argued. “You cannot be the strength for all. No one man can.”

Rayn fought the reason of her words, but knew they were true. They all needed healing. They all needed many weeks rest. But the deep thumping on the stones told him that they would get no such rest, at least, not tonight. But their enemies were still several hours away, at best. They could gain a little rest, and a little strength.

It was his last thought before he passed out.

Three hours.

Jayd sighed. She had hoped for more. She had hoped for so much more! Rayn slept where he had fallen, and she dreaded awakening him. She didn’t even know if she could, but the dark wiseman assured her he was simply asleep.

They had lost fifteen dragons and their men, two of them wisemen.

And they were about to die in a cave.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd would have taken the battle back outside and into the air. She knew there were enough of them. But could they really leave the injured in the caves, just to assure their own survival?

And, really, if TigerHak new enough about the plague, could he too make the plague even more aware by poisoning a man through his dragon? Perhaps not. Perhaps he would risk no heir. Yet they would have to die here in a cave, with the wounded, rather than risk becoming monsters themselves.

So it was that she trusted Rayn's judgement in coming here.

The thumping grew louder now, the first few pebbles began to shake themselves loose from the wall.

It was time. She didn't wait for any other man to make the call. She needed them awake. She walked to the dark priest – he seemed the most hale of the wisemen left. He roused easily, and at her urging bid a prayer of awakening to the warriors. One by one they slipped into consciousness. Awake, aware, ready to do battle.

She looked at Rayn. He was already sitting, taking a deep drink of the healing waters. Her visage must have said something, for he turned to speak, taking no notice of the now shuddering wall. With each swelling word, he roused both men and dragon into fervor of battle. "In memory..." he muttered. "In memory of our loved ones. In memory of our right to be free from plague! In memory of those who have died in this cause, to rid the worlds of this blight, to see dead all that would turn you into a monstrosity. For the right to live without fear!"

They cheered, and a moment later a great boulder burst into the staff-lit cavern. They responded with energy, and began to cut down any being that attempted to enter beyond. The small mammals were destroyed by

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

dragon flame, but a few larger animals made it into the cavern beyond. Men and dragons working together broke them down. Ethnomancer's cloud made it impossible for the enemy to gain a foothold here, and Icestorm's breath tore shreds through the enemy. For a long time, they held the narrow passage.

But slowly, one grain of sand at a time, the plague was enlarging the opening.

They fought with intensity, and unbridled desire. This was the final stand of the heart of Pearl. The foe knew this, and Jayd knew... here, they would die.

Almost as soon as she realized this, she saw a great four legged reach its neck in, and turning aside began to scoop out a huge boulder. It was dead a moment later, by swords and dragon breath, but the damage was done. They were pouring in the opening now.

She fought with the men for all they were worth. But it was not enough. Lightning and Stormclouds began to teleport those they could out, and the rest were left to fight against an ever increasing number of foes. But there was not enough time to get everyone. Then, a moment later her worst fears were realized as a plaguecursed dragon, full of disease, entered in with the rushing horde. It breathed, strange white and blue flames, and Jayd fully expected it would be the last thing she'd see.

Then the dark skinned priest, the one who called all other wisemen "father", stood in front of her, and using some prayer of faith she had never seen, took all that flame into his body. Into his heart. He died in the very act.

The dragon prepared to breathe again. There was none to stay the white flames now.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Suddenly the entire cavern was filled with a golden fire. It raced across the stone like wildfire. It took to the bodies of the plague-cursed and froze them in place, consuming them in scant heartbeats. Yet the fire did not harm any of those without the plague.

Jayd looked around in wonder, wondering who had saved them.

Then she saw them, the golden priests of Thiaz with their majestic dragons, arriving with Stormclouds. There were dozens of them. They purged the cave, they tended the wounded and dying with expert skill. They mended her own wounds and stayed the plague around her in moments.

Jayd wondered from the cavern, dazed with amazement at their miraculous deliverance. Her feet took her outside, watching torrents of healing waters pouring miraculously from a starlit sky. And there, posed in the sky and silhouetted beautifully against the enormous moon of Sanmarellis, was the Fortress of Pearl.

She fell to ground, and let her grateful tears join the ceaseless rivulets of healing water.

They urged her not to leave, but Pure would not stay inside the fortress while she could help, at least, not while she could help her friends. She had already taken off her dress and put on work clothes such as the tribesmen used to make her wear on most days. Then, with a small army of the two dozen elite warriors, dragons and wisemen who refused to leave her side, she climbed up on Farwing.

Her warriors looked concerned.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

You stress them mightily, Farwing laughed inside.

Let them worry. I must see this land myself, and comfort the warriors if I can.

That is very noble of you, he replied.

Day was far away on this side of the mighty Sanmarellis. This world so large, yet had only five seas. It was almost all untamed wilderness, and the councils from before the founding of the worlds had declared that that was the way it should always remain. It was the promise they made to themselves, that this world would be preserved, and allowed to grow. The plague that had now touched this world was a broken promise, and a tragedy that had been prevented for four thousand years. That the plague had arrived here from her world ... was a shame she would never forgive herself for.

The flight of dragons curled up in the nightlit sky. Farwing's mighty talent had already been put to use spreading the other dragons around the globe, half a million riders from two worlds flowing out from six points. The leaders of Thiaz were impressive; they had every square thousand kilometers of this world portioned off, assigned to a priest and six warriors; seven riders in all. She had ordered them to make haste, but still, it would be half a day or so before they were all in position. Each would find their place around the globe and then, they would cover it with rain. Sweet, beautiful, healing *rain*. Then all that would remain would be to hunt the remaining few plaguecursed where they hid. Then she would not rest until they found a way to make this world free from the plague, forever.

It felt good knowing they were going to win.

Her small army of followers rode down in the sky towards the base of the mountain where the fortress would soon rest, towards the cavern on its

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

softest slope where the bravest warriors of Pearl had made their heroic defense. The wounded were being taken out, carefully, and being cared for in the infirmaries of the fortress now. The prayers Rayn had once again found would renew them all within the hour, broken bones or severed nerves notwithstanding.

She looked, golden priests and dragons working miracles, bringing what plague-cursed they could back to life. Back, where now they would be immune to the plague, and by morning they would have the opportunity to hunt the plague that had cursed them, joining in the glorious war to free their world.

Then she saw Darkwing, hissing at the golden priests. He would not allow them near him. He seemed to be holding out his left wing, and Pure could only assume it was to protect his rider.



12 Jayd and Darkwing on Sanmarellis

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Jayd,” Pure whispered in fear for her friend’s life.

The enormous Farwing slithered down from the sky, and Darkwing bowed his head, but did not keep his eyes off them, or the wary golden priests that offered their aid.

She climbed down, and walked up to him.

He was still hissing.

“Darkwing, stand down,” she ordered.

It seemed to snap him out of his anger and confusion. “Sorry, my princess.”

He raised his limb, and let her enter under the shade of his wing.

She found Jayd there, weeping on the ground. She, as her dragon, was cut in many places. A great gash lay open on her cheek, but she seemed well enough to stand.

So, it was not a wounded rider Darkwing protected, but her right to weep alone.

In that instant Pure’s heart ached for her friend: Jayd had almost died. She had almost watched her brother die, she had almost watched her own dragon die. She had probably stood by fighting with all she was worth, while those she knew and cared about were taken from this life.

Pure knelt down, and cradled the weeping woman’s head to her chest.

The Rain

Jayd listened in silence.

The rain was falling.

“The air here has a higher oxygen content,” the high student from Thiaz was telling them. “It leads to good health, but takes time for the body to adapt. It will contribute to the emotional disturbances among the elite of Pearl.”

Jayd said nothing. She knew it was much more than that.

They were in a conference now, deep inside the safety of the fortress. The rain had been falling since before dawn, and they had resting all that day. A new day had yet to dawn on Sanmarellis, but it was morning on her home of Pearl. Yet here they kept time as the Princess required, so they were preparing for a new day instead of preparing for sleep.

Surely there was a prayer for that?

Her heart still ached, but she did not know why. It was as if all the fight had died within her, as if the last throes of battle had drained her. She caught a glimpse of Rayn, watching her with obvious concern. But she was not prepared to put on a brave face just for him, or for any of them. She wanted to run. She wanted to live out her life in a world with no plague.

Did Sanmarellis thank them? Did he count their lives against his own almost... immortal essence? The educated of Thiaz, the ‘students’, had spoken to him now too, calming him. But they too were left with a puzzle. A riddle: The cavern of graves.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The high student spoke of it now, "... I am disinclined to impress you with language, Princess of Pearl. I am a foremost world scholar on my planet, but I do not know what this vision means. Sanmarellis is... different. He is terrified, yet also a being of immense power even compared to the other worlds. Power... and... passion. He feels things deeply, especially for a world. Almost childlike, or perhaps as an adolescent-"

"One who fears for his life, and all he holds dear." A woman, a general of Thiaz, added.

The high student nodded. "But in spite of all this I am left with one solid conviction. This is not a symbol, or an effigy. This cavern is a real, actual place."

Few agreed, but Rayn spoke. "I am given the same witness."

The table was silent.

"An actual cavern?" Prince Caspina spoke, seated away from the soldiers of Thiaz. "With, what, two hundred billion people by your reckoning? Surely we would find evidence, or they would have left a flag to warn others?"

"Perhaps not," the general disagreed. "If they knew the plague had become aware before they buried themselves, perhaps they took extra measures to hide themselves?"

"But even so, such a cavern would surely be enormous!" Caspina argued. "And if they excavated any part of it, the tailings would be as large as a mountain! That alone would be hard to miss."

"Perhaps," Rayn said. "Or perhaps not. The cavern is sequestered from Jayd's gift. Even my staff cannot find it out. If they chose to hide it, they hid it very well."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Or perhaps,” Caspina said, being the only one daring to speak all their hidden fears while the student of Thiaz scowled openly at him, “it does not exist at all.”

Call

A week slid past. Rayn looked out from the comfort of the fortress.

They had soaked all the land.

They hunted every appearance of the plague.

They rested not, day or night.

But it was as if the world himself was resisting them. How the plaguecursed survived when the rain pained their bodies, and yet, the plague was slowly spreading. They had blessed the water all over the orb of Sanmarellis. Animals that drank would be immune for hours, and the plaguecursed that drank would die.

And slowly, yet surly, the reports of plaguecursed were spreading across the world.

He slammed his fists down on the windowsill. Hadn't it been enough? The near death of all who raced to save this world? The actual dying of many, the sacrifice of the riderless dragons of Sanmarellis? The endless prayers of a half a million souls?

Why was it not enough?

What more could be required?

Even Divinity seemed silent on this quest.

He needed council. At his mental request the five of the inner circle heard a call. He brought them, brought them back into the grand council hall. They came quickly, so much so that by the time he arrived, in less than a hundred breaths, they were already there.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I trust, good brother,” Jayd greeted him, “that you have news worthy of our presence, and the presence of your princess?”

He walked down the spiral slope. Each of the five inner riders, and their dragons with them, were assembled. Farwing was still settling himself into a great counter spiral that ran the length of the room.

“I do not,” Rayn confessed, “but hope only that we can create such news ourselves.”

They looked at each other, Snow the caller, Rhoc the mighty, Jayd the navigatoress, and the beautiful Pure; Princess of Pearl.

He knew they had no answers, and neither did he.

Pure answered his silence, “Well, let’s lay it out once more. The plague is spreading, in spite of all we can do. We have more than half a million dragons and their riders, as well as all that Sanmarellis has to offer... but it is not enough.”

“And we still cannot find TigerHak,” Jayd said with bitterness.

They fell silent.

“What can we do?” Snow asked.

“How are things with you, Snow?” Jayd wondered out loud, “I haven’t had the chance to catch up. What are the animals saying?”

“They are confused,” Snow explained. “They know something big is going on. They are curious about the fortress that sits on the mountain. They talk about evil dreams, and a crying man, which I assume from the description of the wisemen is the tormented spirit of this world. But they have no council of which to give either. Some of those that recover, that survive the healing back from the cursed, are more silent. They act as though they have lost hope. There is a dark spirit that oppresses this entire world.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“And the students and adepts of Thiaz, for all their experience and wisdom, seem ill put to the task of healing him,” Jayd complained.

Rhoc showed his agreement with a grunt. Their dragons shared glances; they did not need to speak in a council where their riders spoke their own thoughts so perfectly.

“What are we to do?” Snow wondered.

“Of the seven worlds,” Rayn thought out loud, “Sanmarellis is the largest, Pearl the central, Thiaz the wealthy, Chalcedonah covered in fire. Amarii was so defeated by the plague they fled from there to Argentus, which is far away. Tourmarelle ... hmmm. In Tourmarelle they silenced the plague by taking it into their own bodies. I know it is cruel, but-”

Rhoc cried out in disagreement.

“I know, my friend, but what can we do? The dragons here have no humans to mourn, perhaps...?”

“Perhaps, then, they do not have enough to live for,” Jayd replied. “The devotion of the dragons of Tourmarelle preserves them in their suffering. Here, they would all die, and the plague be left unchecked in this world once more.”

“And I am yet loath to add,” Pure continued, “this world responds strangely to the plague. I have measured the, well, I have taken the measure of many things. I believe the plague could be far worse than it is, but for some reason, it is not. There may be some factor in the blood of Sanmarellis that I haven’t measured, but I think not.”

“Then things can get worse?” Jayd pondered.

“Yes, but, oh! Perhaps that is what we must do! Rayn, your suggestion, of measuring the worlds. Maybe Pearl and Thiaz cannot save

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Sanmarellis alone! Perhaps we really do need the strength of *seven* worlds to win this!”

“I don’t believe I suggested that...” Rayn pondered out loud.

“Haven’t you tried?” Jayd asked, “I mean, you told them. Haven’t you tried?”

“They know, all except Ethphraim. They have no dragon orb.”

“Then we will send messengers!” Rayn declared.

With a curled fist, Rhoc volunteered.

“We have at best a week before the plague covers this world, maybe two. How are we to gather them in time?” Rayn asked.

“There is another device, a device of which I have not spoken before...” Pure began.

Even as she spoke, a vision surfaced in Rayn’s mind, or was it a memory? It filled her words with vivid images.

Pure continued, “There are portals, gates. Like the one found by Jayd on Amarii. We think humans came to this galaxy through one such device on Ethphraim. It is probably still there. And it is probably on other worlds too. They take enormous energy to create and maintain.”

“They do not use the golden threads?” Jayd guessed.

“No,” Rayn answered, not knowing how he knew, “their threads are black.”

“Black, why would they be black?” Jayd asked him.

His mind filled again with words, numbers. He saw reasons beyond his understanding, yet some part of his heart understood it all. It had to do with the ... field... and matter... gravity so powerful that not even light could escape.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

But he had no words to explain it to Jayd, so simply shrugged.

“Yes, the threads are black, for want of a better word.” Pure smiled.
“And the plague cannot use them if we only use them to travel in one direction: from there, to here.”

“So where is the portal on Sanmarellis?” Jayd asked.

They all looked at Jayd.

“Oh,” she said, and bowed her head in concentration. After a moment she looked up. “I can’t find it. Again. Oh, this world hates me!” She protested.

Pure sighed. “There is... one option. One that has not yet been attempted. One reason... beyond all others... that inspired the manufacturing of the fortress from beyond the clouds in the first place. That, and to house the future residents of Pearl while the world was preparing. The fortress *is* a portal.”

That seemed news to Jayd.

Pure was still talking, “You don’t know, more than a quarter of the plant life on Pearl started as life on Sanmarellis! They measured all the life, and altered it, and planted it carefully on Pearl to give us a world rich with life and color and fruits! We cannot lose Sanmarellis, not ever. There is just too much yet for him to share, and so little we know. I wish we knew where his people had gone.”

“I just assumed they were in the coffins,” Snow whispered.

“But it’s been four thousand years,” Jayd disagreed.

“I was in one of them for four thousand years,” Pure said with a frown.

Rayn was silent.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“It is beside the point,” Jayd said. “We have to save Sanmarellis. And let us gather the strength of all seven worlds before we begin. Let us each take an elite force this time. Let us go back to our worlds. Call in whatever help they will send. Perhaps this plague is a gift from the Divine to that end? We may die, yet this cause will unite the worlds once more, and their unity will live on. Let humanity, and the dragons we ride with, write our names across all stars, forever!”

Rhoc cheered in agreement, and the dragons roared. But Pure was silent, and she looked over at Rayn. Did she share his misgivings?

Was there *something* they were missing?

Jayd



13 Jayd and Darkwing

They arrived only just in time. The wall had fallen, the buildings were burning. The defense of Fartown was about to break.

Jayd surveyed the upcoming disaster. So, it seemed, the Tyrant was good to his word – he was not attacking the city. He had allowed another dragon and its army to do that.

One that wishes to win his favor, no doubt, Norvich stated.

She was with five others, two riders from Thiaz, two riders from Pearl, and two dragons from Sanmarellis. After waiting out a day in boredom on one of the flying boats of Thiaz the six of them had braved the storm on the portal of Amarii. Now they raced towards the city of her welcoming, and

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

were now horrified to see it burning. How she wished she, and not Rhoc, had been allowed the company of Lightning, or at least Stormclouds. She could have stopped the fighting before it began.

The dragon that was laying waste to Fartown saw them coming in, and rode high in the sky.

“What are your orders, mistress?” The old Thiaz adept, their only wiseman, asked her in what must have been a title of respect on their world.

Jayd knew she was in the company of men many times her age, and experience. But this was ‘her’ world. Divinity would help her make good choice.

“Hunt the dragon, make sure he does not get away! Thiaz, this is on you. Go, now! Norwich, you are with me, Stormbreath, we will need your talent. Tell me, can you be gentle?”

He laughed, and rising the storm with his breath, sped along at an impressive speed. He reached the town even before the dragons of Thiaz had caught up to the Tyrant’s servant, who was wisely fleeing for all his might.

Jayd circled the city warily, for it took the battle weary warriors of the city a moment to recognize their friend, their ‘goddess’. But when they did a cheer went up from the walls, and the weeping of their woman, whom they unwisely refused to arm, rose up to greet her. The invading dragon’s army, at the presence of four new dragons, fled.

The allies fought the flames as one, with the talent of Stormbreath doing much to bring cruel fires under control. As the fires died Jayd landed to greet a familiar friend.

The high priestess, Lelleth, tearfully called out to her. “We thought ourselves dead!” She cried, and they threw their arms around each other.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

A tall man, possibly the captain of the guards, approached them. He towered over her, which was saying something, for all the people of Argentus were stout and tall; built like warriors. While people milled noisily around them, Lelleth introduced him as Legionnaire.

“Goddess,” Legionnaire knelt, and spoke like a career soldier, “we are honored at your deliverance. All were praying you would come.”

Darkwing laughed.

“Goddess no more, but friend,” Jayd insisted. She had found a new trick, taught to her by the wiseman of Thiaz, that any world that possessed a teacher could teach the local languages to any with dragon rider helm, or bracelet of the traveler, and she had both. Lelleth would be pleased.

“Certainly,” he replied, like he would tell her she was a carrot if she asked him, but would never stop believing she was a goddess. Today had only convinced them even more.

“I am not come to deliver you, only,” Jayd confessed, “but to ask for your aid.”

“Then we give it, gladly,” Lelleth told her.

“I will summon every man who can hold a blade!” Legionnaire boasted. “Two thousand of this city alone within the hour! I-”

“We have a week, at best. And there is something we must find first.”

“You come to this world seeking treasures once more?” Lelleth smiled.

“Once again, treasures you get to keep,” Jayd smiled.

Others had gathered now, even the fat man who spoke to her the first day she arrived, not a week ago. What was his name?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Word was spreading fast, this meeting was not a secret, but soon guards pushed curious onlookers away at Norwich's insistence that ignorance was a protection to some.

"What is it, Morning Light?" the fat man asked her, was it Belioc?

She smiled at his obvious fawning.

"Have you come to take us away to your heaven?" He asked before she'd had time to reply.

"Not to a heaven, but we need warriors for a war. The plague has surfaced on Sanmarellis. Pure, the Princess of Pearl, is calling all warriors of the seven worlds to battle."

"Then this is a glorious cause!" Legionnaire shouted. "We will strike down this plague where it lies! We will win glory to our Goddess! We-"

The foreigners to this world, even Darkwing, pulled back at Legionnaire's sudden intensity, an almost palpable heat emanating from his war moved spirit. Even Stormbreath unconsciously adjusted his position to battle readiness.

"Calm yourself, good warrior," Jayd said, and he immediately obeyed, almost as if he didn't know how to feel unless she told him. "There will be time for battle soon. But listen; Lelleth, all you wise. We need to take our numbers to the portal, and teach it to take us to Sanmarellis. But we can't leave this town undefended, and we cannot take you all with us. We have a week."

"What are you going to do?" Lelleth whispered.

"Form the first dragon circle of Argentus! Then when your world is at peace, it will be a simple matter to walk a hundred, hundred warriors of

this world against the plague. You are the greatest warriors of the Seven, and I am proud to call you my friends!”

It was a simple speech, but they were still tearing up.

“I put out a call, as soon as you left,” Lelleth said, chocking through her tears, “and many heroes’ came, such as our Legionnaire here. Many are still on their way. I have allowed the heroes to consult the oracle. They are becoming wise.”

“Indeed!” Legionnaire agreed, “I never imagined the Westfolk and my people were descended from the *same ancestors*! But I have seen it for *myself*. Now, the blood feud between them and us *must* end!”

“And as others gain wisdom in the oracle, it will,” Lelleth agreed. “I have made contact with priests and priestess from all over the world via the oracles. They know what is happening, and are joining in the battle against the tyrants in secret with us, becoming wise... gathering heroes!”

“But then we struck a problem,” Belioc confessed.

“But there is a problem...” Lelleth spoke over him, seeming in great authority in a world governed by the men. “The dragons, they became suspicious. They knew we were up to something, and I fear, in some places they may have already forced or deceived some human allies into revealing our secret. The oracle on one land to the south fell strangely silent this morning! The dragons know, and now that this one has attacked us... I knew they were coming for the truth. If you had not arrived, it would have destroyed us, notwithstanding the great secrets I have gained from the oracle.”

“Are there no dragons who speak for you?” Jayd asked her.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“There may be, on other continents, lands far away. I hope you can forgive our language, it was not developed from a people as wise as thee.”

Jayd smiled, she did not let the good priestess know her people were well educated, in many ways, more than her own. They had interlocking shields, and watercourses that brought the life giving liquid right into many of their homes! Her people hadn't even considered that, but carried theirs from a well using a bucket. And she hadn't even asked the fortress where it got all its water from.

But Jayd just smiled, “Well, as far as I know, we need three things. First, we need to know where the conclave is. This would be a large cavern, or similar, with a spiral pattern on the floor?”

“There was such a place,” Lelleth said, fear in her countenance. “But the dragons destroyed it, centuries ago, oh, wo are we! Your cause has already failed!”

“Not so hasty,” Jayd and Norvich said at the same time. Jayd continued. “We can build our own. We just need a large crystal, and to leave it before a teacher for at least one night. Then it will create a conclave. All we need is a large cavern.”

“Now we do know of such a place,” Legionnaire spoke. “And of such a crystal. They are both in the hall of the Tyrant. But I know he is defended day and night by the six dragons who serve him as mates, and the tens of thousands of men who would die to protect him at any cost. Plus, there are his allies to be concerned about. Even if he fell, they, and his countless other enemies, would pour down upon us to claim his treasure. His fortress is the heart of a dead volcano; a mountain of sheer sides and no entrance but a narrow staircase that winds along-”

“Wait a minute, that makes it seem very defensible,” Jayd realized.

“What are you thinking?” Norwich said.

“Perhaps we can play a trick on this old dragon,” Jayd wondered.

“Lure him out for the day, defeat his guards, claim the crystal and scatter his treasure to lure away any who would claim his throne. We only need one night. We can bring the teacher from here, and then, at dawn, renew the conclave of dragons.”

“That is a bold tactic,” Lelleth smiled.

“You said there were three things?” the fat man asked.

“The second thing we need, and this is probably what we need first, is the alliance of the oldest dragon on Argentus. Do you know of the one?”

“Yes,” Belioc said, trembling visibly. “She is said to be ancient, older than a thousand years, though I have read records of a dragon meeting her description from over two thousand years ago! She is ‘the Empress of the north,’ and all dragons give her reverence. None dare approach her lair.”

“Then that is where we go first,” Jayd declared.

“And the third thing?” Lelleth pondered.

“That is more difficult. If she resists the bonding, we will have to slay her. We keep moving down until we find a *willing* dragon. After the first bonding, all dragons on Argentus will begin to feel the desire to bond, and move towards or away from their divinely appointed rider. The first thirty or so must take place in order, and if any resist the bonding, they must die or be forced to be touched by their rider on the forehead. After that, the joining will continue all over the world without regard to order. On Pearl, it took a day. It was a miraculous healing. You have never experienced anything like it! You never will again.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Then someone shrieked, "To the sky!"

Jayd looked up, and saw with a moment of horror that a huge brown dragon rode high in the sky, a golden dragon and its rider dead in its jaws. It dropped them from the sky.

The Tyrant had returned.

Rhoc

The dragons of Tourmarelle were expecting him.

Rhoc roared in victory as the small starboat of Thiaz finally pierced the fog cloaked world of endless night that was Tourmarelle. A part of him felt like he was coming home. The others who came with him on the starboat of Thiaz turned their noses up at the strange world and its endless trees of fungus. But Rhoc *loved* it.

He had journeyed with them for two days, listening to their conversations. Six dragons, two from each world, including Lightning. Four men; two from pearl, two of Thiaz, one of whom was a wisemen. Rhoc had watched them all become friends, and tried to tell them all about strange world they were about to visit. But now they were here, it was clear they never *really* hoped to set foot on this mud-soaked earth. Dragons were there, dragons in their hundreds of hundreds. Dark, twisted forms on shredded wings, others that flew by some miracle he knew not how to explain. When his companions saw them were at first repulsed, then afraid.

It made him smile.

Rhoc, knowing it would please his hosts, leapt from the sky and fell. The blow against the mud was intense, but the dragon armor, and his gift, kept him alive and laughing. As he swam back up it was to the cheering of dragons. The Starboat and its riders, whom he had not bothered to tell of his plan, flew down with concern written all over their faces.

He didn't bother with them. Throwing back his helmet he took to cheering, hugging every person he encountered. The black skinned people

smiled, and raised their bone spears in greeting every time they saw him. They put him on a raft, large enough to carry a family, and began to row him towards the great conclave where the dragons were clearly gathering. It was going too slow, so grabbing up two paddles he thrashed against the water and paddled so hard the craft tilted, great sheets of mud and water spraying out behind him.

That one act alone, he knew, would make him legend.

Fairystone, dancing by his side, laughed with him.

The cheering began to die down as they approached the conclave, the dragons of Tourmarelle waiting in reverence, the five headed matron awaiting his arrival at the head of the stones. Her two-legged mate resting on his customary perch.

Rhoc had been very careful to not bring any healing waters this time, and their wiseman, just in case, had been instructed to not carry his golden staff.

The Starboat drew low in the sky, and the five other men got out, Twoswords with them. Their dragons stayed on the deck of the Starboat and nodded in mutual respect to the residents of Tourmarelle. What they thought of the twisted and bloated locals they gave no indication, but many of the young dragons of Tourmarelle stared intently and without apology at them.

“Rhoc, boy with the strength of stone,” the matron began in her slow manner, “we greet you. The dragons of Tourmarelle greet you, the unbonded men of Tourmarelle greet you. The spirit of this world greets you. Friend, you are welcome here.”

Without thinking, Rhoc bowed down to the ground the way he'd seen the man do before Twisted the first day he'd arrive here, over a week ago

now. The dragons fairly glowed with honor and pride. A moment of silent reverence settled on the conclave.

“A bright day marks the first greeting of Thiaz, Sanmarellis, and the noble dragons of Tourmarelle,” the wiseman of Thiaz suddenly interrupted. They were all using the blessing of the Northern prophet now.

“And I am honored to be the first to greet the Priests of Thiaz in over three thousand years.” The matron replied with a smile, but a moment later Rhoc pondered if she had meant more, and if she meant to point out that they hadn’t been around for a while, and if she was maybe telling him she was still upset at him that Thiaz had abandoned them last time in their hour of need, and maybe...

“I see,” the wiseman of Thiaz muttered, “well, we are honored to meet the mighty matron of all dragons of Tourmarelle, and to find her in good health.”

Rhoc raised one eyebrow to look at the wiseman and he continued to speak, and how he seemed unable to see the way the matron raised her eyebrows at him as well. Why would he not shut up? And what was that about health, hadn’t he listened when Rhoc had told him and all the others about the terrible suffering they took on by allowing the plague into their bodies to protect the humans? She was not in ‘good health’, not at all.

The priest paused, and the matron drew a slow breath in preparation to speak. Yet the silence seemed again too long for the wiseman, and he interrupted her again. “Great dragons of Tourmarelle, we come with matters of trade, we-”

Rhoc walked up to the wiseman and slapped him on the back of the head. The old man almost fell face first into the mud.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rhoc glared at him till, finally, he fell silent. He could almost feel the amused laughter of the dragons and men of Tourmarelle.

The conclave, a grove amongst the enormous fungi of this world, again grew silent. Rhoc sat on the ground and waited a good hundred breaths until the peace had fully returned.

The matron smiled. *I am happy, most, oo see you Rhoc, strong man of the Celtwyld, ambassador of Pearl.*

I am honored to see you again, mother of all dragons on Tourmarelle.

She smiled. They both knew she wasn't the literal mother of all dragons, but it was an honored title he felt she deserved as their matron. She would know that.

We see you bring evil tidings however. I will excuse the rudeness of the yellow spirit whisperer; his people must learn our ways. Do him the honor of informing him, once more, that Tourmarelle has no need of his people's gifts, or trade.

"I will," Rhoc said in the reverent silence.

The dragons nodded.

What is the evil news? she wanted him to say it out loud.

"Sanmarellis is falling to the plague," he replied.

They dragons hissed, many roared. Rhoc saw his men clutch their weapons in fright, and bid them be at peace. Were they truly so wary of the dragons of Tourmarelle? Did they honestly think them just as perverted in spirit as they were in body? Had they not listened to him on the way over here?

Rhoc shook his head. They would have to see with new eyes. They would have to learn to be more silent, if they wanted to hear new things.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The dragons continued to hiss. Rhoc, and he assumed the other men, could hear frightening words in that hissing language. It sounded like dragon, but it was different somehow.

And the dragons were angry.

Let us die rather than live in peace while our enemy prospers!

Yes, let us go, Mother. We can get closer to the plague than our brother dragons of other worlds. We will make a difference!

I tire of this tortured life, let me die in battle!

She suffered the hissing till it died down completely. Then she slithered her enormous, five headed bulk up towards the center of the conclave. “It was a sorrowful day when we learnt that this conclave would never again find use to make us bonded as riders and dragon. We have suffered these three thousand years, and will do so ten thousand more to protect the men we love! We owe the plague its death for the suffering it has caused us. Every dragon of this world I can name would rather die than live while this pestilence prospers. We will help you. We will all help you!”

Please, you must leave some, to guard the men, her husband begged.

Let those who wish to remain do so.

Please, my sister, a huge dragon with eight legs spoke. You must stay here too. You are needed, you-

Bah! Don't you think I already know this! She spat from her five heads. But let the rest of you go with twice the vengeance in your hearts for this horror!

“They will help,” Rhoc explained, perhaps unnecessarily, to the assembled humans. They nodded.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

You will, however, she continued to the riders alone, have to provide us with some kind of transport. I feel you have closed the threads, and there are none of us who can travel between the stars, at least in any meaningful way, without them. So perhaps you have brought some of the boats of men? Or are more on their way?

The golden wiseman was silent, and Rhoc smiled. It was his cue to speak, but perhaps he was learning... to listen.

As the dragons watched in curiosity Rhoc walked up to the man, and staring at the ground in front of him, nodded.

The golden wiseman knew what he'd meant, "Queen, Mother... Perhaps you'd be wise now to stand away from the conclave?" he suggested in what must have been the politest form for his people.

She smiled, and slithered away with a look of curiosity and awe.

Yes, Twisted whispered, show us the forgotten glories of men.

The wiseman continued, "There is another way to travel among the stars, a way found by men from before the founding of the seven worlds. It-
"

The black thread, the matron's wyvern husband interrupted.

"Yes, you are correct," the wiseman replied.

All the dragons slithered or flew away from the conclave, the great stone spiral that was once the central meeting place of men and dragons on their world.

The black threads, Twisted whispered, *so they are not rumors?*

Rhoc smiled.

This was old wisdom, older than the seven worlds, Twisted continued.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The priest chanted, speaking to the oracles. Soon, an enormous circular ring began to rise up from the mud around the conclave. It was huge, large enough for an army to stand within. The ring of stone rose up, higher and higher, the moss and bracken of three thousand years, as measured on Tourmarelle, dripping from its surface. It was dark brown, carved with intricate patterns of silver and stone. As it rose, the air around it hummed gently.

Rhoc was glad the golden wiseman knew what he was doing.

Once the ring had reached high above the tops of the tallest fungi, a gentle white light began to descend from it. It floated down like spider threads, spiraling gently.

“Now we wait, to see if the Princess of Pearl receives our invitation,” the wiseman said.

A moment later, it seemed she had. The gossamer threads suddenly whirled around in a blizzard, and those watching were pushed backwards by the sudden gale. Lights and shades danced within the curtain until it slowly coalesced into a scene of a beautiful tree green world.

They stared at it in silence, till a single voice dared to break the reverence. “This is a cold, bright world,” the matron’s brother complained.

The five headed matron swam up to the bright curtain. She looked deeply at it, and in a moment allowed all dragons and men present to literally feel her despair and frustration that she was not able to go.

“Go!” she screamed. “Go, by my blessing and the will of Tourmarelle! Go, and kill everything if you have to! Burn and destroy, take back life from the clutches of the plague that prevents us from being whole!

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Fear not death or pain or maiming, my children, for all such are become you already. But does cowardice?"

They roared in defiance.

"Go, GO!"

And thousands of Tourmarelle, dragons, and their men as dragonfriends, raced through the door between the worlds.

"I wish you could have seen it," Pure told Rhoc later that hour when they met. "It's like a tornado, spiraling out from the base of the fortress. We can use it to go anywhere, as long as there is another portal for us to go to, and it is open. Otherwise the vortex is extremely dangerous. I wish we could have used it the first time, but felt that a single messenger would be more appropriate. If only Thiaz hadn't dismantled theirs when the plague struck!"

Rhoc nodded. He was a little worried; the dragons of Tourmarelle, twisted and repulsive to their own kind, had arrived lusting plague blood and anxious to see battle. Farwing was sending them out all over the world, and assigning their leaders to key positions in their own army. But Rhoc didn't know if they'd ever fit in with the dragons that fought this war already.

Pure guessed this thought, "As for me, I am pleased we of Pearl are not outnumbered by Thiaz ten to one anymore. They are behaving themselves very well this time, but they are powerful, educated, and so many! If they wanted to cause trouble, they could. But with Sanmarellis and now Tourmarelle on our side they are less likely to be inclined, or able to."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rhoc smiled. They would be all right. The strength of Tourmarelle was arriving. Perhaps with four worlds they might yet save Sanmarellis?

Quest for the Empress

“Get off my world, or die.”

The five riders waited on the ground. It was too late to try and take the battle into the air. The Tyrant had somehow got the drop on the other rider from Thiaz and slain both man and dragon just after they'd taken out the dragon that was attacking the town. It was not the great size, or skill of the Tyrant that had bested the dragon rider from Thiaz. It was his six mates that had won him that battle, and he knew it.

So seven dragons rode high in the air above a burning city.

“We can take them,” Norwich said.

Jayd looked at the burning city, “No, they are after the citizens here, not only us.”

All around, citizens had thrown themselves to the ground, begging the seven dragons in the air for mercy. Jayd was convinced, had they not had at least some lingering doubt that she really was a goddess some of them would have thrown her to the Tyrant without hesitation.

“I'm guessing,” Darkwing sighed, “that he's finally worked out that we are bonded.”

“Join me,” Jayd asked, activating her flying bracelet, and Darkwing flew her up in the air without hesitation. She hoped the levitation trick, and the fact that she showed no fear, might give the seven dragons in the air a moment to pause before thinking about tearing them to shreds. They could not have already forgotten the might of the dragon riders.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Then she leapt up onto Darkwing's head, spear drawn. The six female dragons surrounded them, and Darkwing was careful to remain just a little lower in the air than the Tyrant.

"Suffer these to leave in peace, and we will go," Darkwing said.

"We can take these five!" A female, the lead, hissed. She spoke in some language she assumed Jayd would not recognize, but by the Northern prophet's prayer, she did. The dragon showed crackling electricity down her spine.

The Tyrant ignored her, "You've been trouble again, you two. So, tell me what has happened? Has the plague finally been swept from all worlds, and now you, *interfering maggots* from Pearl again seek to tell us how to behave? You think to force on us the bonding once more? We would rather die..."

"Look at the disease on his head!" A slight female cried in dragon, so they would understand, "Don't touch him, he is covered in welts!"

Darkwing almost lost it, but Jayd reined him in. None could see behind his rage the deep pain he felt at having his rider insulted.

"Easy," she consoled him.

It made them laugh.

"Do the dragons of Argentus forget their oaths so soon?" Darkwing teased.

The Tyrant blew his flame and acid, harmlessly, up into the air. The females quivered, "I do not forget my oaths, but you have tricked me. You were never of this world, and this human never just a friend! So, I will hold to my oath till the end of my days, but only so long as you take this

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

abominable people away from my world! Get out, get off now or you will all die.”

They waited a moment.

“Thank you,” Jayd and Darkwing said, and it made them angry, and confused.

Jayd and Darkwing flew down, the seven flew higher into the air.

“Listen to me!” Jayd commanded in a voice loud enough for all in the city to hear, and by the remaining man of Thiaz, the adept, it echoed throughout the whole city.

The Tyrant looked very interested in that.

“We have to leave,” her people cried in dismay, “or face an attack by the Tyrant. I am taking you to Sanmarellis, where you can live in peace.”

Some looked like they might argue, but for the honor for their goddess, or fear of the tyrant in the sky, none did.

She smiled at them, for she was hiding a secret in her heart: get these out of danger, continue the quest, humble the Tyrant...

The weeping citizens had their baggage packed within an hour – they had been preparing for a siege or evacuation since the army of their enemies had been spotted approaching. They trailed out of the city in a slow, sorry caravan.

Jayd did what she could to hurry them, and the seven began burning their town to the ground the moment they left. They stopped to weep.

“Enough!” Jayd shouted after a moment. “There is no time for tears! Let the past burn, it will not outshine a brighter future! Get up, get up all of you, and march!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They were bred to follow orders. They stopped almost instantly, and marched away from their past at an impressive pace.

It was still half a day till they arrived at the portal. Jayd flew among the people all that time, organizing them, insisting the strong ones carry the weak – even the old and infirm – because they would die if left behind. The two dragons of Sanmarellis took up the rear, and never did Jayd wish they'd brought a much bigger army to Argentus. It was a mistake she intended to fix next time she came.

Yet as this people marched Jayd observed they had a strength and skill none had ever witnessed on Pearl. They all had been made to serve in the army from their fifteenth till their twenty fifth year, and any that failed that brutal training there died. They were bred to be warriors; tall, obedient. Those that were whole bore the ordeal without complaint. Jayd had to admit: she was impressed.

Soon the pillars that reached beyond the heights of the clouds could be seen.

It was time to make plans.

She spoke in her heart until the adept of Thiaz heard. *Tell Lelleth to go through first to guide the people. We riders will stay behind to guard the passage.*

Mistress, I have a fear, he replied, *the Tyrant is watching well our actions. I suspect he will want to renegotiate the terms of our treaty once he sees what the portal can really do.*

That gave her pause to think.

Do you have any surprises that might scatter the seven, should they attack?

I do, however-

“Pssst,” a voice suddenly whispered by her ear.

Darkwing swung away.

“Stay,” a dragon’s voice said, “or you’ll give away my presence.”

“Who are you?” Jayd whispered, speaking in dragon as best she could.

“Why can I not see you? Is this your dragon gift?”

“I am Ireala, and yes, I can make myself invisible to both dragon and human eyes. I have been hiding here since I heard rumors a week ago that someone had come through the sky portal. Now I see it is true! Is it really you? You are dragon riders, are you not?”

“We are,” Jayd smiled. Perhaps Divinity had sent an answer to her prayers.

“Not so clear,” Ireala whispered. “Nagi, the tan dragon high in the sky, has perfect vision. She can count a spiders legs on the edge of a mountain from the plain. Talk to the ground, as though to yourself.”

“I will,” Jayd replied.

“Riders, Riders!” the invisible Ireala rejoiced in a whispered voice, “I heard the forgotten tales from my grandfather, relived the forbidden memories from my ancestors. We were as one, weren’t we? I see you two are.”

“Incomplete until,” Darkwing sighed.

Ireala might have nodded. It was impossible to tell. She made no sound unless she intended, and scarcely was a breeze detectable when she was near. Or was that only the wind? Even Jayd could not tell, yet it was as if she spoke from a few paces away.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I have found my rider, she is very talented, even if she is still very young.” Ireala seemed to beam with pride. “But the bonding does not work for us. I do not know why.”

“Oh, I expect I can explain that,” Jayd replied.

For a moment Ireala was silent. “You realize,” the invisible dragon explained, “that the Tyrant will not allow you to leave this world?”

“I had supposed as much.”

“I imagine he expects you to bring reinforcements. He only wants to claim the portal for his own, but none of our kind can open it, and the humanity of this world no longer holds the memory.”

Jayd was silent, and relayed this message to the adept, who sent it on to Lelleth and Legionnaire.

Norvich soon knew as well, and it was he who came up with the clever solution. *We cannot fight the dragons like this; we need to get these people off world as soon as we can. Have the wiseman stand between the pillars, as if he is needed to hold the door open in person. Have his strain as though the weight of the task was great. Then have the people make a run for the portal, and we will stall them as dragon riders, and Ireala with us. They will know to fear the bonded!*”

Let it be so, Jayd agreed.

They took up battle readiness, as secretly as possible, but their preparations were not lost on the Tyrant or his keen-eyed mate. The seven were spreading out through the sky. They must have considered they had the advantage of numbers and hidden powers, but that was both diluted with the arrival of Ireala.

Provided she could be trusted.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The adept bid her trust the invisible dragon, but Jayd knew better than to trust a thing was true just because the wiseman believed it.

They reached the portal at dusk, the Tyrant was clearly wary as Darkwing's wingspan visibly increased. He looked like he was gunning for a rematch, but wanted Jayd out of the picture first.

Like she was ever going to let *that* happen.

The portal was massive, an hour's walk at a leisurely pace between the two great pillars. The adept stood in the center, summoning the energies with great acting. Perhaps a little too much, for thrice he tried and failed, and on the third attempt fell to the ground, and called for water.

The seven circled slowly overhead.

Jayd spoke through the helm, *You're not overdoing this, are you?*

He smiled inwardly at her. *All in a day's deception*, he replied.

Gathering his strength he summoned the portal again, and this time, roaring as though with superhuman effort, the door in space was rent open. Within the beautiful, endless stretches of verdant wilderness stretched on forever. Trees laden with fruit, birds of all varieties in the air. Sanmarellis looked even more beautiful than before. There was no indication of the violent battle with the plague that was being fought there.

"Ahh," the Tyrant whispered.

They drew their weapons, and Jayd felt, rather than saw, the flight of Irealia.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

An instant later the huge brown tyrant flew to the portal, and stretched out his wings, “I am sorry, but I must insist we renegotiate the terms of your banishment. Unless you all want to die, you will leave this priest and his dragon to me. I-”

So that *was* what he wanted, the chance to conquer Sanmarellis! Yet the Tyrant never did finish, for that was when the priest of Thiaz decided to humble the pride of the dragons of Argentus. A massive explosion of energy blasted out from the portal, stunning the seven from the sky. Yet herself and all the allies of the adept were unharmed. The humans ran, the fat man surprisingly swift on his feet leading the way. Two dragons from Sanmarellis went with them.

The Tyrant, struggling to stand after having been blasted from the sky, turned to breathe on them. An instant later a golden bolt of seemingly Divine light shot him in the back. It came from both the pillars. The tyrant roared in pain, his females helpless to assist him.

Jayd glowed with hope. They were about to escape!

And then she would return with that army.

“Please,” Ireala begged in her ear, “please do not abandon us.”

And then the Tyrant would have time to prepare. And then there would be war. And then the humans would be cut down between the two great armies.

Divinity bore witness in her heart; she could not leave. Not yet, not while the world was still in oppression.

Jayd found her heart in an instant, or as Pure might say, ‘made up her mind’ in an instant, *Norvich, ride with them. Ireala, take up that woman there, her name is Lelleth. She’ll be needed here.*

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Agreed,” Norwich shouted, riding Stormbreath against the faster females, preventing them from regaining their advantage. Lightning shot across the land, scaring one pillar, but the portal remained.

Jayd took to the air, and Darkwing gained the Tyrant’s attention with a plume of black flames. “Then I, too, recall the terms of this treaty.” Jayd roared in their ears, “I will stay, until you are humbled, and the warriors of Argentus are called to serve a greater cause than to die in the senseless and capricious wars of the Tyrants!”

They roared now, but almost all the humans were through. The adept, and his dragon stepped within and out of the ability to return. The Tyrant tried to race the portal, but found his legs suddenly encased in stone, and was too injured to pull himself free as yet.

Then Jayd saw Lelleth helping a struggling child through. A moment later a spectral image of a giant grey beast with antlers sharpened for war charged her – the gift of one of the tyrant’s mates, to summon the shadow beings.

But at the last instant a huge talon cut from nowhere and slashed the partially real beast into oblivion.

“Ireala...” the dragon mistress hissed.

Lelleth threw the child to the adept, who in catching her lost his hold on the portal, and it began to snap shut. The Tyrant roared, and struggled to bight out at Lelleth, but in the next instant she disappeared into the arms of Ireala.

Time to leave, Darkwing stated.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Take the Legionnaire first, Jayd replied. He was holding back till everyone got through, but it was too late for him to join them now. Darkwing swooped down, and snatched him up.

Norvich, get back to Sanmarellis! She ordered.

She could feel him complain, but in the folding remains of the shredded portal, he left.

None were faster than Darkwing, and in moment he had left the scene behind, heading west. Within an hour the pursuing dragons were far behind the horizon, and they turned to head north.

“I hope Irealia and Lelleth catch us,” Jayd prayed.

“I know they will,” Legionnaire agreed.

“I hope I don’t have to carry you during the day,” Darkwing complained.

The rode on in silence till dawn.

Snow

I don't want to do this. Snow buried her face in her hands.

I know. I'd rather be leading the battle against the plague of Sanmarellis, Windfyrth commiserated. *But your Princess has asked this, and I see her wisdom in confronting the barbarians of Ethphraim once more. Still, four days is a long time to be away from a battle.*

Snow shared her dragon's anxiety. They had taken four of the fastest, most powerful skyboats of Thiaz, with over three hundred elite warriors – vastly more than was needed.

But now that they were bearing down on the dusty blue orb that was Ethphraim, every fear, every anxiety, every desire for revenge welled up inside her once more.

“Just let me do the talking,” the student of Thiaz smiled at her.

She didn't smile back.

“We take only six riders,” Windfyrth told him, and he nodded professionally. “Tell me, what have you learnt?”

He rubbed his scanty beard. Windfyrth's people were once from Thiaz, but they lacked much of similarity now. Still, she knew how to get along with them, and it seemed to involve a lot of direct orders and too many apologies. Not very like the people of the Celtwyld, not like them at all.

“As you know, we managed to make contact with the people of Ethphraim two days ago. They have a number of machines in circulation around the world, and we found our way into their communication network with relative ease, it was not very complicated. We contacted their leaders,

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

and they have arranged a meeting place – the mountain you already know so well.”

“Why there?” Snow protested.

The student smiled, “They know you do not fear it. I expect that now they are aware of the truth of the rest of their local star system they are going to be a lot more polite. They thought themselves the only world in the cosmos with life on it!”

Snow scoffed.

“I know, right!” the student openly laughed. “But we have discovered they have a strange dialect of dragon that we can use for communication, apparently based off an older tongue of people who built landing platforms of the old type – square based pyramids. They are trying to catch up quickly, and I think they have a few talented individuals they will be using to communicate with us.”

“Have they no priests?” Windfyrth asked.

“Not that I can tell. Or they do, but they know so very little. Almost none of their world is protected, or sanctified by all but the most basic of protections. And even then, I suspect it is more by accident than deliberate design.”

“But why the mountain!” Snow complained.

The student grew serious, “There is another complication, unique to this world. I think they want to keep our meeting a secret.”

“They *what?*” Snow demanded.

“Their world is divided into several hundred nations. Each with their own agenda, and wars are common between them. One nation currently holds a powerful stance above the other nations, and assigns itself a peace

keeping role. But that hold is tenuous, in many ways. Their world fears the instability a sudden revelation of the state of their universe may cause.”

“They are already unstable, keeping so many secrets...” Snow muttered.

The student shrugged.

A moment later they were riding down in a dawnlit sky. Snow’s body told her night was approaching on Pearl. Her day had been long, and stressful, while theirs was only beginning.

They brought only an elite team; two dragons from Sanmarellis, one with gifted supernatural healing. Two from Thiaz, bearing a priest and a warrior of some fame on their world, apparently. Snow thought they both just had too much muscle, but perhaps that would give the barbarians pause to think before attacking. Two dragon riders from Pearl, herself, and the great polar warrioress with her deadly spear.

They rode down through dappled clouds in the morning sky. No iron birds rose to meet them. As they neared the earth no armored turtles rained fire on them. There was a line-up of armed guards, presumably the bravest on their world. They bore weapons, but held them down by their side.

They are nervous, Windfyrth chuckled.

She flew down from the sky, and landed so heavily it made the ground tremble. As the other dragons landed behind her she opened her wings, and shattered the morning silence with a roar that would have destroyed the moral of any army of Pearl. It started the birds from the trees. One man fainted, but the rest held their place.

Snow had to admit it, even she was impressed.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

A leader of the men of Ethphraim stood forward, and removed his helmet. His face was pale. “Ambassadors from distant worlds. We welcome you to our world, in the name of peace. Come, we wish to talk.”

“Not even a meal first?” Snow said in disdain.

The student of Thiaz then replied, in an old form of dragon. She hoped the men of Ethphraim understood his words, they didn’t have any wisemen, so they couldn’t have the northern prophet’s prayer. “Let the glory of divinities light shine on this, our second meeting. This is a meeting of forgiveness, of bounty, and of war. We are grateful to be here.”

Snow said nothing.

Come, Windfyrth demanded to her, we are going to meet these like civilized people.

She didn’t smile, but rode on her dragon as the six of them entered the mountain fortress without fear.

None of the men dared look at her.

The meeting was insufferably boring. There was only water to drink, or some bitter cheeses and dry biscuits. Snow didn’t even try their wine, and yet for some reason they even seemed pleased at that!

The meeting was held in the great room, their tower having been dismantled. Snow was grateful for that, at least they could fit all the dragons in a meeting now. Most of them had no real interest in the long-winded discussions of men, but Windfyrth was not that kind of dragon. She had almost as much to say as the golden student, which was a lot.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Indeed, the room was large enough to hold a conclave, if Ethphraim hadn't killed all its dragons.

The old general was nowhere to be seen, some new man standing in his place. Somehow the surgeon had survived, but could not meet her eye.

Ethphraim began with a formal apology, most especially to her, and Windfyrth. They offered musical instruments, their weapons of black rods, even gold. Windfyrth denied them all, calling it a simple misunderstanding, but Snow suspected she did it to keep them wary.

Then they talked about the stars in general, and the scholars of Ethphraim were lost in the news of the seven worlds. However, they looked quite grim at news of the plague.

Finally, Snow thought bitterly. *Finally, they understand.*

She still wanted to slap them all for being so stupid, and more especially for trying to keep it all secret from their own people, even now.

After that, Snow found that she lost interest. Discussion of wars, and nations, and something called 'genetics'. It was hopeless. She could understand none of it. She didn't even want to be here. So after an hour or so, she simply spoke up. "What I need to understand," she interrupted whatever they were talking about, "is why you need to keep all this a secret from your own people?"

She waited while a man in a white robe, a scholar or priest of their own world, attempted to translate her question to the new general. The student of Thiaz tried to help.

"OK," the one they called general cleared his throat. "I understand it is often difficult for outsiders to understand our ways, especially ones as young, well, especially ones not from around here. You see, there are many

nations on this world, many secret societies that would terrorize our people, how to explain this? We fear that the sudden admission that our local corner of the galaxy is full of thriving cultures of humans, allies with dragons no less, would destabilize our international economies. There'd be mass hysteria, a drop in markets, looting, and plundering. People here would act irrationally, more especially if they found out about your plague. There would be panic.”

Snow sighed. It didn't matter what this man thought. He was going to keep his superiors' orders. He was going to keep this meeting a secret from his world forever.

“We are, however, initiating a high-level government initiative to break the news to the people carefully. We are beginning with the conspiracy theorists and investigative journalism. We intend to stagger the introduction of any technologies you feel willing to share with us. We estimate that within twenty to fifty years it will be possible to approach our people with the truth.”

Snow sighed with exasperation, and turned her face away from the man. *What a world of fools*, she thought out loud.

Windfyrth did not reply, but she knew her dragon was thinking that the people here were actually showing some prudence, even if the mighty dragon herself did not agree with their goals. She felt they had the right to govern their own world as she saw fit.

Even if it meant they all died with plague? Snow wondered. Those in power thought only of themselves. Had they no knowledge of the afterlife? Did they not worry about what would happen to their graves if their children

died in ignorance? Did none of them cling to the memory of their ancestors, and fear for the world in which their children would grow up in?

The general was saying more, but she couldn't hear him. She didn't want to. She wanted to put her helm on and walk out on a room full of selfish, murderous fools.

But she was supposed to finish her mission first.

That was when she saw it, the tell-tale slither of a creature's tail. It looked a bit like a melleit, but Snow already knew about the giant mice of this world. They were good to her the first time.

At last, she thought, someone sensible to talk to.

She jumped down to kneel on the floor by the small hole, speaking softly, "It's all right. Please come out now. Come talk to me."

She heard its voice from within, "You're joking right?"

"No, I'm not. Please come out, I need someone to talk to."

She was very aware of how everyone had stopped to watch her talk to the floor.

"You're not going to hurt me, are you?" the creature said. "They hate us here, call us 'rats'. They hunt us, and place poison. They kill us if they see us. How can I trust you?"

"Because I'm not like them. I'm from another world."

"What does that mean?"

"A faraway place. I am not like them. Not like the men here at all."

It stuck its little nose out, and sniffed the air. She felt the human's tense at its presence.

"You can be brave here. I will protect you," she promised.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I choose to believe you,” it said, and crawled out. She held down her hand, and after sniffing it in a most gentle manner, he crawled on.

“Ha!” he said, straining out to sniff the assembled men and dragons. “Not so brave now, are we! This one is nice. She is worth *all* of you.”

Snow giggled.

Windfyrth translated, and the men of Ethphraim stared in fear and astonishment. An animal talking, what would they think?

“What are those?” the rat asked.

“Dragons,” Snow assumed, “they’re not from around here either.”

“I wonder,” it said. “There is a cave, well below. Their life energy reminds me of that place.”

“Really?” Snow wondered. *More secrets, no doubt.* Without hesitation she asked the men of Ethphraim to explain.

With nervous hearts they claimed she didn’t know what they were talking about.

Something about the rat was different, and Snow began to perceive it might have once been a treasured companion of a human. He seemed a little less fearful of them than she’d expected.

He asked to be placed on the table. Without fear, he traced out an image with his own body. It was a symbol, simple. Four straight lines, joined at the edges, crossing over, with a triangle in the middle.

The men truly became pale.

“I think I’d like to see this place,” Snow insisted.

The translator said nothing, it was obvious what he was thinking.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The men of Ethphraim said nothing, but looked at each other. A moment later the general said, "If we take you, you may have to come alone. The way is too narrow for your dragons."

"That is a lie," the student of Thiaz smiled.

The general protested, as though he really didn't think it was possible, but the surgeon whispered to his side, "The chimney grants access. We had it widened in case we ever needed to, you know, remove the artefact in great haste."

"I really should teach you people how to provide a sequester," the golden student smiled.

The general sighed, and the rat ran onto Snow's waiting arm, "I don't think they like me, even more!" he said, and snuggled into her hair.

In the cave

Three days.

It should not have taken three days, but it did. They slept during the day, hiding in the most unassuming places. Darkwing carried them at night, racing faster than sound through the high air. Her bracelet kept Legionnaire from freezing, but she still wished she'd brought a wiseman. By now dawn was creeping over the horizon, and they'd taken shelter early in a cave so that Darkwing could rest.

"What do you suppose it is like?" Legionnaire suddenly asked. She knew he meant the place they were seeking, the home of the Empress of the North.

"I was hoping you would tell us," Jayd replied. This man was a staunch gentleman, always taking care of her comfort before his own. The two of them took turns taking watch at day, but all were exhausted. It was even more impressive that Legionnaire, who would answer to no other name, had survived a week of war before the flight.

He must have had a heart of steel.

"I have heard nothing, only that the dragon Empress, oldest of her kind, dwells under the northern lights. I look forward to meeting her, if she does not eat us."

"From what I can gather," Darkwing added, "she holds no human servants in her territory. I can sense her presence from here, when I sleep. She is not like the other matrons; she has gathered enormous power to her

throne. But not the kind of men or dragons, it is another thing, I'm not sure which. But she knows we are coming."

"Do you think we will be welcome?" Jayd asked.

Darkwing paused before replying, "Yes... and no. My dreams tell me that she is at odds with herself... we'll just have to wait and see what she does."

Jayd stoked the fire, using the wind.

Legionnaire watched her, his face filled with wonder... and admiration.

She started to feel uncomfortable under his unmoving stare. He was a man, and she a girl, even if there was a dragon to chaperone them.

She stood up, and walked to the cave entrance, as much to take in the fresh air as to avoid his gaze. She looked out at the shadows of the dawnlit forest. Day would be here soon. She heard Legionnaire stoking the fires behind them.

"I will hunt soon," he informed her. "As much for warmer clothing as for food. There is a village not an hours walk from here. I can take provisions there."

"Why do you not purchase them?" she asked.

"I don't speak the language, as you do," he told her. "Besides, they are going to be in service to one tyrant or another. They are honor bound to tell him or her of any vagabonds on their territory. It is better that our passing go... unnoticed."

She knew what he meant. Just last day they'd lost sleep fleeing from a tyrant they would rather not confront.

She sighed, and hugged her arms against the cold of the morning.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Can I offer you my cloak?” he said, uncomfortably close. She hadn’t even heard him stand up now.

But she didn’t move.

“The men of this world are so brave,” she said instead. “Our way was to flee if a dragon attacked. You draw your swords and try to make a stand. And you do! I am honored to know your people, Legionnaire.”

She allowed the cloak to be slid over her shoulders.

“It is we who are honored to know you, goddess,” he whispered by her. She could feel the enormous heat of his body, though he didn’t dare touch her. “You awaken the oracle, you begin a rebellion that can reach across an entire world! A world that is just so much larger than we ever knew. I thank the ancestors who brought life, and taught the land how to rain and fill the seas. But you... you have set us all free.”

She turned, unafraid now, though he stood so close. “Well, at least not yet.”

“But soon!” He shook his fist. Then he seemed ashamed of his own feelings, and stood away from her. Turning to the fire he turned to stoking the coals once more.

“Why do you all fight so?” She asked. “I know it is not to serve the tyrants, you attack any your tyrant will tell you to. What drives the bold warriors of Argentus?”

He stirred the flames, staring within at the embers as though they narrated his story for him, “We are told, by our mothers and the ancestors, that after death we must pass by the river. We pay the ferryman with the coin the priest presses into our hand at the grave ceremony. Then we pass the guardian, the three headed snake. Then, at last we are sorted into our fate.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Those who are judged evil are assigned to the fields of torment; traitors, liars, oath breakers and the like. They live eternally where spirits torture them endlessly. Those who are judged honest and good are sent to the unending battles of Enguardium. There they are reforged as immortal warriors who cannot be slain. There they battle day in, day out, preparing for the great day in which the gods will return and... so said my mother... free us from the tyrants.”

She raised an eyebrow at this.

“Oh, the tyrants would have us change the ending to serving them for eternity, but in whispered tones... our mothers knew better.” He pointed his stick at her, indicating towards her heart, and blinked back his tears.

She shook her head. So that was why ... they put so much faith in her. She was a living legend. A myth incarnate. A promise of deliverance made flesh.

How could any one person live up to *that* expectation?

But she knew in her heart, she would die trying rather than let them stay prisoners on their own world. Even if she wasn't a goddess, she could still do everything in her power to help them. Especially if they believed in her.

He cleared his throat, and wiped his eyes.

“What about the others?” she asked, wanting to hear more of his stories.

“Those who are judged neither good nor evil? That is the largest amount of them. Normal people, living normal lives. Or honest soldiers whose hearts fail them in their final battle. Or criminals who find repentance soon enough before their own death. Those whose lives are in a balance

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

between what is good, and what is evil. They are left to wander. They are set free, sometimes back into this world, and left to wander. They have no fear, no hunger. No passion. They simply are. To me... that would be the worst fate of all.”

“And that is why you fight,” she thought out loud. “To win yourselves a place in the most glorious war history has ever known.”

He nodded sincerely, the flickered light of the resting fire dancing in the reflection of his reshaping blade, the one she knew he could bring to life in a heartbeat. The one that would sunder a dragon’s scales or cut down a tree, and he wasn’t even a true dragon rider yet. The blade that would surely kill anything that attempted to harm her in any way.

“I am sure you have long since earned yourself such a place,” she told him.

Yet he stared grimily into the fire. He was not prepared to rest, nor to enter heaven.

Suddenly Jayd yawned, realizing she was quite tired. She allowed him to spread out her bedding and she fell quickly into a dreamless sleep, comforted by the presence of her dark dragon, and the huge man with his dancing blade devoted wholly to protecting her.

The Portal of Ethphraim

Snow sighed when she saw it. The rat had done well; he had lead her right to one of her goals.

“A portal!” Windfyrth smiled. She and a golden dragon were all that would fit in the little room. It was armored, coated in strange grey iron. Symbols were on each door, and a wall of transparent stone protected a smaller room of their colored grey cabinets with lights on them.

But their attention was drawn to the two stone pillars in the center of the small room. They were tall, three times the height of men, covered in rune of ancient words Snow did not know. The floor around them had similar writing pressed into the stone by ancient hand, and one was the symbol the rat had drawn.

“This is good,” Windfyrth announced. “Now you can heed the call. Now you can send your armies through to join the glorious battle against the plague!”

“Indeed, but we don’t know how to operate the pillars, and we’ve been trying for, well decades. Only once did we achieve an opening, and we still don’t know how. The world beyond was purple dust, but it still changed all we knew about the universe.”

“I will show you how,” the golden adept smiled. “I will stay behind, and teach you all you need to know about the pillars.”

“And no doubt charge handsomely for you time?” Windfyrth scoffed.

“Of course!” The adept smiled. “The gold of Ethphraim is very good, and let’s be honest, people of Thiaz can never have enough gold.”

Windfyrth scowled at him. "I do not like the direction your alliance is likely to go," she told him out flat.

He smiled, but hid poorly his disdain at her open rebuke. But, for whatever reasons, Windfyrth allowed it. They were, after all, a very primitive people here on Ethphraim. They needed all the help they could get.

"How many," Snow asked.

"How many what?" The general replied through the echoing voice enhancer, far more primitive than a wiseman's staff.

"How many warriors?" she said, exasperated.

"Oh, a hundred elite by the end of the day!" the general boasted. "And a thousand by the week, if you need them, we--"

"A thousand?" Snow said with disgust, "and you are *proud* of that? Have you no understanding of the danger you face? Do you not even care? Your world will be dust when the plague arrives here, in a week if not less. For whatever reason the Princess had required your assistance, and you send only a thousand? Have you no *shame!*"

He was insulted at her rebuke, and even Windfyrth held her peace.

"A hundred, by the end of the day, if you are able to show us how to use the pillars. We will be grateful. But a hundred is all we can spare at this time."

"Because the rest are busy keeping lies?" she told him.

"Snow, enough," Windfyrth chided her. "You are better than this."

But she wasn't. In spite of herself, she broke into tears. Perhaps it was her disgust at their secretive ways? Perhaps it was the horror of being confined in their caves yet again? Perhaps it was the humiliation she would feel when her world brought along less than a hundredth of anyone else's?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Something was bringing out the worst in her. How did Windfyrth, who had died here, not level this building at its first sight? Did dragons have larger hearts than men?

Suddenly she felt a gentle nudging on her chin. It was the rat. He said nothing, but nudged her sympathetically, almost playfully.

She smiled.

She knelt down, and let him scurry away to the hidden nooks in the vertical cavern they called the 'chimney'.

Still, some things were worth saving on this world, she realized.

"I have only one regret," Snow informed the general that evening, as the first hundred soldiers of Ethphraim prepared to leave. They carried a strange assortment of tools and weapons. Each had dozens. Not one of them seemed bonded to their tools, not one! Again, she wondered at the wisdom of including soldiers of this world at all.

But they had to know the truth of what was happening out there among the stars.

"What is that?" the translator asked her.

"That you have no dragons."

"I regret that too. Legends tell of beasts that were described as your dragons appear. Legends from only a few hundred years ago. Recent ones, too, if they are to be believed."

"Recent?" Snow asked. "How recent?"

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Well, current, I suppose. One that is said to swim in a deep lake in the cold north.”

Snow felt her hope rising.

A dragon, even only one.

It would be enough to save this world.

It took her only a moment to locate the adept. He was in a room talking to the General; they almost didn't let her in. She still hardly cared. They had killed her. They would talk to her whenever she wanted.

She told the adept her idea, while the translator struggled to help the General understand. Without an operating teacher on their world the Northern prophet's prayer had no effect.

The adept seemed pleased, “I suppose I can use the pillars to augment a call, similar to a conclave. Yes, if there are any dragons, we can find them.’

Also, Windfyrth continued to Snow in her heart, I have brought a gift. A crystal that has spent a day before a teacher. The scholar of Thiaz intends to sell them one at great price. He will not be pleased when I offer one as a gift! It can be used to form new teachers all over their world. It can be used to reinitiate the conclave of dragons right here!

She was glad Windfyrth was listening.

“Call them,” she ordered the adept, who nodded politely. He explained his idea to the General, who was very enthusiastic.

But the adept was a fool if he thought she couldn't tell he'd be glad to see her go. It was clear now, he was not leaving Ethphraim, and they did not want him to go. They would sell him anything he wanted to get their hands on his knowledge and the tools of men. And then they would keep them all secret from their people. Ethphraim was not the most highly

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

populated world of the seven, not at all. But they managed their people with a kind of disdain that was bordering on the insane.

But Snow ignored all that.

They went downstairs to the portal once more, and the scholar enacting a ritual with great showmanship, calling on the dragons of Ethphraim, to see if any remained to answer the call.

The Empress of Argentus

They arrived just after midnight the next day. They were flying high in a polar sky, across ice covered lands. The trees had surrendered trying to find root in the cold soil many leagues before. Jayd was glad she'd brought the warmer clothes, for while the bracelet kept them warm, and the arm of the solider even warmer, there was something about the white lands below that seemed to convince her she should feel cold even when she didn't. She had no idea how Darkwing survived, but he did not complain. After all, he could survive the emptiness of space; perhaps snow swept tundra did little to cool his blood at all.

"Behold!" Legionnaire said, pointing.

There, rising up over the horizon, was a cliff of blue ice. It looked like the heart of an extinct volcano, and it was very large. There could be no doubt, the dragon Empress waited for them here.

"The heart of ice..." Legionnaire whispered.

"Ride low in the sky," Jayd told Darkwing, and he quickly obliged.

"You don't suppose-" Legionnaire began to say.

Suddenly the land was torn with an unexpected gale. Sheets of white ice seemed to spring up in deadly pillars of wind, twisting columns of spiraling air. Darkwing roared against the onslaught.

"Courage, my dragon!" Jayd called to him, and held on tighter. Her breath then almost left her as Legionnaire pressed down all his weight and muscle to hold her on to Darkwing's saddle. She thought it excessive, until an instant later the rude gale whipped past Darkwing and along them. She

almost fainted at the incomprehensible strength of the wind as it bashed into them, yet Legionnaire held strong.

“Go, go!” he roared.

Darkwing suddenly leapt forward, answering the Empresses’ challenge. With unmeasured skill, born from years of running the dead man’s fingers by violent sea breezes, he navigated the forest of tornadoes... and survived.

The gale died.

“We live!” Legionnaire smiled, and they laughed.

Then a dark mist began to roll up from the ground.

“For now,” he continued.

A moment later they were engulfed in the blackness. Jayd could see nothing, and lost all sense of direction. It was as if the darkness was trying to draw out her fears, to consume her from within by her own nightmares. She grit her teeth.

“We are one,” Darkwing told her, and heard Legionnaire breathe more calmly as well.

“How can you see?” he asked them.

“I cannot. But I know darkness,” Darkwing replied. “This is a little thing, hold tight, Legionnaire. There is but one course of action for this... we must weather the storm.”

They rode in silence, Legionnaire clinging to Jayd now as though his life depended on hers. Jayd held tight to her bond with Darkwing. She felt the darkness surround them, penetrate them. It reached inside her heart. Helplessly, she watched as it reached towards the bright silver cord that tied her to her dragon. She felt that darkness try and extinguish that light.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

No. Jayd replied, *we are as one.*

The darkness dissipated, and suddenly they could see once more. Jayd breathed in deeply – that was one of the scariest things she'd ever experienced.

Legionnaire wept openly, but did not beg to flee.

She laughed, and touched his cheek. His tears stopped. He was a man who could not, or did not, hide his feelings.

"I wonder what else-" Jayd began, but did not have to finish her words to find out. The sky was suddenly filled with a hundred bright auroras, gleaming blue and orange and green. It was so bright she almost had to look away. A moment later she gasped.

In front of them lay not one, but hundreds of blue walls, hundreds of hearts of ice.

"What happened... which one?" Legionnaire muttered.

"I have no wisdom that can pierce this illusion..." Darkwing voice was weak, it sounded like an apology.

Jayd sighed; she fought them, this matron. She looked out at the mountains of ice, all alike. She wondered which one was the true one, or if the one they were heading towards was the correct one on the first place.

How to pierce this illusion?

She did the only thing she knew; she prayed. Not two words into it her eyesight fell on the nearest pinnacle.

"That one," she announced, feeling confident, yet with no evidence to back up her bravado.

"I agree," Darkwing said.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Suddenly an icy breeze flew around them, and within it great bats of ice were created. They had talons like knives, and mouths full of razor teeth.

Darkwing greeted them with a plume of his black fire, and those that were caught in it shattered immediately. An instant later he roared as a few caught hold of his tail and dug their claws in.

She drew her swords, and stood up. Legionnaire gasped in surprise, then cried out in fear as she jumped backwards over his head. Activating her bracelets she flew at the bats and shattered them before they could do any more harm.

The wind here was her friend. She flew. Dancing and dodging as one with her dragon, she flew. They weaved, sliced, and Darkwing's great breath filled the air with power and darkness.

Legionnaire cried out in fear and rage as he swung about wildly. He may have even managed to destroy one or two, a testament to his incredible skill. He did not know what it was like to have one heart fighting in two bodies, as a dragon and rider do.

A heartbeat later the bats were slain. Jayd rode on the air and landed on Darkwing's great neck. She was about to return to the saddle when she saw Legionnaire gaze, an abject look of utter adoration.

No man had ever looked at her like that before, like she really was a goddess. Like at any moment he would die willingly just to please her.

Like he would live every moment of his life serving her, just to see her smile.

It was more than she could claim of any man, let alone one who was riding with her to war.

"Enough," she told him.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He sat back, his soldier like professionalism returning in an instant.

But she knew what fire he hid in his heart.

Without looking him in the eye, without taking a moment to ponder the situation she was in, she sat down.

They were swooping now, towards the heart of ice. Suddenly great clouds of snow began to billow around the entire massive base of the mountain.

“Enough!” cried Jayd.

And, to the Empresses’ credit, the snow suddenly stopped.

She heard Legionnaire gasp.

“We have had enough of your tests,” Jayd whispered to the Empress of ice, whom she was certain now would hear her. “We have come to set you free.”

No further trials assaulted them, and in a moment Darkwing was circling the mountain, looking for a way in. Legionnaire’s keen eyes spotted it first, a gentle mist rising up from the top edge of the mountain.

They rode towards the mist, and found a narrow crevice in the ice, too small for Darkwing unless he used his claws to make room for himself.

“I will go first,” Jayd replied.

They landed, and to her immediate surprise, the air within the crevasse was warmer, much warmer than she expected.

Legionnaire and Darkwing looked at her.

Carefully she edged her way down, using her knives to dig into the ice and prevent herself from slipping.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

It only took a moment to enter the cavern within, and she stopped when she did, Legionnaire and Darkwing pressing in behind her. The scene in front of them took her breath away.

Trees.

Thousands of trees, with a warm temperate mist rising up from them. Flowers of all colors brightly bloomed, and there were structures where a large dragon might rest, or eat. Great birds flew through the sweet smelling air, and large orange fish frolicked openly in the gentle stream than ran from a far wall towards the center lake.

But it was the stars that impressed her the most, for it seemed the entire heart of ice was entirely transparent from within. She well imagined that one could look out and see the whole world from here.

Carefully, commanding the winds, she helped Darkwing to place Legionnaire in the saddle once more, and they all flew down.

Towards the center, by the lake, was a platform made entirely of black ice. It reminded her of the place where the Matron of Pearl would call a conclave, so it was there that they headed.

As soon as they landed Legionnaire threw down his weapon, and kneeling down on one knee, surrendered himself to the mercy of whatever dragon owned this miraculous place.

Jayd stood next to him.

“This is sacred land,” Legionnaire muttered, almost seeming to beg her to kneel with him.

She looked out at the quiet, beautiful landscape. It seemed no dragon was there, but to be polite, and because they needed a friend here, she decided it was wisest to respect this dragon’s domain.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

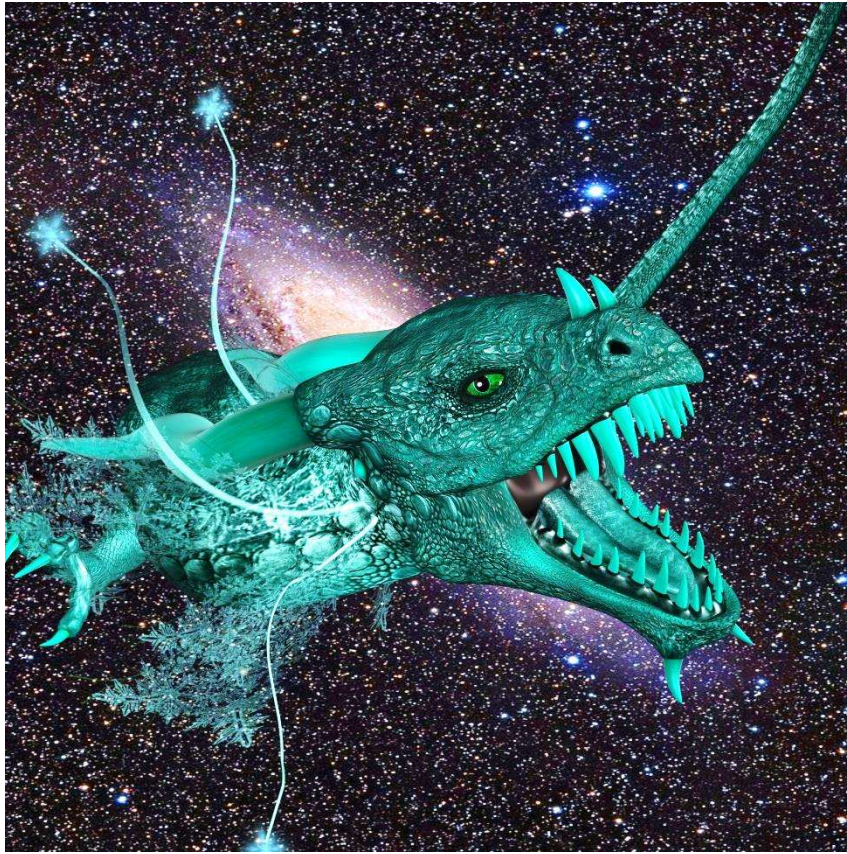
She, and Darkwing with her, knelt too.

A moment later a mighty dragon shared a gentle laugh, echoing off the vast walls of this cavern.

They looked up, and Legionnaire lowered his eyes immediately. Jayd looked to where he was looking, and saw, appearing from the air itself, a huge dragon, an aerial drake. She was the size of Farwing, no, even more. Large enough to rival the matron of Pearl, rest her soul.

She slithered through the air like it was water, laughing gently.

Slowly, almost too casually, she circled them. “I heard you coming, Jayd, dragon rider of Pearl. I heard you open the portal, and at last I felt hope that the plague that destroyed my world was gone. But you bring bad news, don’t you? You want my children and their human servants to risk their lives in protecting *yours*?”



14 The Glacial Matron of Argentus

Jayd didn't know what to say. Her honesty was almost condemning, but at least she wasn't being a tyrant.

Wait... destroyed her world?

"Matron, are you... born of Amarii?"

"How rude!" she laughed. "No greetings, no flattery? What do they teach you on Pearl, and why do they send someone so young?"

Jayd held her tongue, and looked up.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

This dragon was old, very old. How it was she could still fly, or conjure such miracles, was a wonder beyond reckoning. How she could have lived for over four thousand years, to out-age even the Matron of Pearl? It was a miracle beyond belief.

And if so, how she could allow her dragons to become the tyrants they had was a sin inexcusable.

“Your dragon betrays your thoughts,” the matron said, an edge of danger on her voice. “How? How could I let my children become tyrants of men? Why not! I was scarcely a hatchling when they took me here. I remember the fall of Amarii. I can still hear the screaming ‘oh, they are coming, they are coming!’ Bah. And then we race here, to this world so far away no dragon can hold its heat, and breath, long enough to arrive here by thread. And do you think this world saves us? She is old, and has seen her duty. These new ones, men and dragons, aren’t welcome. They aren’t embraced. They are dying. Dying in their thousands even without the plague. So what do they do, my children? They can’t live without the humans. They can’t bear to be without them. So they take charge. They take command. They take control.”

“You let them?” Jayd wondered.

“Not at first. It was a difference in opinion, those who wanted the humans to survive, and those who wanted them to be self-governed to their own deaths. I did not intervene. One day there was a war between the tyrants and the dragon riders, and the tyrants won. That decided it, for me. They farmed the humans and you know what, it *saved* them! Only the strong were permitted to survive, and it saved them... as a race.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd watched the dragon Empress's leisurely flying, almost hypnotic. She spoke with such conviction, such cruel resignation to the horror of a world unprepared to give life.

Yet she also knew the heart of a dragon. She knew there was ... regret in that voice as well.

"You farmed the humans?" she asked.

"We HAD TO!" the Empress roared, and turned to face her. For a moment Jayd feared she might attack, and knew she and Darkwing would never stand a chance. "They were *dying*. So we stopped letting them choose mates for themselves, and bred only those who were gifted at breathing this air. But I must admit... over time... the dragons lost their focus, and began to breed them only to assist them in their own petty wars. Now the world is covered in war, and the humans..."

"The humans have forgotten who they are," Jayd finished for her.

The Empress hissed, then turned away. She was clearly a dragon conflicted. "Why have you come?" she asked Jayd.

"To bring back the dragon riders. To save you. To save this world."

"That is not all," the Empress said.

"That, and to find out... if you can help. The plague has finally found its way to Sanmarellis. We -"

"*Shut up* about your stupid plague. Have you taken some humans there already? Then they will be dead, and I will never allow them to return here. If you bring the plague inside you, you have condemned our world."

Jayd was incensed at that. "We have a new prayer, found by my brother, the High Wiseman of the fortress from beyond the clouds. It stills the plague! It has on Pearl, it will on Sanmarellis... but we are few."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“And yet it does *not* still the plague on Sanmarellis?” The Empress cruelly laughed. “This disease is powerful. It will adapt. It will change on every world it concurs. Did you know it became aware? Not even the might of all seven worlds in their strength could defeat it last time, not-”

“How can you surrender like this, without even testing your strength!”

“I have seen too many die trying.”

“As have I,” Jayd screamed, her voice catching in her throat. “But I’m not going to give up, not on those things I care about while there is more than dust in a world to be saved!”

Her words echoed around the enormous cavern, fading into the silence of a tricking waterfall and unheeding birds.

She heard Legionnaire clear his throat.

She turned, and found him almost in tears of shame. He wanted to say something, but hated himself for wanting it. With a wave of her hand, she permitted him to speak in the presence of the Empress.

“If you will, Empress of All Dragons,” he stuttered, almost in a whisper. “Some of us would rather die fighting a plague to save a world, than to die again in the bitter squabbles of your children.”

She turned in her flight, and flew directly towards them. She came right down, placing her enormous maw in arms reach of the trembling Legionnaire. She seemed to be made of ice, but was radiating warmth and power, and near her the grass sprung to life as it had once in Lifebreath’s gift.

“And I expect... there are others who feel this way?” she asked him.

He nodded, not knowing if, in answering her, she would deliver those he spoke of, or hunt and slay them all.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Perhaps it was something she didn't know herself.

The Empress sighed, her breath a laughter of color, light and health.

"So be it," she replied.

The Dragons of Ethphraim

Snow felt it before she heard it. The warrioress of the North spoke to her heart, even though the helm was on the floor nearby. *Snow, you might want to see this. Tornfang tells me a dragon has just appeared in the great lake that rests near this mountain.*

She leapt up with great excitement, bumping the table and spilling their drinks. She ran toward Windfyrth, grinning from ear to ear, even before the others had finished standing.

“What is it? What is going on?!” The general shouted.

“A dragon has been sighted in the lake that presses up near to this mountain,” the golden adept explained to him calmly. It took the translator few breaths to explain, he didn’t know that the word ‘lake’ was.

Windfyrth was caught up in Snow’s excitement. They were the first to leave the mountain – the soldiers almost couldn’t get their newly repaired iron doors open fast enough.

They rode in the air for a handful of heartbeats. By the time they reached the river the three dragons, left to guard outside, were sitting calmly on the bank. This was not likely to be any dragon’s domain, but that didn’t mean they needed to threaten the new arrival by claiming the higher air.

Sure enough, something was there. Snow could clearly make out the dark shape of a large dragon swimming the depths of the lake. She was long, and very large for a dragon. She had a head a little like a horse and her limbs were adapted into flippers; a water dragon.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Windfyrth rode down to the lake and stood boldly, waiting for the aquatic dragon to decide to talk with them.

How long has she been here? Snow asked the three dragons, and their two riders on the shore.

“She arrived only a score of shouts ago”, the warrioress replied. “We let you know as soon as we saw her.”

Snow looked over at the warrioress. She was not on her dragon, and neither was the soldier from Thiaz. The ground was covered in kicked up mud, and the warriors were covered in it.

Snow shook her head. The attraction between these two was growing quickly. The warrior had a shifting blade, as did all the men of Thiaz it seemed, and was busy trying to teach the warrioress how to make hers do the same. She would often allow him to touch her, to instruct her in the skill at arms, only to stomp on his foot painfully, or trip him up when he was not paying attention. It was a game they both insisted on playing, and Snow wasn't sure how this game was going to end.

A moment later a head popped up from the water. It was a female aquatic standard all right. She looked at them with deep grey eyes, wide and deep as the ocean.

“Greetings,” Snow said in the best dragon she could manage.

The aquatic dragon spoke, her voice was strange, her accept deep, with deep o's and a lot of 'och's. Snow often found she had to pause to understand what the dragon was saying. But it was a dragon all right. “Och, I heard the portal open, after all this time,” she replied. “I thought men had lost their art, but I see now... you are noot from this world.”

“True, we are not,” Snow replied.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

There was a careful, considered pause before the aquatic dragon spoke again. “You are from Sanmarellis? Or Amarii? We have not heard from our cousins for a very long time. What became of the Perish?”

Snow sighed, and Windfyrth replied for her, “We are from Pearl.”

“Pearl! Come to tell us right from wrong again, I see. And who is this warrior? You are from Thiaz I can tell. Hmm, we’d best keep our eye on our purses with this one around!” She spoke as though it was all a joke in good humor, and Snow couldn’t help but smile.

“We come, well, we come with bad news,” Windfyrth explained, bowing with respect, “and good. The Plague thrives, and has found its way to Sanmarellis. We are hunting for help to defeat it once and for all. We’ve found a prayer that can heal any taken by the plague, but the sickness is still spreading.”

The dragon sighed, “You want the strength of Ethphraim to add to your cause? Where were you, when the plague flooded across our land, killing so much it ended up destroying itself? But you did not come back. Where were you?”

Windfyrth was angered, but Snow wanted to answer. She knew the answer, and had read it from the teachers, “We died. So many died on Pearl it was left as a desert. We humans lost all our knowledge. We wandered for centuries. Only recently has the world recovered enough to be alive once more. Then the plague tried to use us to open up the golden threads, and to spread to other worlds. It would have come here, if it could. But we prevented it. Thousands of men and dragons have died to protect you, and confine the plague to Pearl.”

“But you did not succeed,” the aquatic dragon replied.

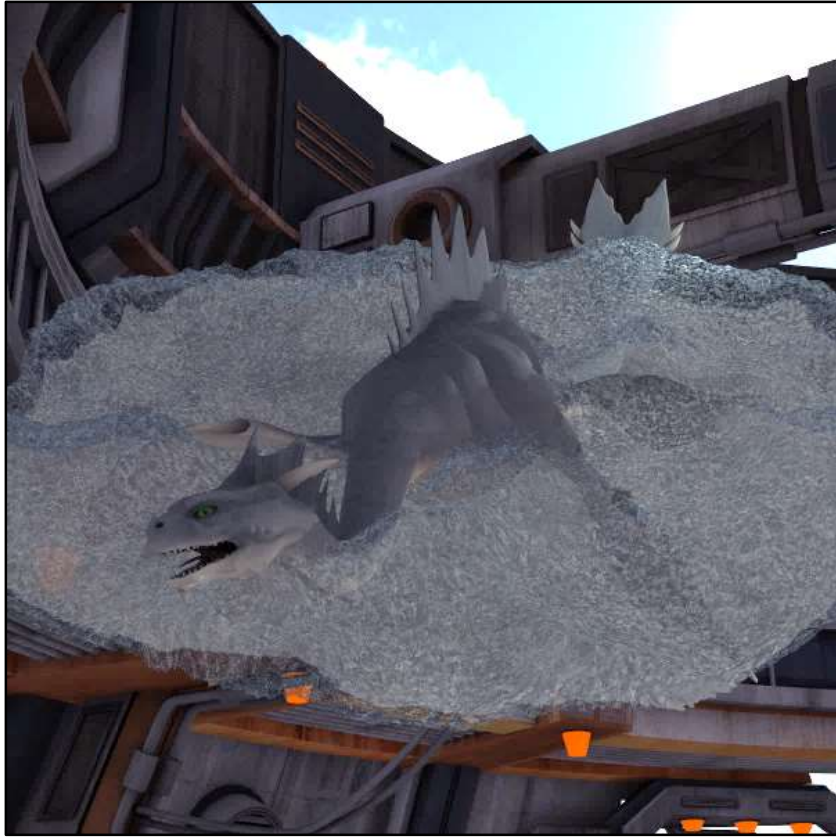
Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“No. We did not. It got to Sanmarellis. And we need to stop it getting further. We need your help.”

Suddenly the aquatic dragon looked up, and looked like she was about to dive under the water again. Snow turned, and saw, heading towards them, one of their strange iron cages with blades of steel on the top. Only now the blades were gone, or perhaps, spinning so fast they could not be seen. So that was what it was, a flying machine! *By Divinity, it is noisy!* she could hear it all the way from here.

“I suppose...” the aquatic dragon mused, “I suppose now is a good a time as any. We have been at war, dragons and men of this world, for over three thousand years. Most of us could not bring ourselves to leave them much alone, but we never harmed them. Almost never. We took their livestock instead, as token of our protection. Yet how did they reward us? Och! They hunted us. In their ignorance they invented a thousand tales of how we earned death, or are in league with devils. Now we are almost all slain on this world. I think they will be very surprised to see us here. I am one they have hunted most insistently, though even I have managed to make a few good friends among the men of the deep sea where I live. Today... is as good a day as any. I think it will surprise them to see how many of us yet live, and the others will be coming, they heard the portal too, I am sure.”

She rose up, and the water of the lake bulged around her. Effortlessly she swam in her waters, and the waters floated around her in the air. The four dragons of foreign worlds flew up too. She took a long, winding trail past the flying machine. The humans within looking shocked, beyond speechless.



15 Nessie, the aquatic standardform, a hidden dragon of Ethphraim

At Windfyrth's invitation they all began to fly towards the mountain cave.

"Och!" The aquatic dragon suddenly cursed, "I *knew* he'd be along."

A moment later Snow saw it; blinking lights of gold and bronze. A sudden sound filled the valley, like the striking of an enormous gong that rang like thunder. The men of the mountain drew their guns. Their ignorance amused Snow, had they still not learnt their weapons did nothing to a dragon?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

From the sound a new dragon emerged, greeting all with an enormous roar, bringing four of what might have been his children with him. He was large; an aerial drake, and flew through the air with ease. He was dressed with fine jewelry, and had a coat of gold or bronze mail on his back. His tail trailed a long line of linen streamers, greatly increasing his apparent length.

But his mighty roar was cut suddenly short as the water dragon issued her own challenge. The two huge dragons circled each other warily in the sky.

Snow's face crinkled with concern. *This is a very adversarial way to greet each other at the dawning of a new conclave, the first in four thousand years. Is this the way to heal men and dragons of this world?*

Windfyrth agreed, *Perhaps the antipathy between the nations of men reflect in the demeanor of their dragons. Or did they perhaps create it?*

Before she could reply an enormous screech echoed from the sky. Silhouetted in the bright light of their yellow sun a great wyvern was approaching, covered in flames. Clearly it travelled by sunlight.

The other two dragons roared their challenge, and the three began to circle each other warily.

Suddenly Windfyrth swooped down into the center of that circle. "Good, you're all here," she said in such a business like tone that it momentarily disarmed the foes. "Let us convene inside, in the company of men."

The three dragons hissed at each other, but followed Windfyrth inside in the order that they arrived.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The men had dropped their weapons. Somehow, they knew these strange and powerful beasts belonged to their world. They stood with mouths agape, too simple to know they were supposed to bow right now.

The dragons ignored their ignorance. Soon they joined the others, and they filed into the enormous central cavern, where the general and his men had moved to make room. He still stood there, with the surgeon who hid behind the translator.

The three dragons entering the room were clearly the nobles of this world. They were much larger than any of the visitors; each could easily be over two thousand years old each. They looked down at the humans with a mixture of condescension and disdain, but stood up proud as though they enjoyed being the center of attention.

“Dragons,” the general began, but then seemed to forget what he wanted to say.

“Well done,” the golden bronze dragon replied in a sarcastic voice, using a native language Snow did not recognize.

Windfyrth stole the moment, speaking in dragon slowly and clearly so that the men of Ethphraim could keep up. She took charge; clearly not wanting to wait to see what would happen if anyone else did.

“Welcome, noble dragons of Ethphraim, men of this world, and visitors from far away orbs. We are here to warn you, and to seek aid against the plague of Sanmarellis. We are here to discuss the terms of peace between the men and beasts of this world. We are here to promote the reestablishment of the oracles and tools of men, in particular, the dragon orb. We are here, if you are willing, to discuss the choosing of a lead dragon of this world, the return of the conclave and the dragon riders. We are honored-”

“Enough, little one,” the bronze dragon ordered.

Windfyrth fell silent, but did not bow her head.

He continued, clearly willing only to discuss that which concerned him and his people alone. “The patron of Ethphraim, Rainbow Serpent, passed in 1765. We are not like you of Pearl; we do not choose the Archdragon, or ‘patron’, by such an arbitrary measure as age. We instead elect whomever is most worthy, who has earned the right to ruler by virtue and merit. And it is clear that I alone may hold that honor, keeping my people in order and safety for over a thousand years!”

The others protested, moving about in an agitated fashion.

“I am oldest,” the aquatic dragon presented her case, “of that there can be no doubt, but I claim the right of leadership by my *tolerance*, and patience. I alone have been most virtuous towards men, leaving them to their own development, helping only when necessary, keeping my children from ruining them. Only *I* can claim to have respected the old boundaries, can either of you say you have done the same?”

“I doubt that claim, very much!” The wyvern of fire hissed. “Besides, what mastery of wisdom have you to show? Three thousand years have not been enough for you to ride in light, or sign in destiny. I can speak every language of men! I taught them to forge with iron, then I taught them to speak through wires, and now I teach them to connect their books in a great net! Soon I will teach them to speak in their minds to each other once more.”

“You northern Wyverns have always been too arrogant to be of any lasting good to men,” the bronze dragon argued.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Look at what your indecision did to them four hundred years ago! I remember, and you will remember you needed my help that day,” Nessie told him.

“Help I never requested,” the wyvern hissed back.

“But help you needed or the men of my world would have readily broken your swords during the second blood war!” The bronze aerial serpentine told him.

“How dare you!” The Fiery Wyvern shouted.

“Enough!” Snow shouted, and they calmed down, just a little. “Is there no peaceful way to settle this? Adept, can you not tell us?”

They turned to face a pale wiseman of Thiaz, “I... well... I cannot really tell who is the oldest, or wisest, or most worthy.”

“Can you not tell by their teeth, or something?” Snow asked with some exasperation. He seemed to be being deliberately evasive and unhelpful.

“Teeth? Not really, we can’t even use the code of life to determine age. I mean without access to their teachers, which we have no knowledge of whether they exist on this world or not, I can’t determine genealogy among species-”

“I know of three teachers, under the waters,” Nessie interrupted, and Snow’s heart widened with hope.

“You are blind of all that is *above* the waters!” The aerial serpentine interrupted her.

“How dare you!” She shouted back, and unsheathed her claws; dozens of razor sharp spurs that ran down the front of her limbs. The others responded by preparing for battle.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Please,” Snow whispered, knowing they would still hear her. “Your world is so strange, so secretive, and so violent. Don’t let it come to this. Can you not sort this out with peace?”

The noble dragons of Ethphraim acted like they couldn’t hear her, yelling, scratching the floor, baring their fangs.

Perhaps... Windfyrth whispered to her heart as men wisely began to flee the room, *this is how they want to sort out who is most worthy among them?*

A moment later they erupted in war. Clearly they had decided to settle this with violence, the last one to surrender being the most... virtuous...

Snow sighed, and knew what she had to do. She motioned to the largest dragon of Sanmarellis to follow her.

The men of Ethphraim fled, yet Snow and the two smaller dragons ducked and dodged fearlessly through their thrashing melee. She looked over, and caught a glimpse of the golden adept. He seemed puzzled, then curious. Then he looked anxious.

He’d obviously just worked out what she was going to do.

Not everything must be paid for, she told him.

He didn’t listen, just raised his hand and staff in a prayer. As did Snow, not only to the Divine, but also the spirit of the world, *If you want to stop this war before it begins, you’ll have to protect me.*

An instant later the thrashing tail of an enflamed wyvern lashed out and seeming by accident struck the adept and threw him against the far wall. His armor protected him from death, but he was still momentarily dazed.

It was more time than they needed.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The dragon of Sanmarellis snapped its jaws, biting, as it were, the space between dimensions. There, from a gleaming portal of blue between its teeth, he pulled out a huge quartz crystal as large as a man. It had spent, by the wisdom of Windfyrth and the princess of Pearl, a day and a night before the teachers of the fortress. It was a gift of healing, intended for all the citizens of a world that did not deserve it.

Windfyrth picked it up, and slammed the crystal point down into the solid iron floor. Less than a heartbeat later Snow woke it with a touch.

A bright golden light began to spiral out along the floor, and in that instant the nobles of Ethphraim stopped. Every few dozen paces the light created a circle in the iron floor where a new dragon rider would stand. New crystals formed at intermittent intervals, glowing brightly with their own energy. Four dais appeared at the cardinal points of the room where the teachers would stand.

And with baited breath the noble dragons waited until the spiral of light chose the new leader of all dragons of Ethphraim.

The aquatic standard.

She looked surprised, then pleased. As she raised herself up to her full, glorious height, the other noble dragons ... bowed.

Scintillating with light she floated slowly to the center of the circle. There she sat next to the governing crystal, and with knowledge beyond any others there, she caused a bright wheel of water to form in the air. Within a woman stood at a sink, washing dishes. She looked terrified.

“Horsy?” the woman muttered.

“Yes,” the aquatic standard whispered, “come, Bethany. It is time.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I... haven’t seen you in twenty years! Where are you? How do I get there?”

“Reach out your hand, I will take you,” the noble dragon replied.

“Can I... I have a daughter now. Horsey, it’s been so long! I never thought I’d see you again!”

“Bring your daughter too!”

The woman ran, and returned a moment later with a little three year old girl. “Look,” she said with tears in her eyes, “look, I told you she was real! I told you so. It’s my friend Horsie.”

“Horsie?” the girl said.

“Hold your breath,” the mother told her girl. Her cheeks puffed out, and the mother jumped into the circle of water. She would have fallen on the floor, but Nessie caught her.

They stared into each other’s eyes, a brilliant light surrounding them all. Snow gently took the child from her mother’s arms before she accidentally dropped her.

The joining was immense, and unnaturally powerful – perhaps because it was so badly needed on this world. The woman embraced her dragon fondly.

The new matron of Ethphraim sat back, holding her rider close as the mother took her daughter into her arms once more.

“Huji, you may be next,” the matron ‘horsie’ said to the bronze aerial serpentine.

“I...” he began to complain, then changed his mind. Perhaps he was upset someone else was giving the commands now, but knew it was better to take second place than argue with the most powerful dragon on Ethphraim

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

at this time. With a motion of his chin, one of his children unfolded its wings to present a human man. He had been hiding this whole time. “I have found my rider, and been training him. He is a soldier. He is ready.”

Horsie nodded.

Their bonding was brief, but seemed to surprise them both, as neither could rise afterwards.

“Wyvern,” the matron of Ethphraim ordered gently.

“Thank you,” he replied, a diplomat at heart. As soon as he did, all dragon and rider eyes fell on a single individual in the room that was clearly made to be his rider, though none had known it till that moment, least of all, her.

The surgeon.

“No...” she stuttered, “I can’t... I’m not ready, is someone recording this for further study? I...”

The wyvern laughed.

She smiled through her tears, and walked up to him. She marveled as the miraculous light grew around her, and she joined the light in the dragon’s brow.

Then, unexpectedly, she stopped.

Then the surgeon screamed, and fell weeping on the floor. Her dragon too allowed his tears to fall freely, though he did not move to assist her. She cringed and wept, and Snow fought a desire to console her.

Yet this was not what was supposed to happen when a dragon found their rider.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Desperately the surgeon signaled for Snow to come over, and she ran. She had to catch the surgeon before she collapsed to the floor, and was not sure she knew what was going on.

The surgeon was trembling like never before, “Now I know! Oh, how could I ever be so cruel! Oh, why did I try to destroy something so beautiful? Child, I am so sorry, I am so sorry!”

The sobbing woman buried her face in Snow’s shoulder.

So that was what she was feeling: regret.

It was hard to hold a grudge in the face of such sincerity. In the passion of sorrow Snow felt every angry, hurt and bitter feeling in her melt away. It just didn’t matter anymore. She allowed the flood of tears to wash it all away, and bring healing into her soul.

Snow forgave Ethphraim. Snow forgave the surgeon. Snow forgave them all.

Ethphraim

Ethphraim was healing.

Snow looked at the gathering soldiers. Only a hundred. Perhaps there was wisdom in their caution? They were likely sending these men to their deaths, and any that caught the plague might never be able to return.

Even so, Snow doubted they would do much good. They brought along an inordinate amount of equipment. Boxes and boxes, rods with dishes on them, machines that moved about on their own.

Snow stood by the portal, waiting to leave.

“You will not be needing that,” the adept from Thiaz suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

He was speaking to two men placing a simple, but apparently heavy, black box down on the trolley they were going to use to transport them to Sanmarellis.

They looked at each other, and at him.

Their leader, a man they called Sargent, spoke up. “A word with you, if you please.”

The adept of Thiaz made sure Snow, and thus Windfyrth, could hear everything, by now the teachers were working and they needed no translator.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Sergeant was saying. “Full security measures are implemented. Twelve levels of access, and a forty bit passkey are required-”

“That’s not what I meant,” The student replied. “We can ignore the fact that you have concentrated 233 to the point of pyretic instability. We

can ignore the inadequacy of your shielding measures, or that you clearly haven't considered the repercussion of what happens if you use such a clumsy, indiscriminate device. I shudder to think it is the most powerful device you have to offer. No, we will not need it, because any who bear the staff, headband or orb have even great powers at their disposal."

"What do you mean?" He said.

"You know, I'm not sure what you know, you know the 'essence' which makes all things? Well, to put it simply, you know that every piece of essence has a mirror, or a reflection? And when they are brought into contact they create pure being? How to say, 'energy' perhaps?"

"Yes, matter and antimatter."

"Yes! And our staff can perform this operation within a pico second, as you measure time here. My spare fingernail alone contains enough essence to vaporize this mountain. So when I say your messy little device is not going to be needed, I really do mean it."

"That may be so. But we have our orders. We intend to take the bomb."

This is not wise, he told Snow.

Can you disable it? she asked him.

With a thought, however, if for any reason they attempt to use it against us... he let the idea linger.

Then teach it to do us no harm, and let them bring it. What benefit can there be in offending them?

He sighed inwardly, *This is not my council. I do not recommend it.*

I know, she replied.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He sighed openly this time, and stepped forward. “At the very least, you must allow me to bless this and all the equipment.”

“You’re not going to, like, change it in any way are you?”

“No, just improve it – strengthen it, so that it can act without the weariness of time or decay,” the adept smiled.

Sargent looked wary, but permitted it. She could tell he didn’t know if the student was going to change it, or was just talking religious nonsense.

She had hoped the adept would be a bit more discrete, but maybe permission was necessary to effect the change? Even so, there was still a lot to be done before these people would trust each other.

“The men are ready,” a voice spoke through the air.

“I will open the portal at your command,” the adept said, then stood back.

“You’re not coming,” she said.

“No, of course not,” he replied, being cunning. “They need so much help here, still. They don’t know how to use their teachers; they have not tools like we do. Their dragon riders are untrained; they still only have three riders. The water portals of the matron, sorry, the Archdragon are helpful but it is still difficult work to gather all the dragons and their riders to this mountain which you seem to have decided should be the conclave.”

Snow was angry, but knew a large portion of that anger came from Windfyrth, who was bidding goodbye to the dragons above. But Windfyrth could feel everything that was happening down here in the cavern. The adept of Thiaz was going to try and sell things to Ethphraim, which they would still keep secret.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“You were not permitted to stay,” Snow tried to tell him. “You were to accompany me, and we are leaving for Sanmarellis-”

A new voice spoke over the air, “The priest is being invited to stay by the people of Ethphraim. You have what you came for; you are free to leave-”

“A hundred men!” Snow shouted in disbelief, feeling Windfyrth’s rage. Then she calmed down, “I know you will keep your dragons a secret still. But what will you do, when the plague defeats us and reaches out to your world? How will they defend themselves with all the ignorance you allow them? I am glad I am leaving here. And thank you, thank you for these honest soldiers. They do your world honor, but their number says more than I ever could of how Ethphraim feels about the other worlds. Goodbye Ethphraim, I will not set foot on your world again until your sky rains peace.”

They said nothing, and as Windfyrth arrived, they left.

I still don't get them, Snow said.

The Gathering of Argentus

Her voice became a ringing hum, which rose and rose till it shook ice from even the far wall. At first Jayd didn't know what was happening, then she realized: it was the call to conclave.

Then the Empress breathed on the dais of ice, and it immediately renewed its form and beauty. A brief blizzard spiraled around the cavern, cutting the weeds and vegetation aside. Jayd looked down and saw familiar symbols in the dark ice, and for a moment wondered if ice would do.

What else is stone, Darkwing laughed, but frozen lava and its kind? Ice will do just fine.

In spite herself, Jayd found the tears welling up in her eyes. She steadied herself on Legionnaire, who was weeping too.

The Empress laughed. "Now, where to begin?"

Jayd was waiting, wondering if the dragons were going to appear. But none did, at least, not yet. Perhaps none possessed Stormclouds gift?

"Let us begin with this one," the Matron said, her voice having taken on a richer, deeper tone.

Jayd felt her heart leap within her, filled with hope. Millennia of war and cruelty were coming to an end.

The matron drew a circle in the air, and in it a wall of ice formed. Into the ice an image grew.

It was Lelleth. She was riding a beautiful dark blue dragon that could have only been Ireala. On her lap sat a little human girl with a halt arm. She had beautiful green eyes, but she shivered in the high air.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Ireala,” the Empress said.

Suddenly the blue dragon panicked, and almost threw her rider. She began to vanish.

“You know I can’t find you if you do that,” the Empress said.

“Who are you?” Lelleth demanded, speaking dragon very well.

Ireala circled in the air warily.

“I don’t need to introduce myself,” the Empress declared imperially.

“How do I know it is you?” Ireala replied.

“Ireala,” Jayd interrupted, “relax, it is us.”

“Goddess Jayd?” Ireala begged, “Is it really you? Loklell has the power of illusions, I know. But can he imitate the Empress of the ice? And Empress, if it really is you, how do I know what you intend? You have never spoken for the humans! Yet you know I do! You know I know the others, and I can find them. I heard your call, but what does it mean?”

“I don’t have time for this,” the Empress said, and in one swift move launched her head through the ice, shattered it, and somehow reached through space to grab a hold of Ireala’s body with impressive speed. Within an instant she had dragged all three of them screaming through the portal, and threw them to the floor.

“Get out of the way,” the Empress demanded Ireala. “And take the child. This other one will do.”

Lelleth looked around, finding herself alone in the center of the circle as Darkwing hurried to snatch the child from danger even as Ireala scurried to comply. Lelleth stood, boldly, in the center circle. She showed no fear.

“What purpose drives you?” the Empress asked her.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“To see our world saved from fear, fear of tyrants. Fear of plague. Free.”

Something in those words touched the Empress deeply, but her words seemed to deny that, “Well, I suppose you’ll just have to do anyway.”

It was not a joining of growing lights, or of radiant music, but of deadly lightning. Lelleth should have died, but she did not. As though the Empress insisted almost killing everyone she met.

But the radiant sentiment of holy joining filled the entire heart of ice. It was done.

And the Empress fell on the ground, subdued.

Lelleth, what remained of her clothes still smoking, stroked her brow. For a moment they stood there.

Legionnaire was almost hyperventilating.

“It has begun,” Jayd told him.

A moment later, the Empress lifted her head. Lelleth mouthed her every word, and if she didn’t know if they were her own or not.

Jayd smiled: It was how it was.

“Now, which one of you numbrains are going to volunteer to be next?” The Empress hissed, her voice even deeper and resonating now.

Three dragons appeared, or perhaps had been there the whole time. One stepped from the tree’s as though he travelled within them. Another slithered from the water, covered by reeds that did not grow there. One merged in from the ice as though made by it.

“Ireala deserves this honor,” the wooden one said.

“I just came because I’m curious,” the ice one replied.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Well that’s just too bad for you, Dakening,” the Empress told the ice one. “I can command the bonding only so much. We need thirty, and I’d like to choose them as far as I am possible. So congratulations, you just volunteered. But, yes, I choose Ireala, not only because she has earned it for insisting in a peace none of us truly believed in, but because she’s already chosen her rider.”

“I have a rider!” the reeded dragon boasted, but no one paid him any attention, and it seemed to Jayd he was just bragging, and probably didn’t really.

The Empress bent down to the little child, “Did you save Ireala, or did Ireala save you the day you freed her from the hunter’s snare? I have watched you little one. Time does not permit us to share your story, but I know your pain, and your trials. You have earned this honor. Do you dream of a sky full of dragon riders once more? Then stretch out your hand, and own a dragon for yourself.”

Ireala gasped, and knelt before the little child with the halt hand. The matron breathed on them, and this time the bonding was gentle, and glorious. And when it was complete the two swept up into the air laughing.

And Jayd wondered what her story had been.

The Empress called the wooden dragon next, and almost forcefully bonded him to a man she found on another continent. Then she started the process of claiming humans and dragons from all over the world for the bonding. She would make walls of ice, and grab them from where they stood, or slept or fought. And she would make them join with any dragon or human of her choosing.

Jayd wondered how she did that.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Within an hour they had over twenty riders, and more dragons were arriving. But the Empress was tiring.

“I can do no more,” she suddenly announced after the twenty second dragon. “I have taken this one dragon, whose place was fifth, and pushed him back as far as I could go. He must yield, or he must be killed.”

The assembled dragon riders of Argentus fell silent.

Somehow Jayd and Darkwing already knew who she meant, “The Brown Tyrant,” they said.

She nodded grimly.

“He is deadly wounded, but the bond may yet save him. However, he has placed himself in his mountain, surrounded by an army of his allies and mistresses. I cannot take him from there. You must go, and make him submit, or cause him to die.”

“But Empress, who is his rider?” Ireala asked.

“Legionnaire,” she replied.

And they all turned to look at the giant man; pale and trembling.

Jayd was fumbling with the straps on Darkwing’s saddle. These new bags were not self-tightening, like the older ones had been. The air was moist, and the cold made the metal shrink. But dragons were fierce, and powerful. Too often links made with human hands would tear, or slip asunder.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She paused to breathe, and then found a pair of huge, human hands upon her own, arms with wrapped completely around her. They kept the tension in the rope.

“Allow me to assist,” Legionnaire asked.

She was momentarily lost for words, trapped in the arms of the strongest man she’d ever known.

For reasons of his own, he took her silence as permission, and hefted the ropes with his impressive strength. She felt the stone hard muscles of his chest against her back, the iron strong arms working the ropes with absolute ease that which she had found almost impossible.

Then, without a word, he turned away.

Jayd only then realized she’d been holding her breath. Had he noticed? She was sure he had.

Suddenly he stopped, turning towards her, he looked at her feet. “I am sorry, my goddess. I did not mean to take such liberties with your personal space.”

“That’s all right,” she immediately apologized. But it wasn’t, not really. This was war and he either of them could die at any minute. But then again, perhaps that was the very reason to pursue this... opportunity.

Darkwing raised a crooked eyebrow at her, mocking her.

She found her composure, striking his armored rump. But there was a man to deal with. “Legionnaire, I hardly think this is fair. When your people will finally see me for who I am, you will not think so much of me. Look, I am half the stature of the women on this world, and a tenth the strength. We are at war, and this is not a good time to ... well...”

He looked chagrined, and hopeless.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

But she waited until he had formed his thoughts, “I ... don’t think I can stand to see you harmed, Jayd. I would rather die than see any harm come to you.”

Again her heart rate quickened, despite all her heart’s warnings that this was a place she should not go. It was touching, and he had a particular talent for being sincere. She’d always had a soft spot for men who could be honest. Tears found themselves in her eyes, but she could not let this go on. “Don’t think of me as a goddess, Legionnaire. I am just a warrior. I will do what is necessary and die when it is my time. You must look for a greater woman than me if you are to find love.”

For a moment he paused, looking at her in silence.

Again, she felt timid. It was a terrible risk to hurt his feelings. For a moment, she even forgot about Darkwing.

To her surprise the man stood up, bowed, and thanked her. With all the bearing of a professional warrior he said, “Thank you, lady Jayd. I will go and make sure we have enough meat for the journey.”

Jayd sighed.

This was going to be a long journey. Where was Rayn when she needed him?

Regarding Love

He sat in the lounge of the large starboat that Thiaz had provided. It was cool, with comfortable red couches that seemed to shift underneath one slowly so that no one place on their body bore the weight for too long. The music that played here was always soft and relaxing.

But Rayn did not feel relaxed. It had been almost six days, and they were still a day out from Chalcedonah. Even Ironfang had taken to gnawing the golden pillars of the starboat out of boredom, leaving the commander of the boat the thankless task of repairing them each evening.

To travel was to wait, even in war.

“The journey vexes you?” the student of Thiaz, a kind man named Ko, suggested. He was an unassuming man, with a round face and small stature. They had become good friends, or at least, capable allies. Rayn and he spent hours in conversation, though he was careful not to give away too much, or anything Divinity forbade him. Ko wielded an orb, a powerful tool used to communicate, and to hold knowledge like a teacher. It was a powerful tool, and try as he might the student would not allow him to touch it any more than Rayn would allow him to touch his staff.

Rayn nodded, the waiting did indeed vex him.

“Here,” the student offered, “use my orb. Contact your friends back on Sanmarellis. Let them tell you about the war.”

Rayn was deeply touched. This was a sign of trust not even he was prepared to offer the student. He nodded, deciding then to trust Ko as a rare example of Thiazian integrity. Even so, he was grateful Ironfang

immediately offered to watch over his body as his spirit took a walk between the stars.

He sat by the student, and Ko showed him how to use the orb in the same manner as the dragon orb. With a heartbeat Rayn found himself at the orb in the fortress. There were others there, but they were busy. He looked out and noticed Norwich, master of the fortress in the Princess's absence. The older man took one look at him, and smiled.

He seemed to know Rayn hadn't really come to talk about the war, but to talk with friends.

"Come with me," Norwich stated, and walked to the window where Stormbreath was already waiting. Together they sailed down, far into the trees surrounding the mountain. It was a beautiful night on Sanmarellis, with dragons in the skies and warriors on the earth. It was hard to believe a terrible war was being fought here for the life of all.

Norwich led them to one of the countless campfires of the Celtwyld around the mountain. There they found the northern warrioress and her dragon. They were chatting with two more familiar souls, Twoswords of the west, and the clever desert merchant of the Eastern. They all greeted Norwich with honor and cheer, and welcomed Rayn. One year ago each would have panicked at the ghostly sight of a man whose soul was projecting across the stars. Now, not even this sight frightened them.

"So!" Twoswords gloated, "one from each of the great continents of Pearl! This is a good fortune!"

The Eastern merchant simply nodded, fixing her saddle as her dragon, Wildblizzard, waited. Rayn was sure her brother Hailstorm and his rider would not be far away, undoubtedly fast asleep this late at night.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Good fortune indeed!” the Northern warriorress said in her coarse voice. She had a bandage across her right arm.

“What happened to your arm?” Rayn asked her, wishing he could perhaps wield the faith of the staff across the stars, but did not know how. “Another scar to count against the plague?”

The merchant laughed, “Not at all! This scar is from a far more *vicious* foe, I believe.”

Twoswords laughed, while Norwich continued to watch over the evening meal. If it were possible, the northern warriorress might have actually blushed.

“I don’t understand,” Rayn replied, brow furrowed in concentration, trying to gain some wisdom from the cause of the wound. It seemed to be a gash from a sword.

Norwich replied, with a smile, “This is the wounding of love, I am afraid.”

“Who did this to you?” Rayn asked, still not understanding.

“A whelp of Thiaz,” Twoswords smirked. He jumped back the next instant as a frosty spear almost impaled him in the face, and he laughed.

“He is no whelp, fawnling!” she said with a threatening smirk.

“I agree, I agree!!” Twoswords held up his hands in surrender. “He is a mighty warrior, known to all his people!”

She grinned, and pulled her spear back.

“He’d have to be, to score a wound on thee,” the merchantess grinned.

Rayn now understood; the polar warriorress had great affection for a soldier of Thiaz. He noticed she was fondling a wreath of flowers, perhaps

designed to be worn along the brow, but instead she kept them at her side. Were they intended perhaps?

“I will slice his throat for this wound on my arm,” she promised with a grin. “To disgrace a warriorress such as I with this little cut! It is beneath my dignity to even speak his name.”

Her words were so violent, but she smiled, and when she sat down it was clear she was thought of nothing but this man.

“Truly... love is a... strange thing...” Rayn muttered.

Norvich was stirring the pot over the fire as though ignoring the banter between the others. “Stranger than you know, young wiseman.”

Twoswords grinned. “Tell us, Rayn. We have all been wondering recently, you are now a man. Have you chosen a woman?”

The direct question caught Rayn by surprise. He sat down on a nearby log, and the others watched him in silence.

“With all that is going on,” Rayn half lied, “I haven’t given it much thought.”

The desert merchant scoffed.

“Really?” Twoswords jeered. “You are surrounded by many of the worlds most beautiful and powerful women, and you say you don’t think of love?”

Now, to his chagrin, it was Rayn’s turn to blush. He realized he was among them still only a man of sixteen years. A man, yes, but a very young man. The youngest of them might still have been double of his years, Norvich triple, perhaps. But the men of Pearl rarely lived beyond 40, so manhood of necessity came early.

“Rumors abound,” Norwich continued. “They say you are secretly engaged to the Princess, who loves you for saving her.”

“No, not at all!” Rayn replied, too quickly. He was losing ground here.

“What of Lady Ouweth of Thiaz? She and her golden dragon catch the eye of all, yet they say she has only eyes for thee young wiseman,” the desert merchant grinned.

“Lady who?” he had never heard of her.

“Bah. I’d wed him to Snow,” the polar warrioress suggested. “She’s the only sensible one out of the lot of them.”

“Wait, no, you got it all wrong!” Rayn felt panic rising up in him.

They stayed silent, and he realized they were just goading him. Hidden smiles betraying their true intentions.

“So, what of love?” the desert merchantess asked. “Has the high wiseman of the fortress thought on who he might take as bride one brightnight?”

Rayn stared up at the strange motes of light that were the stars. He realized he’d never get used to staring up into endless distance that was night-time on this world.

Yes, he’d thought about love.

“I guess... I just don’t know,” he confessed to the older warriors. “Pure, she is my friend, and beautiful beyond compare. Snow, well, I’d never thought of her. I just... how do you know? How do you find love?”

“Love finds you,” Twoswords replied. “It is the one force more powerful than every army in the world, more than any warrior among the worlds. It strikes as lightning the first time you see her eyes. And it can sneak up at the least expected moment, when you find you love one you have

known for many years. But when it has found you, it will change you forever. It will disarm the fiercest vagabond, silence the wildest tongue. You will find there is only one thought upon your heart, and that is her. You live for her, breathe only for her. And at her whim, you will die for her.” His eyes stared away into the night sky, and it was clear he was speaking of a woman none of them had met. Did he have a wife? It was not clear. But one thing was clear; Twoswords had been touched by love.

“That’s *garbage*,” the northern warrioress replied. “You don’t know the *first thing* about love.”

“Oh!” He laughed, not at all insulted, “and I suppose you do?”

She huffed, pressing the coals in the fire and accidentally putting them out. Anything she touched with her hands was quickly coated in ice, unless she was careful.

“I do,” she finally replied. “It is the *great hunt*. The only *true* hunt. You must first know yourself, as a warrior, and as a person. You must know all your true strengths, and be acquainted with all your true weaknesses. You must not hide at all from your real self. Like a hunter seeking a prey, you must truly know yourself. Then, you must seek your quarry. You must know the prize you seek. Has he the strength you desire? The best parents? The noble spirit? But that is not all, you must know if he does compliment your own weaknesses, and make you strong. You must know if he is right for you, and not let your heart do *all* the choosing. A good match *makes sense*. He completes you. He is strong at your weaknesses, and will force you to challenge your faults. Only a man who... fits... will do. *That* is love. That is...” she stopped, and glared at Twoswords.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He couldn't help himself, and completing her sentence for her said, "A warrior from Thiaz?"

She stood up and swung out at him with her spear. He caught it in the air, but she had foreseen it. With the palm of her other hand she smashed him squarely in the chest and sent him sprawling into the dust where he lay, coughing and laughing.

Norvich shook his head, while the merchant filled the air with her happy laugh. The warrioress huffed, and sat back down.

"Methinks he is right," The merchantess said.

The warrioress huffed again.

Rayn smiled, it was obvious to all that love had found the northern warrioress and it was only now just becoming apparent to her.

Then she smiled.

Rayn knew she had found her quarry.

Twoswords recovered, wiggling his finger at the northern warrioress in a good natured 'next time' kind of way.

Norvich spoke, "I think you both have very good points. But I'm not sure that's what love is either. You speak of fitting, or of consuming passions. But I want to say that love is even more than that. It is ... putting the water on boil before she returns from the market because you know she likes to warm her feet. It is waiting at the window in winter so he can see your smile when he comes back from guard. It is denying yourself, because she needs to feed the children. It is listening to her complain in silence, because she doesn't even know what is troubling her. Love is what you *do* to make a love work for a lifetime and beyond. It is reborn every morning

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

with a kind word, and rekindled ever night in silent embrace. Love is what you *choose to do*.”

All fell silent, the halcyon night bearing testament to the truth of all their words. Within it Rayn found much advice, a great treasure, one that would help him know how to choose a love...

...Just as soon as he got back.



Figure 16 The Brown Tyrant

The Best of Argentus

The Empress of Ice opened a corridor in the air, and the small army travelled through.

Jayd looked out in dismay. The closest the Empress could manage to the mountain of the Tyrant was still several minutes away, but that was not their greatest challenge. The hundred or so dragons that circled that mountain were.

They enemies turned immediately to attack.

In spite herself, Jayd trembled.

Do not fear, Darkwing consoled her. Though they are many, and we are twenty and two, we are riders; we have taken the armor from the heart of ice fortress. They don't even have dragon friends to protect their backs! And let us not forget, we ride with the Matron. They must respect her.

It wasn't that, I'm just... looking forward to this, is all.

He laughed, for they both knew she was fooling herself. There were only twenty and two, it was almost five to one, and they *all* had to survive...

Stop! The matron roared, *we are come to speak with Modelium.*

The dragons ignored her, surrounding them in the higher air. Intuitively each army took up slow, counter rotating circles.

One who spoke for their enemies hovered closer, it was the lightning mistress. "We have no wish to slay you, Empress. But we know what you are trying to do, what you are trying to force on our husband. The humans are beneath us, why do you ride with a worm on your back?"

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The Empress roared, and all the lesser dragons in the air staggered. If none doubted their cause before, they all had reason to now.

The Empress rode higher in the air, and Lelleth stood to address the dragons. By what miracle Jayd did not know her voice was clear to all. Perhaps it was the staff which she was now armed with? The staff of the true priestess. “Dragons of Argentus! You are powerful! You are great! Humanity would have died four thousand years ago had you not intervened!”

The lightning dragon scoffed.

“But you are alone. Your tyranny makes you weak. Don’t you recall the former glory? I know you don’t sleep well at night, knowing what you have become. I am only a woman; and not strong, or wise, like a dragon. But this tyranny must end. You were made for better things.”

They roared their defiance.

“Tough crowd,” Jayd muttered.

“These have already decided,” Legionnaire whispered in her ear.

Unconsciously she pulled away from his whispered breath.

Lelleth and the Matron waited until the shouting died down a little, “Then let us make an accord!” Lelleth shouted, “we will leave, and take all who agree-”

“Never!” the mistress roared as her spine crackled, “you cannot take our slaves from us! They are ours, and you are trespassers, and will be dealt with according to the old law.”

The mighty Empress could have argued. Jayd sensed there was much more that could have been said. But the Empress of all dragons on this world said no more, except one deadly phrase; “So be it.”

The war begun.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd didn't even see the first attack. She heard the lightning, and other explosions as the tyrants unleashed their breath. But they would have all missed. The art of the Matron was new, and she had shared it with no one.

The dragon riders slid from invisibility and charged from above even as their illusionary doubles from below disappeared.

Dragons were formidable, yet a dragon with a trained rider is an even more terrible thing. Wings were shattered, eyes gouged, teeth cut from their sockets. The tyrants caught each other in their own flurry of wind and fire, while the dual sight of the dragon riders and their mounts managed to evade almost every blow.

The first attack on the tyrants was devastating; they must have lost twenty dragons.

But there were at least eighty more.

Now Jayd, the Empress whispered to her mind.

Will you be alright? Jayd asked. She had trained all the other riders, but only for a day. The riders of Argentus had grown up knowing how to fight dragons, their tyrants had bred them for nothing less. But there were still a small, untested force.

In the instant of her mind, the Empress could speak all her thoughts, *We have achieved our most important goal; Verethol the liar is slain, Habyah the venomous is fallen, Darkyah cannot move. There are none others who can stay our cause singlehandedly, at least not without much effort. This is the moment, their forces are confused. They must not see you leave. Get Legionnaire to the Tyrant. I am convinced once he meets his rider the joining will recommence. Once it surrounds this world they will either flee, or surrender.*

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Agreed, Jayd nodded. A moment later they flew into the Matrons open mouth. There, just as had been prearranged, they struck an ice portal covering the back of her throat.

Darkwing was left with almost no time to adjust his speed, and thus went careening into the wall. As expected, three of the female dragons were there. They turned on Darkwing and breathed at once.

Jayd summoned all her powers to protect them as ice, wind and blue fire surrounded them. It helped, but it was not enough. Darkwing could not rise.

Jayd took an instant to take in their surroundings. At this close range the Empress had finally managed to pierce the mountain's natural protections, and brought them to the healing inner chamber, where they tyrant lay, resting. He eyed them with battle readiness, but still could not rise.

She heard the sharp intake of breath, and knew Darkwing was about to reply. But she also knew that, at best, he could drench one of them in his terrible black fire. The others were still free, and she could at best distract one of them, and Legionnaire might perhaps best another, while the third tore shreds from her dragon's flank.

It was unlikely they would win this in such a confined space.

The flickering torchlight became twilight as Darkwing spread his wings for one final defense.

Then, suddenly, every enemy dragon was thrown against the far wall.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They struggled against an invisible hand that held them there.

“Lelleth,” Darkwing said with amazement in his voice, and Jayd turned where he was looking.

There, standing in hallowed glory, staff and hand outstretched, the high priestess, chosen of the Empress herself, had pinned the three dragons to the wall by some miracle.

They could scarcely move. Jayd wondered how she’d gotten here, then noticed the tyrant had his head pinned to the floor as well.

Ireala, Jayd mused.

She heard the young dragon’s laughter echo mysteriously around the room.

“Legionnaire, now!” Lelleth shouted.

He ran up to the tyrant, and his mates screamed. Outside, Jayd knew, the enemy force would be racing desperately to this place.

In a heartbeat Jayd recognized the mighty energies of bonding. A dim light began to glow in Legionnaires hand, and a resonating energy between the tyrant’s brow. They locked eyes.

Time seemed to pause. Eternity was in that instant. Nothing was said as the two warriors looked into each other’s soul.

Then Jayd saw it... the problem. The tyrant was not a repentant criminal like Ironfang, he was not a lost soul like Ethnomancer. He was a true tyrant, and he would not, ever, willingly submit to the bonding.

Between them there was no bitterness. It was the simple understanding.

Jayd cried out in dismay. She knew what was about to happen before it did.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

With a movement of his sword so swift it was almost impossible to see Legionnaire brought his blade down and severed the tyrant's neck.

His mates cried out in horror, and Lelleth almost lost her hold. The mountain shook, and Jayd could almost feel the power of the joining as it spread around the world once more.

The room was silent, all except for the weeping of a mighty man, who cradled the slain head of his only dragon in his huge, trembling hands.

A score of breaths later the first of the tyrant's army arrived. They looked on in fear and confusion.

"You are too late!" Lelleth said with great courage, "your cause is failed. Leave with a covenant of peace towards humanity, or prepare to meet your ancestors and their judgement."

The tyrant's allies fled.

Lelleth turned her attention to the female dragons.

One of the females fell to the ground. "I swear it, but I will NEVER take a human rider!"

"So be it!" Lelleth roared. "And let it be your loss, and punishment. May your never know what it is to find a rider, and the completion of your soul!"

The dragon hissed, but ran out.

The other two, it was clear, bore humanity a terrible death wish. Lelleth closed their eyes, and they fell asleep, never to wake again.

Jayd tried to help the weeping Legionnaire to his feet.

He refused to stand.

"Up!" Lelleth commanded, "the war is won. I already know the tyrants have fled. The Gods have blessed us with a miracle this day; twenty

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

have put their hundred to flight! All will know this, and all will know what you have done to make it possible!”

He did not stand. The man, given only to obeying orders, could not stand.

Jayd was filled with compassion. She knew what he felt. She’d seen it before, and been in the room when it had happened. She knelt down to listen to him.

“The light has gone out inside me,” he whispered. “I know it was necessary, but how can I ever see the sun again? I have earned the torment of the endless well. I will never stand in the unending battles of Enguardium. I did what was needed! But I will never forgive myself...”

Jayd placed a hand on his forearm.

She said nothing, but placed a single kiss on the top of the head of the greatest man of Argentus she had ever known, and let him weep.

The feast they held in honor of the warriors was great. One dragon, Reeds from the heart of Ice, eventually fell due to his great wounds, and Lelleth’s craft was not yet sufficient to save him, or his handsome young rider. But they held on long enough to make all the difference in the world. They were coming in their hundreds, more every day. Some were scarcely humbled by their bonding, others confused. But the tide of destiny had changed in this world forever.

“It will still be a long time before we are done with the tyrants forever,” Lelleth said, interrupting Jayd’s somber thoughts, seeming to know

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

what she was thinking about. “And we still know so little about the teachers. But we had some time to prepare, given what little time the gods gave us between your first visit and your last.”

Jayd smiled, she looked up at the tall, older woman. She looked out at the feasting dragon riders. She looked up in the sky where Darkwing was showing them old secrets of men.

She was done with feeling sorry for them, and as the totality of the victory sunk in Jayd squealed with joy.

The party stopped.

“You have done this!” she shouted to the stars, then stood on the table and addressed the silent warriors of Argentus, “you have earned this day! I was just a witness to the Empress’s choice. I stood by while Lelleth held three dragons in bands of unseen iron. I simply watched as a great man broke his own heart to save this world! What am I, but a guest? A sorry apology for a warrior against the mighty ones of Argentus! You have won your freedom; *you* have won your glory!”

And the sky lit up with thunder and fire as the dragons welcomed men into their circle as allies, as friends, as one. She could almost feel all on Sanmarellis tremble at the thought of the day the mighty armies of Argentus would arrive.

Rayn

Six days. Six and a half. It was more than his patience could bear.

They used Ko's orb often. The princess assured him, every hour that he checked, that the war was going as planned. That every possible action that could be taken to defeat the plague was being put into effect. First Tourmarelle, then Ethphraim. The war was slowly being won, but that the strength of the other worlds was sorely needed.

But it did not heal his impatience, or his desperate will to be anywhere but between the stars.

He was grateful for two things. He was grateful to have the mighty Ironfang, to whom all dragons gave reverence, with him.

And he was grateful for Ko, the student of Thiaz.

A sudden arrival interrupted Rayn's thoughts.

"Commander," the second rider of Thiaz interrupted his thoughts. He wore a brooch with a boot symbol on it, which meant he was a journeyman. He apparently owned or acted as steward of this starboat, ownership laws among Thiaz being strange. But he had skillfully made sure that the four humans who rode with him, and six dragons, had passed the time in relative peace.

But each was anxious to place feet upon the red orb of Chalcedonah.

"Commander," the journeyman repeated, "we are arriving at the planet. I know they are expecting us, but perhaps you might like to announce our arrival?"

"Certainly," Rayn replied, nodding at Ko to perform the deed.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The student activated the orb, speaking to the dragonorb of their world. It opened up a vision in Rayn's mind of the room where the orb was now housed – a great stone room, full of hematite pillars. The room was filled with officials and scholars of the people.

It was going to be a big event.

Rayn tightened his robe.

It was time.

They rode on the starboat through the red sky of Chalcedonah, six dragons trailing behind. Hundreds of hundreds of people had turned out to see the spectacle.

Yet the dragons of Chalcedonah were not to be seen.

Citizens shouted and cried in awe, and in excitement. Several women fainted. By the time the starboat landed at the footsteps of the great stone building, where by the burning torches it was obvious that they were supposed to land, the crowd was cheering.

Rayn stood down first, standing first on Ironfang's massive claw, and then allowing him to lower him to the safety of the ground. Each dragon performed a similar ritual of welcoming, the two of Sanmarellis circling high above. For a moment a fleeting thought crossed his mind, something about the pattern in the flight of the blue one, Hope Starlovecrossed; a dip in his flight, the tremble in his wing. He, as all the dragons of his world, missed the bonding with humans very much. Perhaps he was finding this mass of

humanity a little difficult to experience? But Rayn dismissed the concerns since there were more pressing matters to attend to.

An old man of Chalcedonah spoke, his voice surprisingly confident and loud, “Welcome, travelers from among the stars! We welcome you to our nation, and look forward to our first meeting of our worlds!”

The people cheered, and Rayn smiled, hiding the concern that this man had welcomed him to his nation, not to his world.

A series of introductions followed, and then they were offered drinks. The bitter brew was strange to his taste, but Rayn downed with a grin, for fear of giving offence. They raised their cups to salute the people, and more cheering followed.

“Come now, let us adjourn to our communications,” the old man said.

Rayn paused.

The other riders went in, but stopped when they saw him waiting.

He wasn't sure... there were so many people.

Ironfang was watching; he knew what Rayn was paused for.

Oh well, Rayn reasoned, they should know.

He placed the tip of his staff firmly on the ground, and was pleased to see it struck there with a mighty crack. The entire assembly fell silent. Every man's eyes were on him.

He bent down, and kissed the earth, willing his spirit to communicate with the soul of this world, begging its permission to be here.

Slowly the spirit of Chalcedonah responded. She was powerful, in no way the least of the seven worlds. His mind was filled with a brief overview of her past eons of existence. He saw her birth in the fire as dust became a globe. He watched the air form, and darkness be replaced by light. He saw

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

the world glowing with fire, and realized the massive orb that was her governing world, though made mostly of red gasses, kept her ... changing. She would shift and flow with an enormous tide, pulled by the relentless flow of the great red orb. Eons were filled with volcanic fire as life struggled to take hold on a world whose surface would change completely every hundred years or so. Yet by the will of Chalcedonah and the Divine, life did gain a fragile hold, and the air began to be filled with living breath.

Yet it was a baited breath. The world seemed to be waiting. Waiting for ages. Suddenly, even as a suffocating man revives at the first breath of fresh air, a bright light struck the world. It was the dawn of men and dragons. They came, bringing new life, bringing precious knowledge that converted the invisibly small beings of this world into great plants and trees. They gave strength and variability to the red mold that made the air breathable here. It was a glorious time.

Then he suddenly felt himself choke as a dark spirit covered the world in an instant. It was the plague. It killed much of the life, it decimated this world. It had left them with no dragon riders, no dragon circle. The constant shifting of the world soon tore apart the conclave, it buried all the teachers. Men and dragons scarcely survived, but by the time the plague had run its course it had destroyed itself.

Yet a few hardy individuals survived. They began to rebuild the shattered world. Thankfully, due to the wisdom of their ancestors, great vessels had been laid up above the sky. At the appointed time they slowly began to rain the old life upon the red orb once more.

But all that was over two thousand years ago, as time is measured on this world. In spite of plague, famine, death, and the constant threat of

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

earthquakes and volcanoes bursting forth flame from the fiery heart of Chalcedonah, life survived. Men and dragons had survived on his harsh, challenging world.

She returned him to his body. Inside, he held a deeper wisdom, and a profound respect for this world and its people. He struggled to stand, finding his face covered with tears.

Calming his breath, he looked out at the confused people, the concerned rulers, and the watchful stares of the dragons. "This world," he shouted, gathering his words, not really knowing what he was trying to say, "this world is *strong!*"

If he had any means of measuring the cheer at their first arrival, the cheer at this statement would have shattered it. They roared.

He smiled, he hadn't meant to, but he recognized he'd just won their hearts.

The leaders of Chalcedonah were silent.

Rayn had just told them the reason they were here.

"There is little we can do to help," the old politician, the chairman, was saying. "We have few warriors, and I expect our world is so far behind your own in technology and society that we would be more of a hindrance than a blessing. I can offer you all we have, but... Chalcedonah is not ready."

Rayn smiled, he had expected this. "You are no fewer in number than those of Pearl, and I suspect your dragons, whom you know are on this world,

are no less in might and power. As for your understandings, well, we have prepared a gift for you.”

He indicated towards Ko, who stood forward. Using the science of the orb he called from a distance between the spaces a giant crystal of quartz.

The gift of Sanmarellis, of Thiaz, and Pearl.

“You are hardly a month behind my own experience.” Rayn admitted.

“What is that?” the chairman asked.

“A crystal, blessed by the stone teachers of the fortress. It will find any teachers on your world, reawaken and heal them. It will build them anew if need be. It can be used to reforge the conclave of dragons, that you and they may be one again. It – ”

The room erupted in a chorus of disapproving voices.

“Can we be sure?”

“Have we tested this?”

“How can we ascertain any deleterious effects prior to implementation?”

Ko looked at him, his eyebrows raised. Things had just taken a turn for the unexpected. It had taken all his sincerity and convincing just to get Thiaz to agree to this free offering of knowledge in return for a better contribution in the coming war. Now the Chalcedonians seemed at odds with the offering.

The chairman raised his hands for silence. “We must look into this matter. We cannot rush such meteoric cultural change, you understand this.”

Rayn looked at him, not really understanding the reluctance. Had he not just vouched for the wisdom of the teachers, the power of the dragon

riders? What was going on? He said something than, that in retrospect, he should not have, “Aren’t you just... a little curious?”

It was immediately apparent that they did not trust him, any more than they gave their trust to any. To sell a good thing on ‘curiosity’ was, clearly, taboo on their world.

He cursed his folly, and stood back.

They chatted angrily among themselves.

Rayn reported his shame to Ko, in his native language, and he placed an encouraging hand on his shoulder.

“Wait!” a voice called out.

The room fell silent. All eyes were on the scholar. He looked at Rayn with pity and concern.

And Rayn noticed his spirit looked strong.

“I am willing to give this a go,” he told them, carrying on a conversation that had been lost on Rayn. “I will try out their technologies. If I am harmed we will learn from this, and move on. Exercising caution. It is the least we can do, for they have travelled far, and seem only to want to help.”

“Help us in their war,” another scholar huffed with a dark, condescending voice.

“If the mystery of enigma is lost then the art of science fails you!” The scholar shot back, probably quoting something from their lore.

There were no objections.

The scholar stood forward, and waited.

“I don’t understand,” Rayn whispered.

“They want to see if it works. If it will harm them,” Ko explained.

“I don’t understand. He’s already worked the dragonorb without harm,” Rayn replied.

Ko shrugged.

Rayn motioned for the scholar to walk forwards.

They watched him in silence.

You don’t think anything can go wrong here? Ironfang asked from outside, with just a little amusement.

The scholar stood with the four foreign dragon riders. Scribes and artists took in the moment in hurried scrawls.

Rayn sighed.

With a touch of his hand, he awoke the giant crystal. He asked it to stay quiet, and to harm no one, but help this man on his journey.

The scholar reached down, and with a cautionary finger, touched the crystal but lightly. “It is not warm, but I feel a vibration as though it were a machine, of some sort. The stone has the feel and texture of genuine stone, in appearance like a large crystal of quartz. It does not appear to be radiating any form of visible light, nor calorific rays. I can detect no harm.”

The scholars and politicians nodded and hummed thoughtfully.

“Ask it a question,” Ko suggested.

Rayn translated.

“I... what sort of...” the scholar mused. Suddenly his eyes flicked to Ko.

“You... I’m sorry, but the most strange thought has just occurred to me.” He turned and announced it to the assembled group, “I am impressed to, as though the idea only just occurred to me. Like my own thought but ... not like. Hmmm, good sir, do you mind me asking. Have you some kind of

orb on you? Like a window? I know that is a silly request, but the image imposes itself on my mind-

“Such as this?” Ko smiled, producing his orb.

The group was impressed, but wary.

“Yes, quite like. What a strange coincidence.”

“Not at all,” Ko explained, “did you not notice, you asked a question, ‘what should I ask,’ and the crystal responded in divinitie’s light – ask Ko here about his orb. It is one of the tools of men. You have already shown some skill at working a dragonorb, one of the mightiest forms of the orb. This stone is given to bring understanding, and is at the heart of all the teachers of Pearl. Great understanding is given to those who use it.”

“Yes,” Rayn continued, “but also a caution. Great knowledge, but all knowledge has its price. You must be careful, ask only what is right for you to know. Were it to flood all it contained into your mind in an instant, it would drive you mad.”

The scholar, already reaching for the orb, drew his hand back.

There was a stifled cry from the audience. Rayn looked over, and saw Taroz. The man looked as though he might fall out of his skin with concern.

But he did not move, and Rayn decided it was time for this people to try out new things.

Taking a look at Rayn, the scholar reached out, and Ko gently placed his orb in his hand.

“It is a sphere, seemingly made of glass or very pure quartz. It is heavy for its size, so I assume some kind of stone. It is clear... no... I see lights, or do I imagine them? They seem to me to be like a city, or a ... world...”

covered in cities. I feel my mind filling with ideas. There are many, too many to hear them all. What do the cities mean??”

Ko and Rayn lunged to the scholar at the same time. With his long, golden cuff, Ko wrapped the orb in an instant. Rayn pulled the scholar away.

“What happened!” the chairman roared.

The scholar twitched a moment, then righted himself. He breathed in, and sighed.

Rayn could not be more relieved.

“It was... amazing...” the scholar muttered. “I was reading a thousand books all at the same time...” grateful tears in his eyes.

“Do not fear!” Rayn commanded them, finding a touch of Divinity in his voice, “this man is unbalanced: he did just what we told him not to do. He tried to see too much. He just tried to see every city on your world.”

They seemed either greatly impressed, or even more concerned.

Ko smiled, trying to calm the worried people of Chalcedonah, in his broken speech, given by his study of his own orb, he said, “He tried to see too much... this is a common mistake... of youth.”

He smiled, and the scholar laughed, then clapped his hands, “I can see this technology takes time, and it is time I am willing to take!”

They seemed to approve, but Rayn knew, they did not have time. A plague was running riot on Sanmarellis. A plague that could, through some demonry, perhaps even find its way here.

He looked at Ko, smiling. And for once he realized they did not share goals. Ko, and all his people, were willing to let Chalcedonah run at their own pace.

The Divine, Rayn was sure, had other plans.

What am I to do? he prayed.

“Harmony,” the revelation came to his heart and his voice, silencing the crowd. Even Ko looked surprised.

Then a new revelation formed in his heart, and he did not like it. But he knew what he had to do, and he would not deny the Divine its right to instruct him in a greater wisdom.

“Taroz,” he asked, “come forth.”

The servant looked around as though there might be another Taroz present.

There was not.

Rayn smiled, and invited him forwards. As the man took his nervous steps into the center of the room Rayn continued his explanation.

“As Ko here explained to me just this week: There are many tools, the orb is but one. There is one here, in particular, that assists greatly in the development of harmony, within a man, within a community. It brings about healing, it brings about revelation. It can be used to restore wisdom to a people too caught up in their own council.”

Ko looked at him, a puzzled look on his face. As though he knew exactly what he was about to do, but could not believe it.

Taroz had walked into the center of the circle, and had taken up his place by the scholar’s side.

Rayn continued, “In many other tasks, one tool out serves the orb. This tool I bring today, and this tool I give willingly to this man who is wiser than you all, because he came to serve, and not to be served.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

With this teaching Rayn's staff lit up with a glorious light blue light, his own. He looked at the staff, his protector, his gift, his first possession that marked the becoming of a man.

"And I give it freely to you. This tool ... is the staff."

He laid the head of it on Taroz shoulder, and in an instant it burst out with a brilliant deep blue light, a light which reflected in Taroz dark eyes. It seemed to hold the mysteries of the starfields of heaven, and he spoke nothing in wonder.

Taroz took the staff with supernal reverence, and knelt down on one foot. Rayn raised him up immediately.

No one could speak, not one of the educated scholars, ambitious politicians, nor a fearful populace.

A white light began to write a symbol on the staff, beneath Rayn's own. It glowed a deep red, the spirit of Chalcedonah.

Taroz gagged in surprise. "My father's sign," he muttered in amazement. "My clan sign!"

Rayn smiled, "Scholars, wise ones, leaders, good people. I give you Taroz, first wiseman of the Divine of Chalcedonah. May he always guide you well."

Rayn bowed, and the scholar bowed, and before he knew it, everyone in the room excepting the chairman bowed. The old man with white hair stood, looking around, uncertain. Then he nodded.

Though the old man probably could not tell it so far... this was a good day for Chalcedonah. He only wished he knew what was happening on Sanmarellis.

Night

Rayn was frustrated, but held his feelings in check. He missed his staff, but was more concerned about the time the people of Chalcedonah seemed to want to take. They could be making dozens of staves, orbs, cloaks and shifting blades. They really could. But instead, they were probing the crystal with devices that could tell them nothing. They would not take a step of faith into their darkness, only to find the light in the new place was so much brighter.

What would it take?

He had given up on their musings, and so had taken to visiting with the scholar in his new, spacious study within the large building. Its walls were thick, as one might expect from a world that shook almost every day. No buildings rose more than two stories high.

“I feel so bad,” the scholar mused, “you have given up your staff, and now what?”

Rayn smiled, glad to be called from his thoughts. He knew the scholar would make a great student of the orb one day. “I do not mind,” he said honestly, “it was appointed of the Divine. You have no staves here. This is one way to show you a new path. You can use it to anoint other staves. You can produce a world of healers. Where is Taroz?”

“He has not wasted a moment!” The scholar laughed, “but gone out to do just that. I hear he is causing quite a storm. He went right to the hospital, and they’re walking out! What a man!” The scholar smiled, then sighed. He seemed sad.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn was not surprised. Taroz was more than a good servant to this scholar, he was a friend.

“Still!” the scholar interrupted the silence, “something must be done! We can’t leave you staffless! Not on this world. Come, I have something to show you!”

Rayn smiled to himself, this would make a nice distraction. The other riders were tending to the ship while they rested. Hopefully the debating politicians of this world would have some strong answers for them by dawn.

He walked over to the bookshelf the scholar was trying to clear a path towards. He sifted books and stacks of paper, handing Rayn a stuffed owl and old tome in order to get to the long box that was shoved among the message.

“Aha!” the old scholar finally triumphed, “here it is! Just as I remembered! Here, a little gift for you, my young traveler from far away stars, may it comfort you in your ... generosity.”

Rayn looked down as the dark black box, made from wood.

“Well, open it open it,” the scholar insisted.

Rayn pulled at the lid, but was surprised to discover it slid open rather than having hinges. It seemed the predominant way of closing boxes on Chalcedonah. Inside was a bone white staff.

Or at least, the stem of the staff.

“See! A gift, from my world to yours.” The scholar smiled. “A new staff for you to keep, given freely. I can sign a certificate if you like. We found this interesting artefact from the dig out at Lon Kzentou, but I suppose you wouldn’t know where that is now, would you, anyway! Quite a find, and not much smaller than your old one I’ll wager.”

“Where is the rest of it?” Rayn wondered out loud.

“Rest? You mean, isn’t this all of it? How ironic, I’d always assumed. As chief curator you’d expect... now... hmmm, now that you mention it I suppose I have seen similar artwork. Let me think, now where did I put that book? Oh, it was so long ago.”

Rayn raised up the broken staff. It was a wiseman’s staff, that was certain. It had broken cleanly just under the head so that it was little wonder the scholars of Chalcedonah, who had never seen a real staff in action, had not noticed.

The staff gently tingled under his fingers, and Rayn had a very good feeling about it. He ran his hand down the white shaft, was it polished wood? No, something far more advanced. He could not place it, but the staff seemed... familiar. Like a memory, but he could not place it, at least not till he saw the rest of it, and knew what it was supposed to look like.

“I know, a ha! Here it is, here young man, look at this.”

Rayn looked over at the soft covered book the scholar was holding. It looked like a catalogue of some kind, filled with descriptions and illustrations. And there, towards the bottom left corner of the page, was an ovoid wrapped in white leaves.

Without a doubt, Rayn knew, it was the head of the staff. Yet like a dream just forgotten the memory of it still evaded his conscious mind. A thought... a purpose... it was tantalizingly close. If only he too could remember.

“Seems odd,” the scholar mused out loud, “I have not looked in this book for over three decades. My memory is good, but not that good. Perhaps it was that orb your golden friend allowed me to use? I don’t know how I

managed to place the two objects, they are not entirely alike. They, oh, now this presents a problem.”

“What problem?” Rayn replied.

“This is in the troves of the Imperial museum. We can’t just take it. Oh, now what a quandary, I have given you a broken staff, but the head is claimed by the museum!”

“What will you do?” Rayn asked.

“I, well... hmmm... well I don’t suppose a little visit there will do any harm. Perhaps you can show them how to fix the staff, they’d be very impressed, I am sure.”

“It sounds like a good idea to me. When can we leave?”

The shelves jittered with the gentle passing of one of the frequent earthquakes of Chalcedonah. They happened so often, neither of them took particular notice, except for the scholar who held on to the lantern in case it fell over.

“Well,” he thought out loud, “there’s a carriage that rides there tomorrow morning. Wait a minute, what am I saying! You have dragons! Come on; let us take a dragon there now!”

“Sounds good to me!” Rayn shouted, and lead the way out.

Ko found them on the way out. “Where are you to going in such a hurry?” He asked with a smile, or it seemed a smile, the light from their lanterns was quite dim.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“To find the rest of this staff!” Rayn said in a cheery tone, “come with me Ko, let us fix this staff!”

“You already gave them a staff,” he complained.

“We need more!” Rayn laughed, and moved also so that Ko had to hurry to keep up.

“I don’t know if I can agree with your Pearl policy of always giving things away, it puts them in your debt you know,” Ko protested.

Rayn stopped, “Perhaps, but if we are each trying to outdo the other with generosity, it would be an abundant world, wouldn’t you agree?”

Ko’s mouth open and closed, but no ideas came out.

Rayn laughed, “Or you can sit here waiting while they discuss things forever, cautious people. Suit yourself!”

“Actually,” Ko said, “I was wondering if I could talk to you about that. I have offered to invite some other scholars to this world, in order to trade technology with raw materials. It would seem much like a great benefit to the local population, wouldn’t you agree.”

He did, but said nothing. Something seemed amiss. He liked Ko, he really did. So why hadn’t he mentioned the option of bringing in more scholars of Thiaz to sell them information when, if they just trusted in the Divine, they would be learning already? It seemed, at best, a strange request. “Let us think about this a while,” was all Rayn managed to say.

Ko nodded, and called his dragon, while Ironfang lifted first Rayn and then the scholar onto his back. One of the dragons of Sanmarellis, Hope, went with them. And if he didn’t know any better, a misty cloud over a nearby steeple seemed to follow them along as well, as it had for most of the

day. But Cloudform had not stopped to speak to them at any point, so Rayn and the others left him to his private curiosity.

In little time they found the place the scholar sought. It was a pyramid.

“They took that pyramid from the Hotakyan six centuries ago,” The scholar told them, “during the time of the Iworgan Empire. They had a habit of doing that. Anyway, they set this tomb up here, and built catacombs beneath it to house treasures – the stone is strong enough to resist the earthquakes. Anyway, the last dozen years have seen some generous extensions take place, making it into a kind of museum, a place to house items of historical significance. I didn’t recognize the similarity between your staff and the one housed here. Yes, I really do think the orb opened it to my memory now I think on it.”

Rayn nodded, and the dragons landed. The pyramid had two square based obelisks at the front entrance, which was guarded by a simple iron gate and two guards who were chatting informally.

As soon as they saw them one of the night watchmen ran. Everyone knew about dragons, but few had seen them.

The scholar, the student, and Rayn approached the entrance. The scholar showed his credentials to sole remaining watchman, and he opened the front gate with trembling hands. They took fire, in a small lantern with a curved mirror at one end and slats where a small hood could be drawn down to diminish the light if needed. Rayn thought it a marvelous innovation on the lamp design he knew of.

They were about to enter when Rayn felt a pull at his heart. Looking back he saw the three dragons, waiting. Ko’s dragon and Ironfang were sitting quietly on the stones, while Hope flew agitatedly in the air.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He was watching the humans, who were watching him. Rayn felt his anxiety, and the desperate need all dragons of Sanmarellis felt at the loss of their humans. He could well imagine the dragon fighting back the temptation to snatch one up right now and keep a human all to himself.

He sighed in pity.

Ironfang, tell Hope that the time will come.

“Hope,” Ironfang roared in the language of dragons, “*calm* yourself. The time of the dragons of Sanmarellis *will* come.”

Hope Starlovecrossed hesitated in his flight. Rayn wondered what turmoil must have gone through the brave dragon’s mind. After a moment he landed. “You see that they have men to spare? Some might come back to our world one day, and reclaim the privilege of the dragon riders? I long to see that, I really do.”

“Your time will come,” Ironfang promised him, and resting his own head on the stone steps allowed the curious humans who braved the darkness to watch him and the others in wonder.

Dragons, all dragons, were a little vain like that.

Rayn, Ko and the scholar descended into the pyramid.

Rayn tried to listen to the scholar as he shared myriad ideas about this people and that. He tried to listen, but only Ko actually seemed interested. After a hundred breaths or so they reached a room, filled with tall stone. To his dismay he noticed a stone teacher, arm held up to teach, eyes vacant of knowledge. It had no temple to share its wisdom. It was sad, had they trusted him enough to activate the crystal and begin the conclave every teacher in this world would already be sharing knowledge. He looked around, and

noticed the walls covered in large images of winged serpents; unmistakably dragons.

“Your people have sought the dragons for many years,” Rayn thought out loud.

“And still they do. There are cults that worship them, hunters that persecute them. Now, all the dragons hide from us, and we deserve it.”

“We will see if we can change that, if we create a conclave for them to join with riders. Once they know the hearts of men, they will learn to trust you one more.”

“But they still stay far from us.”

“I know. Do you know which dragon is the Patron of your world?”

“Whom? No, I suppose – oh, here is what we are looking for!”

Rayn looked down. There, in a wooden box with a glass lid, there was the head and leading body of a staff. It was polished white, but the crystal within was silent and grey.

As though lightning had passed through him Rayn knew this stone belong to the staff he held.

Ko gasped.

They looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

“My eyes deceive me,” Ko whispered, “that is the head of the white staff! And lo, there Rayn, you hold the stem! I cannot believe it, after all this time!”

“What do you mean?” The scholar asked him.

“I have studied many things. This is no ordinary staff. Rayn, have you studied the lore? I told you about them, remember? There were nine, nine tools of men.” He turned to the scholar, “you see, long ago all the creations

and talents of men were found to be resolved to nine classes, which could be epitomized into nine individual tools. When humanity first arrived in this area of space they brought with them the master tools, the archetypes - the first and great tools that created all the other tools. You think the staff of Taroz is great? I tell you, it is but a shadow of what lies in this case... of what once lay in this case. This is the archetype of its kind... and like the power of men in this world... it is broken.”

He seemed so sad, almost... reluctant to experience the powerful disappointment.

A master staff?

And it was broken?

“Can it be repaired?” Rayn asked.

“I would not know how. I expect not. They are primal archetypes. They seem to exist beyond the comprehended dimensions. We of Thiaz hold the wand, but all others are lost to us. Now we find the head of the staff, and by it the stem!” Ko mused.

“I imagine your world is quite prepared to pay handsomely for these items,” the scholar smiled, “which is a pity, because-”

“Pay?” Ko said, sounding surprised. “Not at all. The archetypes are without value. They choose their own wielders from the most worthy of the entirety of humanity. They cannot be forced to work any deeds against their nature. By the law of the seven worlds, no one can own any of the archetypes, it is law.”

“Well, that’s good then,” Rayn said.

“I agree,” the scholar said, and picking up a stone idol, smashed the glass lid.

“What are you doing?” Ko said, voice strained with surprise.

“Those *motherless amusements*,” the scholar swore, “at the high council intend to talk for centuries before any *real* work gets done. Rayn, I propose you fix this staff immediately.” He took the head of the staff out, and offered it to Rayn.

Ko looked confused, like he wanted to grab it right now, and run.

“What harm can there be in trying?” Rayn smiled. “Besides, once they get a headband working they can fix the glass; I’ve seen it done by the princess of Pearl. Fixing a staff, on the other hand, is another matter. Let me see, let me see...”

“You should not do that,” Ko whimpered, “you haven’t prepared, you have no council but this old scholar, no offence, but...”

“The head may not belong to him, but the stem does,” the scholar said with sudden passion. “Who are we to prevent him repairing his own device? That is a great rudeness on my world, golden student, and that is condemning someone’s wisdom because of their age! I want to see if it can be done. I am not waiting for a plague to attack my world as well. I am going to heal the men and dragons of this world. I am going to bring back the lost lore of the men of this world. I am going to ride a dragon through the sky!”

“You...” Ko looked like he might say *you don’t know if a dragon will choose you*, but said nothing instead. Looking at Rayn, he implored, “Please reconsider your action.”

Rayn smiled, “You act as if you think I will succeed.”

Ko said nothing more.

Kneeling, Rayn pushed the two ends of the staff together. They fit exactly. They were meant to be. But they did not heal. Was there no life in

them? Did they need power like the dragon riders' armor? No, that thought seemed foolish. The tools were powerful, and the archetypes even more so. They could fix themselves. Rayn knew it.

And he knew he could not do it himself. In fact, he knew in his heart he could not fix the staff at all. No tool seemed more able to touch the will of the Divine than the staff, and it was a tool that was used to heal communities, and to guide men to peace. It was a tool used to work the will of the Divine.

And it was the Divine alone which could heal the white staff.

He closed his eyes in prayer, Ko fidgeting nervously, the scholar gleaming with pride.

Rayn implored from the depths of his soul for a power and wisdom greater than his own to heal the staff. He offered any sacrifice to see this tool restored to men.

Suddenly he felt his soul shift. He seemed to be standing on a great platform of stone, overlooking a vast array of innumerable stars. He knew he was in the presence of the Divine. He felt an unimaginable power standing close by, wrapping him its unfathomable presence throughout him. He dared not to move, but felt in no way threatened. It was as if the Divine was so powerful it could move the stars with a breath, but yet had such control it would not harm a butterfly's wing in a sandstorm.

Looking out, he mused. The stars all stood before him, all of them. He seemed to sense their names, their age, their personalities. Among them an impossibly small cluster stood out of about twice a hundred stars, and of those, one. The sun of Pearl, with unfailing duty gave heat and light to a tiny, impossibly small speck that was his world; Pearl.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Suddenly she glowed with a great light, outshining even her own sun. Then from the multitude of local stars new lights formed. Tourmarelle, dark and brown, Thiaz, brilliant gold. Both glowed along with Pearl's opalescent white. There was Chalcedonah, a fiery red, and Sanmarellis, a fading green. Amarii joined them, a bright purple. A brilliant dark blue for Ethphraim who shone bright and unafraid in spirit. And far away the silver speck that could only be Argentus seemed to call to him. Then there was another, a world of gleaming bronze, new to him, but close to the original seven. He did not know its name, but it made up a ninth world.

Nine worlds. Nine tools for men. Nine interwoven destinies to decide the fate of dragons and humanity alike, predetermined in council before humans even set foot on Ethphraim.

There was a crack, like the sound of a great stone striking the ground. In the next instant he found himself cradling the white staff, unbroken, in his hands. He felt himself return to the world, and the vision was gone.

A vision he longed to cling to. "Not yet," he begged, "I still have so many questions."

The presence of the Divine did not leave him. It felt as though someone placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, and gave him council: he had the tools, the time, and the talents. All he had to do now... was to simply believe.

The staff trembled in his hands.

The scholar knelt down to look at him, and Rayn was surprised to find that, indeed, it was the scholar's hand that was on his shoulder.

"You did it," he said.

"The staff chooses you," Ko murmured.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn rose, Divine power coalescing around his feet as he stood. A powerful new authority settled on him, granted by his sacrifice of something important to him, now replaced by something of infinitely more value. “We do not have the time to allow these people to wallow in their fears. We have less time than we think, of this much I am certain. We must form the conclave, and we must do it tonight.”

Ko gasped. “But they have the crystal! They may not let you have it back, especially once you claim their old staff, no offence.”

“We will not need the crystal.” Rayn replied, then turned to the scholar. “Where can we form the conclave?”

“I, hmmm, each nation surely would claim theirs alone would suffice.”

“Is there no neutral territory?”

“Well, the eastern continent was recently claimed, um, I suppose the southern tundra is most unpopulated, but even then it the wild tribes might want to lay claim.”

“Are you sure you need to do this tonight?” Ko said, rubbing his hands together as his growing nervousness apparently now teetered on sheer terror. “They need training. They can’t miss out on paying for the opportunity of training...”

“Oh,” the scholar suddenly realized, “Montar Blanc, the largest volcano on this world. None claim it, most treat it as though alive and thus its own entity. There are no national claims on it, at least, none that I know of in the past two hundred years.”

“Good, we will go there.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Without knowing how, Rayn carried them all by some power the staff possessed. They crossed the distance between them and the mountain in less than an instant. Their dragons roared with either fright or the thrill of the journey as they joined them a heartbeat later.

“How?” Ko wondered, but then continued his protest, “You should not do this!”

The mountain crater was warm, and sulphurous. The air was difficult to breathe, and live magma bubbled at the surface. Yet the breeze was cool; they were apparently quite high.

“Look,” Ko argued, “this mountain is tectonically active! See, to build a conclave here would be to seek its eventual destruction, I advise *against* this!”

“Stop trying to dissuade me, Ko.” Rayn ordered. He was already working. He was already looking deep inside the mountain, deeper into the world. There, within, was a massive body of liquid stone, flowing gently under the mountain, causing it to erupt every few years.

Then that was the problem, the mountain had to move.

He knelt, and put the staff into the ground. The earth quakes started almost instantly.

“What are you doing!?” Ko roared.

An instant later his dragon attacked Ironfang. It was likely channeling all his rage and frustration and Rayn moving things along in a way he was not happy with. In the end, it was a futile gesture. Ironfang was so much the larger, and far more brutal when attacked. Ko’s dragon was stuck in the lava in moments, and had to be rescued.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“What are you doing? You could hurt people, Rayn! This world does not need another volcano! You haven’t researched the full repercussions of this decision!”

He spoke to their hearts, *I don’t need to. I know someone who already knows. And this staff has all the power we need. Can you not feel it Ko? We are moving this mountain.*

It took the rest of the night, and by that time the panicked leaders of Chalcedonah had arrived in the starboat. Rayn took a moment to rest around that time to look through Ironfang’s eyes. The mountain had moved several hundred, hundred paces in only one night. A new volcano was forming far away; it would sate this planet’s need to release the heat and pressure here. As for this mountain, it had a new role.

“Stop this!” the old politician roared. He and his guards ran up to Rayn, sponsored by the dragons of Thiaz. Sanmarellis was keeping out of this one.

And suddenly all they were all thrown back. Not by Rayn, or some art of the scholar, but by the dark blue light of Taroz. When he spoke, his voice thundered around the caldera. “I have seen this day, even when I was a young boy. Something is coming to this world, and we have wasted all the time we have had to prepare. Now we must hurry. You will not stop this man from doing what he must do to save our world.”

It was Rayn’s turn to speak, his voice soft, yet penetrating every heart. “Chalcedonah. You are wise. You are strong. But you must learn to be *humble*. You must learn to *listen*. You have dishonored my council many times, and scoffed at the gifts I brought. Let us see what you will do with the gifts of your own ancestors!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The sky rumbled with thunder, and in looking up the warriors and politicians finally saw what was being done. Dark shapes were forming in the clouds.

“What are they?” the politician mused.

“Since you seem so wary of Pearl’s gift to you, perhaps you may trust a gift from your own ancestors! Behold the starboats of Chalcedonah!”

From the sky came hundreds of vessels of stone. They were the ancient devices left by the ancestors of the citizens of Chalcedonah, great starboats where they once waited while preparing their world, great boats where they could hide to wait for the earthquakes to die down. Boats that contained every secret knowledge and tool a people could need to fight a plague. And there were in number beyond counting, enough for every man of this world.

They were silent in wonder. One great boat, the one that was heading towards the mountain, was set in design like the fortress of Pearl, though not one fifth the diameter. It gently floated towards the silent mountain.

Why did you not tell me these were above the sky? Rayn asked Ko.

I... He stumbled to reply.

Rayn already knew the words. Because he was from Thiaz, and his leaders had instructed him to give nothing but what could be sold, even if that was the knowledge of how to use their own starboat fleets.

Yet Rayn’s own wisdom cautioned him to be humble. Who was to say what was best for this world? A coarse introduction to wisdom tens of hundreds of years beyond their own? Being thrust into their destiny as dragon riders? Perhaps Ko was right, selling them what they were ready for really was the best course of action... or was it really better to be left to

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

ignorance, buying their knowledge from others till they came to depend on them. Taking things ‘slowly’ while a plague they could not hope to defeat slid under their doors?

Rayn was not wise enough to say for sure, but he had followed every intuition of his heart. All was working out, for now. Chalcedonah had a way to defend itself. It would soon find a way to talk to every man and dragon on their planet.

And soon, the riders would take to the sky.

The fortress rested on the mountain, and the earthquakes stopped. Lights began to dance from the enormous starboat, and they drew lines on the earth and lava. Glowing lights became solid platforms, and at waist level a beautiful mirage of a conclave formed. It was a simple effort to step up, and it looked to Rayn as though he was floating in the air while standing on the light.

Chalcedonah had its own conclave. It always had.

“Taroz,” Rayn asked, “you are the only wiseman given to this world at this time. Do you believe it is time to form the conclave?”

“I do.”

One or two politicians complained, but the chairman held his hand up for silence.

“Good,” Rayn said, “but the final decision is not mans to make. The joining must be *invited*.”

A moment later the familiar mist formed, and out of it Cloudform, the first dragon met on this world, appeared.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I don’t believe it!” he whispered, speaking a local language, “I honestly thought you men would take *millennia* before you prepared a place for the conclave. I don’t believe it!” He sounded pleased.

“Will you...” Taroz began, then stopped, seeming to realize he was asking the wrong dragon.

“No,” Cloudform replied for him, “but you could not have picked a more auspicious location.” Then his voice lowered to a whisper, and he spoke it like it was a request, “I request the presence of ... the First.”

There was a terrifying roar, which shook the men to their bones and made them cover their ears. Lava burst from the cavern below the floor. People shrieked and sought cover, but Rayn removed the danger with a wave of his hand. A huge, serpentine dragon made of fire and light had exploded from the mountain. He was transparent, as though most of him did not exist in this world at all. He had four limbs, wide antlers, and a broad jaw like a tiger. He exuded a ferocity that sent most men quailing to their knees.

Who summons Montar Blanc from his slumber? The dragon hissed fiercely, steam billowing from his nostrils.

The men quivered. Taroz bowed. Only Rayn, the scholar, and Ko seemed to be able or willing to stand in his presence. They, and the chairman. With courage unspeakable the old man walked towards the dragon who reared up and slithered in the lava. The blistering heat filled the air, and the chairman was obliged to step back.

The old man spoke, “We... we do, great one. Honor us, please. We know men and dragons once rode as one. We... want to know how we might do this once more, if the idea is pleasing to you. If not, we will leave, and never touch this mountain again.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The dragon was silent, contemplating. *There was a time*, it said, *when men were not such cowards before us. They were brothers. But you have spoken like a true politician.*

Then the dragon roared, its voice echoing across the mountains and onto the planes. Within that roar they heard a voice, *What say you, my people? Have the humans passed your tests? Do they earn our faith once more?*

There was silence. One moment, then two. A hundred breaths must have passed while the dragons of Chalcedonah seemed to be in communication with their patron, the 'First'.

Suddenly a joyful presence seemed to fill the air.

It is decided. We welcome the choosing once more! Montar Blanc roared, and it seemed like a terrible weight and fear lifted from his entire being. The waiting of a thousand years, undoubtedly more. The regret of his father, and his father's father. The wound between dragons and men on this world was about to heal.

In that moment Taroz cried out.

"What is it man?" The scholar said, rushing to his aid.

"I am... compelled towards that dragon." Taroz whispered with trembling voice.

"Go," Rayn told him. "Your dragons have held back their desire to join with riders for thousands of years. The compulsion is upon them once more. You, Taroz, are to become the rider of Montar Blanc."

The man openly trembled, "But I, am just a servant."

As are all dragon riders, Montar Blanc told him, *the most powerful of beings in this galaxy; it rests upon us to bring justice, share wisdom, and*

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

to serve that others may have peace. I have never laid my eyes upon you till this day, yet now we permit the joining once more, I know it is true. You are mine, and I belong to you.

Taroz hesitated.

Rayn smiled, and hauled him to his feet. "Divinity would not have called you, if it had not provided a way."

Taroz stumbled towards the dragon, holding out his staff as if it would protect him from the great heat. Soon, however his clothes caught fire. But Taroz did not cry out. Instead, he looked at his own hand in wonder.

"How is that possible," the chairman gasped.

"Renthuric coupling compliments diadactic transmissions," Ko began to explain, then stopped. "Sorry."

"I assume it is his dragon gift," Rayn explained. "Taroz is immune to fire. He probably always was."

"Yes, that does explain a few things," the scholar muttered.

Taroz walked forward, his entire body gleaming with fire and light. The First laid its head down on the appointed dais, made entirely of light, and with absolute silence, and in perfect glory, a new priest healed the bond between men and dragons on their world.

"I wish I had a dragon," the scholar muttered.

Suddenly there was a cry of dismay and horror, "Noo!" an instant later Hope Starlovecrossed, the green dragon of Sanmarellis, lost all composure and dignity. With a look of absolute loathing and desperation, he raced across the assembled throng and snatched the scholar up where he stood. The old man cried out in pain and surprise. Hope Starlovecrossed careened to the far wall, and cradling the old scholar like a doll, curled into a miserable ball.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Mine... mine...” he whispered, his voice devoid of feeling and wisdom.

Hope Starlovecrossed

“Please, I think you broke my ribs,” the scholar wheezed.

All eyes were fixed upon the desperate dragon Hope Starlovecrossed. Rayn looked up at the First, and knew they both possessed the power to force the grieving dragon to release the scholar.

But neither wanted to break the dragon’s heart.

“You are better than this,” Taroz said.

“No, mine! You have your own person now,” Hope hissed to the First as though he had spoken, and not Taroz. “We don’t have our own peoples where I come from. We are so lonely! No cities to watch, or stories to hear. I will bring this one home, and find him a lovely mate. They will make more people, and then we won’t be lonely anymore!” And Hope openly wept.

“Hope,” Ko’s dragon spoke kindly, “you know if you took a thousand men with you, they are not enough for the millions of dragons on your world! You have to be patient.”

“Patient! I’ve waited long enough! I can’t wait any more, I just can’t, I really can’t!”

Ko’s stood down.

Ironfang spoke up, his voice powerful, without regret or hint of apology. “You misunderstand, *dracoling*. Don’t you see? You can have a *million* humans, all bonded to *you*. And it will mean absolutely nothing till you find the one. The right one. The only one. I waited three hundred years. I waited sixty years with my head pressed to a stone pillar of punishment. I could not stand, I could not sit. That was the punishment of my murders.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

And I deserved *every minute*. Just like you will if you don't stop hurting that man!"

Hope's grip loosened on the scholar in an instant.

"Now," Ironfang continued, speaking dragon. From the reaction of the crowd it was clear the northern prophet's prayer had not yet worn off. "Now, I will tell you something true: I do not remember that pain. None of it. It was all swept away when I found my rider. My *one* rider! None other, but *this one* could fill that longing. Not just any one. The *right* one. You too, will forget all your suffering, and be fully paid, if you will *wait!*"

Hope wept, yet with trembling claws allowed the scholar to fall to the floor. A pair of guards ran to his aid, and Ko's dragon kindly took the weeping beast into her embrace. With a gentle wing she and the other dragon of Sanmarellis took him from the mountain.

Now... where were we... Montar Blanc said dismissing the grave situation with a grin. A moment later dragons began to appear from all over the fortress. They came in lightning, they walked through the stone. They walked in the space between the air. Hundreds came in only moments.

This gift, of moving through space is far more common on this world, Taroz and Blanc explained directly to him, *since the need to move suddenly is far more prevalent!*

The joining had recommenced.

Departure

Ko, it was clear, was ashamed.

“I realize why you did it,” Ko finally spoke. They were standing at the base of the mountain. In a few short moments the curtains of light would open up once more, and the portal to the fortress now on Sanmarellis would welcome its first wave of dragon riders and soldiers from Chalcedonah. It took them two days to prepare, though by now the joinings were happening all over the world.

Rayn listened.

“We of Thiaz, we aren’t fools. We know if the plague found a way off Pearl, it can find a way to Chalcedonah. It can find a way to Thiaz. But please understand, we are not evil. It’s just in our nature, in our culture, to always look for the benefit in every transaction. To never be cheated. You... you call it generosity, but my people call it folly. We are suspicious, cunning. I... I admit I have seen a new way of working from you, Rayn,” He sighed. “You have given them a world, Rayn. I hope they deal with you kindly.”

Rayn was silent. He was holding the white staff, and he would use it till the end of his days to serve others, even if it meant saving Thiaz. In his mind he already had, letting them flee instead of putting them and their queen to death for the war crime of attempting to steal their fortress. But it had been his Princess’s wish, and he had to admit, a clever way to deal with a very powerful people.

But Thiaz did not want to see the other seven worlds becoming so powerful, so quickly. Not till they knew what to expect, and how to control

them. If Ko could not see that, he was blind. Perhaps he had never seen how generosity created generosity: At least on Pearl.

A man on a dragon rode up. He had on a rider's armor, an orb embedded in his armor over his solar plexus. His head was masked, but Rayn smiled, he did not need to see his face to know recognize the scholar.

The old man looked down at him kindly from the saddle on his great beast Cloudform. Of all the dragons on this world, it had been Cloudform.

The scholar said nothing. He didn't need to. The gratitude shone from his face. He turned to face a world, a world filling with dragon riders once more. The starboats, that had landed all across the world, were filling with people, who would find their teachers. No matter what culture or continent they came from, knowledge would be filling their minds. Dragons would be filling their skies. Peace was settling across their world.

"Ten thousand," the scholar said, referring, to the number of riders Chalcedonah was offering today. "It is no Thiaz, nor Sanmarellis. But for two days, perhaps, you will forgive us? I really think it is the best we can do."

"It will do," Rayn promised him, anxious to be home.

The curtain of light spilled down the mountain, momentarily brushing the air away in a gentle breeze. For a moment they held their breath as Taroz and Montar Blanc rode high in the air, waiting for something, perhaps simply savoring the moment.

Then they dived at the mountain, and would burst only instants later from the curtain of light spilling directly down from the fortress on Sanmarellis.

"It will more than do," Rayn smiled, and returned.

First Things First

It was good to be home. They had all returned, and each world had sent and were still sending in their greatest warriors. In the days since they had come there had been a noticeable drop in the number of encounters with the plaguecursed. It gave him hope, and meant that, in the quiet evenings, he might have a moment of time to consider other important things.

And that meant he felt nervous.

Rayn looked at the door, the final obstacle between him and his objective. His hands felt sweaty, his breathing constricted. He chided himself – honestly, he’d been less afraid facing the plaguecursed in the cavern! But he was nervous, much more than he should have been.

Swallowing his fear, he opened the door.

It was the observatory, and she was there, standing beautiful in her Pearlescent robe. To his dismay there was someone else in there. The Thiazian prince, Caspina.

And no others.

Rayn felt his face grow hot with indignity.

“Um,” Caspina muttered.

“I suppose I’d better leave if you are busy,” Rayn said harshly. It was not right for an unwed maiden to be alone with a man. That was a law *he* would never break. Intentionally.

“No, no,” Caspina replied. “It is I who should be leaving.” He seemed embarrassed, and made for the exit.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn stood aside to let him go, allowing the disdain to show on his face. Not even the man at arms was present.

“We were, just... discussing the war...” Pure stuttered.

“I am sure,” Rayn replied, actually prepared to believe her. But she took council with the prince of traitors far too often for his comfort, and to do so alone? Or was she seeking his favor? Her own ways were often a mystery even to him.

He went to look out the window by her side as the prince left.

“We really were,” she continued, “he was concerned about some of the self-aggrandizing of the men of Thiaz, and thought it might provoke the new swords from Argentus. We were discussing things, Rayn.”

He said nothing, but looked out at the green world.

“What brings you here?” she asked him.

“Chalcedonah will want to send more forces,” he replied. “They’re learning all they can from their orbs and teachers, but still will take a generation to catch up to Thiaz. I’m glad they are here, but I’m not sure how much good they can do, for now.”

She waited, “What are you here for?”

He sighed, and smiled. There was no better time than this. He took her hands in his, “Pure. I have loved you from the first moment I have seen you. You fill my thoughts, you...”

She blushed, and removing a hand and pressed it to her cheek.

He continued, “We... are very well suited to each other. You need a solid man to help you rule, you are young, and I am very strongly connected to the Divine. There is so much I can offer you.”

“Rayn,” she began.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He didn't let her continue, "I will care for you, all my days. I will boil the water and hold the children and –"

"Rayn, stop," she ordered.

He fell silent.

"Rayn. It's not that... I'm not r... Rayn. No. How could you even say such things at a time like this? We're in the middle of a war and I don't even know if you or I will live to see tomorrow? It's not that, I mean, you're a great guy. You're amazing in just so many ways! But it's not you; I'm just... not ready. It's not the right time for me to be making the kind of lifetime commitment I know you're asking for, I mean, that you're offering. Please don't be sad. I'm just not – this isn't a good time for me."

He let her hand go.

It wasn't the denial; in fact, a part of him was enormously relieved to know where they stood. No longer was there a wondering within him that they were already unofficially betrothed. Now he knew where they stood.

The rest of him was angry. Very, very angry. He'd just taken an enormous risk to tell her how he felt, and she'd just shot him down completely.

But at least he knew where they stood.

"I... that's all right, Pure. It's not a good time. I'm sorry. Well, um, I guess, I guess I'll be going then."

She stood silently, and her eyes seemed to be fighting back tears. He was confused, if he meant so much to her why did she want him to go?

Women were a mystery. He looked out the window once more; down at the mighty chasm Sanmarellis had formed to protect him and the first

warriors. It seemed, right at that instant, to symbolize the great distance between his heart, and hers.

“Well, at least that’s settled,” he told her, and walked out.

She wanted to slap him.

Honestly, knowing they were close was all that was keeping a whole army of suitors from her doorstep. Now the immature boy had gone and ruined their whole friendship? Once news spread they would come knocking, and now that he’d gone and told her out loud that he loved her, really loved her enough to keep her forever... How could she look at him straight again?

Rayn had just ruined their friendship as well.

She looked out at the uncompromising landscape, full of life, life spawned by love. Love demanded her compliance, her obedience to be won over by some man whether it was her choice or not?

The fire exploded from her before she’d even had the chance to consider it.

Rude, inconsiderate boy.

And what was that about ‘fit’? He was nothing like her! He didn’t see the world as she did, didn’t measure the lives of countless billions; only the lives of those he could see. He was still stuck in his tribal ways, not truly open to the many cultures of the universe. What had he done, forcing the change on Chalcedonah without their highest council’s consent, and she had to have to justify that. Snow too. They had no diplomacy, just immediate solutions.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They had no idea of politics, or high end sciences, or subtlety.

They had no idea how to... play the game.

She stormed from the observatory, ready to order the lives of the nearly a million soldiers under her command.

Council

Another week had passed, and voices were raised. Tempers flared, and in their wake, dragons roared. Pure buried her head in her hands; it was not supposed to be like this.

She stood, and it brought the silence she had hoped. That, and Farwing's gentle growl that calmed the assembled dragons and thus, the riders. Present were at least two representatives from each of the seven worlds. She and Rayn represented Pearl. Taroz and the scholar from Chalcedonah. Only one came from Tourmarelle, a black skinned wiseman, called a shaman, with a staff he didn't really seem to know how to use and a twisted dragon who couldn't seem to speak. They rode together as dragon and friend. From Ethphraim stood the honored Sargent, and a healer, the Surgeon, who rode a huge fiery wyvern. From Thiaz came their dragon rider general and his first assistant. From Argentus stood the enormous one called Legionnaire and by his side a child who would say nothing at the council, but her dragon listened intently. From Sanmarellis Starwing brought two of his closest friends, but they did not participate much in the debates at the table.

She sighed, and wondered what to say next. Then a certain idea crept into her from Farwing, "Perhaps, just for the next few moments," she said in her most calming voice possible, "it *is* wisest if we speak our minds, uncensored. This is a difficult war on all our people. It is not going as we had hoped. There are powerful feelings in this room at this time. Let us each take our turn, and report."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“The war goes well,” the black shaman said, and his dragon friend nodded, “blood spills daily!”

“Your recklessness is a constant trial to our war efforts!” The general from Thiaz said in growing anger.

“You think war is a holiday? Why are you requesting your soldiers rest after only a month of battle?”

“Your ignorance of times and cycles betrays you. Fight on, if you will, and die tired while the soldiers of Thiaz, who outnumber all the rest of you, fight on for years.”

“At least we are given over to this cause. Why do you hold back?”

“Pah!” The general from Thiaz scoffed.

“At least the men of Ethphraim are willing to fight, though they be few,” the shaman said.

“Yes,” Pure interjected, “how are things, Sargent?”

The mood in the room relaxed at her interruption, just a little.

“Good, as can be expected,” he replied. “Food is plentiful, and we are grateful to the men of Thiaz for the priest who tells us what is safe to eat. Guarding the long pass is not too difficult, and we have only encountered random, scattered resistance from the plague.”

“Your losses?” Rayn asked.

The general from Thiaz raised an eyebrow. Thiaz had lost hundreds since first attacking the plague on this world.

“Two men, one was torn to shreds by some kind of dinosaur and the good priest of Thiaz couldn’t revive him. Another died from some kind of lung infection. Even so, each of us have taken wounds that would have killed us a dozen times over without your advanced technologies, and the

immunities granted by the staff; that's impressive stuff. Great. And to you, Thiaz, for your generosity."

The general nodded, "You are welcome."

"Nicely said, trues!" Starwing joined in, an unfamiliar air of concern and frustration about him, "but the dragons be ask'n, why are your weapons so ... bad! They sound thunder, and cut any they touch without concern. The orbs of fire... why must your weapons be so indiscriminate?"

"Thiaz seems to have no problem with them," Sargent argued.

"Well," the general's assistant said, "since we are in the mood of open speech, my adepts do report full handling of your weapons. They harm as much as they defend, and apparently you destroyed an entire tree to slay a single plaguecursed Harboradon? I hear that twice now the healing arts have been used to heal collateral damage from your own primitive weapons."

Sargent was visibly upset by that, "Well it's not like we have the *luxury* of a hundred million space ships, fully laden with advanced technologies like those of you or Chalcedonah. We're working with all we got, all we're *given!*" He emphasized. No one spoke, or argued. Ethphraim must have hundreds of dragon riders by now. Yet none had come through the small portal on their world to help out, and when questioned why they still would not say.

More secrets.

"Chalcedonah is proud to lay down its best blood to defend this world." The scholar spoke, "we have over thirty thousand wings now, with some vital teleportary abilities less common on other worlds making a real difference to this battle. I would be proud to see Ethphraim gather all his

resources to this conflict as well. I am sure you will yet make a greater contribution—”

“What, the defense of the long pass not enough for you?” Sargent replied, his frustration evident.

“Given that Thiaz gathers ten thousand times that, yes.” The general from Thiaz added. His tone was honest, not condescending. He was trying to give Ethphraim its dignity while adding his complaint that their contribution under impressed him.

Sargent glowered, but did not argue.

The general continued, “and we of Thiaz continue to offer Pearl two million more dragons and their riders, why do you resist us?”

Pure had anticipated this protest, and answered quickly. Perhaps a little too quick, “There’s no advantage in risking infection to more riders and their dragons. We don’t need more numbers now, we need new ideas. That is why I have called you all here. That is the battle we must now fight.”

“So, thank you, but no thank you.” Sargent summarized, a glint in his eye directed at Thiaz. The man was point scoring, indicating that more soldiers from either world weren’t really called for. “So! What of Pearl?” he asked.

She sighed, “We fight. We have no way of calling in reinforcements unless we withdraw the fortress.”

“You cannot do that,” Thiaz general argued.

“Unless you lend us a fleet of starboats,” Rayn replied.

“We... can’t do that either,” the general muttered.

“So for now we have all we have. A hundred thousand. In all, six hundred and fifty wings from the other worlds, and the twenty million of this

world. Yet it is clear numbers are not enough! Why is the plague still spreading? Where are we going wrong?”

“Well,” the surgeon from Ethphraim said, “with thanks again to the technologies of Thiaz, and the generosity of an orb from Chalcedonah, I have been studying this disease. As you know, it is a macrophagial microbe capable of adaptive invasion of all known life forms. However, you can see,” and now images of her words began taking shape in the lights above the table, “it actually only infects one in every four cells of its hosts body, overtaking the host cells function while it digests it. This leaves even neural networks functioning. After a week or so the host body begins to break down, and the disease segregates exponentially, dissolving cellular life indiscriminately from that point; even its own cells. After only a day nothing is left but a macrophagial intercellular material, what you people call ‘dust’.”

She continued, “here on Sanmarellis the plague has been identified in most of the plant life already, but only as an inactive form, which is another mystery: why aren’t *more* life forms affected by the plague here? Our research indicates that the plague has evolved since arriving here on Sanmarellis. The cell blockers produced by Rayn’s so called ‘prayer’ are effective on Pearl, but here the effectiveness is reduced by the presence of the A-priori endocutes – previral silicate life forms that exist in a symbiotic relationship with all cellular life on this world. A fortuitous but eventually tragic result of the three staged evolutionary processes mapped out for this globe. In short, we need a new prayer, a new antidote, and in spite of all our efforts no student of Thiaz, or wiseman of Pearl, has achieved that.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Not even with the white staff?” The general asked the surgeon rhetorically – he had openly considered it theft of the people of Chalcedonah, who held instead to Ko’s words; *no one owns an archetype*.

Rayn said nothing. The white staff stood by his side. It had called down storms of rain none have ever seen, it healed soldiers who simply saw its light. It was, indeed, one of the fabled archetypes from the dawn of humanity. It was a greater tool. To hear the general speak about it like a kind of object to be fought over was no doubt to him... sacrilegious.

But Rayn said nothing.

They waited for him to speak.

When he did, he chose to change the topic, “What of Argentus?” he asked.

“This war is *glorious*,” Legionnaire responded, his deep voice ecstatic. The soldiers of Argentus were a head taller than even the best of other worlds, and they had lived war all their lives. Each wielded the sacred blade of the dragon riders, the shifting blade. It was a weapon of nobility, honor, and unlike the weapons of Ethphraim; very discriminating.

“We are winning this war,” Legionnaire continued. “As you know, due to new tactics and the might of the Divine with us almost no warrior or dragon has been wounded, let alone slain, in these past two weeks.”

“What of your people?” Pure asked him.

“Only the warriors remain, the Empress invited the civilians back with honor. We are a warrior race. Tomorrow we offer fifty thousand dragons keen for glory and battle, as well as two hundred thousand warriors from every city we can muster. Yet there... there is a war going on at Argentus, some tyrants still trying to claim right to rulership. But we dragon

riders have every advantage over the tyrants this time, with the Empress having made her decision. This war is uniting my people across Argentus like... nothing before. We are, so, so very grateful to the Goddess.”

“Indeed,” Rayn nodded, still clearly uncomfortably with their preferred term of address to Jayd. “And what about the dragons of Sanmarellis? Have we heard from the matron?”

Finding her had been Thiaz’s job, since the dragons of Sanmarellis feared offending her deeply.

The woman who was the general’s assistant spoke, “She will have nothing to do with us. She is an aquatic serpentine; I doubt she can rise above the surface, and even if she can it will not be for long. She is determined to avoid us, and we find approaching her now... dangerous.”

The table was silent.

Perhaps you’re just not looking hard enough? Twisted, the dragon of Tourmarelle, said in provocation.

“And you expect Tourmarelle can do better?” She almost spat in reply.

“I know we can,” the dark skinned shaman replied. Rather than sitting, he insisted on crouching down on top of it in what must have been a commanding pose in his culture. When he spoke, he looked at the ground. Yet his voice was so commanding, his voice so convinced, he held all in its magic. “We must surely seem the most primitive of you all. Yet it seems to us that you have lost your way. Chalcedonah, you do not respect the spirits! The voices of the ancestors or the wisdom in the midst! You eat any animal you care for, with no respect to the ancient totems! You cannot read the messages in the scats, or hear any voices on the wind. You are too far

removed from the roots of your ancestors. You are full of council, and study, and words, but have forgotten the deep lessons your ancestors taught you. You must look again to them.”

Taroz said nothing, but simply nodded.

“I will make sure we do,” the scholar replied.

The shaman continued, “Yet this is not the greatest trouble within this alliance. You, of Thiaz, why must you *always* speak? Do you fear the silence, hoping noise will conceal truth? Then you do well to speak, or else all here may learn about your lies and thefts upon the wind. Why do not share, as though not knowing that nothing is owned. When did your people forget this?”

The general of Thiaz said nothing, seething with anger and what might have been confusion. Then he sat back, making it clear he thought nothing of Tourmarelle’s advice.

The black shaman continued, “Yet above all, sons of the blue orb, your ways are most foolish. Your weapons frighten the spirits, breaking up the ways of the flow within this world! Worse yet, your men show no wisdom for their own refuse, not giving back to the world that breathes life into them today. Yet at the same time you pollute this world, leaving little stones that do not belong here. You are wasteful, wrapping your food in leaves that cannot be digested by man or beast! Heed my wisdom: for a man who pollutes his own bed will one night drown in his own filth.”

Sargent looked like he might have said something in reply, but instead kept silent, and nodded.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

It seemed the old man was almost finished speaking, and then he turned to face Pure's feet. "We will find the matron of this world within two days, if you allow us, child queen of Pearl," he said to her.

Pure's blood boiled, and before she could stop herself, she'd shouted, "Child?!"

He nodded without apology.

Child queen? She fumed.

Don't let it bother you. Farwing hummed. *It's just his culture.*

Child?!?

Farwing laughed.

"You have my permission," she said instead, her voice even and well measured.

"Do you know why the matron is so reluctant to speak to us?" The assistant of Thiaz ventured to ask.

"I do not know," he replied.

"She feels the loss of men more than any of her world." Pure suggested, "perhaps, like Hope Starlovecrossed, she is wary that she may lose her composure in the presence of humans?"

"No, she is the matron," the shaman replied.

"Perhaps," the golden general said, "she is offended at the presence of another patron dragon on her world?"

Taroz straightened, but refused to be drawn into an argument.

"Then why does she not aid us?" Rayn asked.

"You have a white staff, you tell us," The general rudely replied. The table was silent. Honesty was requested, not insults. Rayn, wisely, did not reply.

“Is there nothing we can do?” Pure whispered.

“One moment,” the scholar said, almost jumping out of his seat with enthusiasm. “What about that vision you told me about Rayn? The cavern of coffins? Have we any luck in finding it?”

They looked again at the general from Thiaz.

“No,” he replied. “I am given to the fact that it does not exist, but was rather a symbol shown to the wiseman. No student nor priest, nor even our Diviners can find it. Not even the noble Navigatoress of Pearl! It cannot exist.”

“But it does!” Rayn said with a husky voice.

The general sat back, seeming to enjoy lecturing a boy, “No cavern of that size could be hidden from the eyes of Thiaz. The wealth of such entity would clearly show in the planet’s lifeglobe to the *least* gifted of our students. To suggest it is hidden is preposterous,” he said with a smooth voice, his face written with condescending pity.

Rayn said nothing, and Pure knew it was because he didn’t know where to find the cavern either.

“A moment,” Taroz suddenly spoke up, for the first time. “Master,” he said to the scholar.

“Stop it man, I told you stop calling me that.”

Taroz simply nodded, and smiled, “I recall you mentioning a theory recently, something of a scholar of Nobilae? What was it? That using sounds he could measure the density of stone. Did you not mention it most curious that he suggested one day we might use the sounds of earthquakes to ‘peer’ into the heart of the world?”

“I do recall,” the scholar nodded.

“Then, perhaps, that might be applicable here?”

The room fell silent.

“Echolocation,” the surgeon named it.

“There are over twenty thousand staffs on this world.” The assistant to the general of Thiaz offered, “I can generate an algorithm to plot out their readings. Yes, I believe it is possible.”

“I am not so sure,” the general complained, “it would take an enormous release of movement energy. We don’t have sufficient resources in orbit to predict the next earthquake, and unless Rayn can convince Sanmarellis to produce one, and given his emotional state I’m not sure that is a good idea, how are we going to generate a sound loud enough?”

“Actually, I know a way to do just that,” Pure replied.

The general stood, “You cannot do that! You... you’re planning to drop the fortress on the mountain! The damage to the fortress alone, not to mention the wound to the mountain! You cannot-”

“Last *I* was aware,” Pure said in a commanding voice, “I, Princess of Pearl commanded the fortress, *not* you.”

He bowed, asking her forgiveness, but still pled with his eyes.

She stared him down, then spoke again, “We will need at least a day, thirty hours from this moment, to get all the staffs into location. It will take almost four days for the echo to travel around the world, but it will map the internity of it most thoroughly. I had wished the teachers had recorded such a cavern, if it exists at all, it must have been built after they fell silent, or the memories removed from them, but why?”

“Let us find answers,” Rayn smiled.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She nodded. “Well, it has been an intense meeting, but we all have new plans to look forward to. Thiaz, prepare the staffs, have your warriors stand by. Tourmarelle, it is your turn to try and contact the Matron. Rayn, pray; work with Ethphraim or whoever you have to and get that antidote working properly. We will adjourn for thirty hours, when I will drop the fortress from about four paces back onto the mountain. Let us work.”

They nodded, and some shook hands whose words had been most intense. A few, it seemed to Pure, left with hidden bitterness. But in large it was a productive meeting.

Rayn sat there, watching her. After a moment she also noticed Prince Caspina still waiting at the door of the room.

What of you? The prince asked her.

He knew she'd already made up the necessary calculations. Thirty hours were thirty more hours than she needed. Rayn seemed to know this too, and was watching her intently.

Call Jayd. She told Rayn and the prince, *and Snow. We have a necessary task to perform.*

Womanhood

Jayd shivered.

There was only one woman of the Celtwyld that had joined the battle on Sanmarellis, a dragon rider named River Fern. She had travelled with the second force that came with the fortress, yet it seemed she took this, her new this duty, even more seriously. Pure had decided it was time for them all to participate in the rituals of womanhood of the Celtwyld.

It wasn't the cold that bothered Jayd, nights were never terribly cold on Sanmarellis. It was the uncertainty, and the serious manner in which River Fern prepared the bitter waters. Jayd knew little about the tribe where the older woman was from since it was closer to Snow's people than her own. So she could not help but be a little nervous.

Jayd and the others were dressed in just a loincloth and the cloak; at least *that* tradition did not stray between their peoples. To her left sat Pure, her face a mask of concentration. Jayd smiled to herself: It was clear Pure was determined to see this event through to its completion and never be called a young girl again. Beside Pure sat Snow. She had been very quiet, not quite yet of age to be called a woman, but none knew if they'd ever get the chance to become a woman again. A war was waging, a war for a world. None wanted to die a child when they could battle tomorrow as a woman.

They had been fasting all day. Tonight, they would drink the bitter waters, and dream of their future life as a woman. As the fire began to burn low the older woman began to speak. She told them the stories; a little different to the way Jayd knew them. She told them about the hero women

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

of old; Nataylor, Mera the fierce, Longfountain the valiant. At the end of each story came the moral, a lesson. Pure was terrible at guessing the lessons. Snow was all right. Jayd excelled.

Then came the lesson on marriage and how children were actually made. The look on Pure's face was a priceless mix of disbelief and horror. Jayd tried to not laugh; she'd heard it all before, and was curious enough to get quite a bit of solid information on it from the teachers, so very little was actually news to her. Snow just sighed, and shrugged.

Finally, they were allowed to ask questions. Snow had one, Jayd none. But Pure's would have gone late into the night until finally the older woman had had enough.

They drank the bitter waters, which were blessed by the woman to induce the vivid dreams of those whose spirits wandered. It was a skill they were supposed to learn too should they become mothers, to gather the new souls of the child and bring them to the world before birth, or the children might be born without breath. It was a vital skill for a new woman to learn, and they could not rely on the wisemen to help them. Only the power of the cloak, and the wisdom and determination of the other women in the tribe, could work this miracle.

"Tonight, you will dream," the older woman instructed them, "and be taken by the Divine to view your destiny."

"You mean we will see the future?" Pure asked in wonder.

"No, not really, but a pattern of what the future *may* be, depending on your choices. The journey into the spirit world brings you nearer to the Divine, but your choice is not taken from you at all. What you become is up

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

to you, the vision is merely intended to guide you. When you wake up, you will be a woman, and I will take you back to men folk and declare so myself.”

The three were silent.

“Do not fear, little ones. I will keep watch tonight. No shadow can harm you, or dream take you. I will not sleep.”

It was enough, but Jayd sensed Pure still had many questions.

“Do not fear, my princess.” River Fern repeated to her. “Take your journey as a woman must. Do not be afraid. Last year, when I took my niece on the journey, I waited the night with ease. Today will be no different, except you are the first of my tribe to be honored with the watchful eye of the dragons!”

From the shadow of the night mist behind her rose her ancient and wise dragon Sunsong, guide of both men and dragon. And Jayd knew that high in the sky, only a thought away, Farwing rode. Windfyrth kept the borders of the land they had chosen for the ritual. Darkwing was there too, hidden in the shadows, but far enough so as to not interfere with the rites of womanhood. Yet she thought she could feel his thoughts at the edge of her heart, *Go Jayd, learn all I cannot teach you. Take the rites of humanity, and earn your place as a woman among them.*

He had such a philosophical streak, her Darkwing.

The plague seemed so far away, so far away. More than even a world. The drink made her eyelids feel heavy, though she was also weak from fasting. Without complaint she wrapped herself in the power of the cloak, and by the fire, fell immediately into a profound sleep.

Jayd dreamed.

She saw dragons, writhing in a black sky. They slithered about her, caressing her in their coils. The clouds were large, glowing, filled with black fire and lightning. Dark thunder mixed with the roars of the dragons that seemed to fill a world.

A sole voice filled the void, deep, like a male dragon's. It was Darkwing. *I am Jayd*, he affirmed. His voice was powerful, vastly exceeding any that she had ever heard before. Or had she? Had she not heard that confidence, that wisdom before? Now where... in the proclamation of the matron of Pearl declaring the first conclave in four thousand years? Yes, but also in the call to arms of the Empress of Argentus against the Tyrants. Darkwing sounded just like that. Like...

Suddenly lightning split the sky, scattering her thoughts. She turned, and saw a man. He walked up to her, smiling, and she was suddenly filled with consuming love for him, as though all her feelings had been shackled down inside, but here, in the dream, would find their full expression within her. She found herself glowing with light when he came to stand by her, and there he handed her a small bundle.

"It's a little early," he said, "but there won't be time for it later on."

She wondered what it meant, what this man whom she would love more than life itself could mean. She reached down, and unfolded the bundle. She gasped as the cloth fell away to reveal a perfect little child, a white Lilly blossom by his right cheek clearly indicating that this would be a man child.

He was more beautiful than any other soul she had ever before beheld. He had his mother's nose.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Thunder whispered ominously in the distance. As the blanket fell away, she gasped as she saw the little black Onshroom by his left cheek. The old sign for the approach of a bitter winter – the beginning of suffering. His life would be difficult.

“No,” she whispered, “not our son.”

“Is not your life as troubled?” the man spoke, his voice soft and gentle, full of understanding. “It will bring out the best in him, and he will bear the trials for a multitude of people, even as his mother.”

She didn’t want to hear it, and felt the tears cool her face. She didn’t dare remove her gaze from the beautiful being before her and knew with a perfect certainty that she would suffer *anything* to bring this glorious creature into their world.

“Not my son...” she begged the Divine.

The man held up another bundle.

“Your daughter,” he said.

“Only two?” She wondered.

“That choice is yours. There is no end to the children you might have, no end to those who press against the gate for their chance to enter this life. But these two are most necessary.”

“But... the Onshroom.”

“Don’t you think ... it will be worth it?” he asked.

“I...” she tried to speak, but words failed her.

Suddenly a deep howl echoed from the world behind her, and everything seemed to turn around in spite of her only wish to hold on to the vision of love.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

It was the cave. The howling ruin. It spoke, as with a woman's voice, yet unlike any voice she had ever heard before, "Is not this what you wanted," it demanded to know. "Is this not why you sought my depths? Don't turn away now Jayd, you know the rules of the dare! I'd hate to think any less of you."

"I'll go if you go," her husband said, and when she turned to look at his face, for a frightening instant, it was Rayn's visage. He looked ahead at the challenge of the howling ruin as he did once long ago, nervous, but daring.

Darkness spread around her.

"She's seen all she needs to," River Fern's voice declared.

"More than one comes here to see," another replied.

They seemed to agree.

Slowly she slipped into the deep world of dreamless sleep.

Morning came, and Jayd arose. Her mouth felt dry and her head hurt, but the lingering shreds of the disturbing vision still clung to her like the cobwebs on the trees. To her dismay she could remember it all in perfect detail. Snow slept, curled up in a ball against the body of some kind of furry pig that seemed to have found her in the night. Pure was surrounded by ashes; apparently, she'd gotten a little cool and decided to set fire to things at some point. Clearly neither of them knew how to keep away the cold by sheer force of will.

Jayd grabbed a shoe, and slung it at Pure, "Hey, sleepy, get up!"

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“What?!” Pure stumbled from sleep, “did something hit me? Who threw a shoe at me?”

Jayd laughed, and Snow stretched out while the pig lumbered away into the forest.

They yawned.

The older woman was still sitting vigilantly by the boughs of the tree. She looked exhausted, and grateful. Slowly the three new women roused themselves.

“What did you dream about?” Jayd asked Pure.

“Oh,” she sounded frustrated, “nothing but fire. Fire, fire, fire, all night! I like fire; I was always good at it. But I think I’ve had enough for the rest of my life.”

“Perhaps,” River Fern said, “but perhaps some more detail is necessary. Dreams can be very symbolic, you know.”

Pure sighed, “A candle burning low. A bright fire coming from the four points of the compass to consume me. A ball of fire falling from the sky. So much fire! I don’t really want to talk about it,” she said, and buried her face in her hands.

Jayd looked over at Snow.

“Weird things,” Snow almost whispered. “My hair was white, and there were so many people! I stood on stone. People... people kept handing me babies. I still can’t make any sense of it.”

“You will, when the time is ready,” River Fern pronounced.

“What of you Jayd?” Snow asked, voice soft.

“Yes, tell us!” Pure demanded.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd sighed, and suddenly regretted having asked the others. Her dreams made perfect sense. "I will have a boy child, and then a girl. His life will be difficult, but make a big difference. I even dreamt about Darkwing."

Pure became intensely interested, if that was even possible. "You dreamt of your dragon? Wow. That's amazing. What of him?"

"I'm not sure. I don't really know. He will, I guess, become very powerful."

They were silent a while, till Pure spoke, "You are, after me, the second dragon rider. I suppose there is no concealing he will always hold a place of honor and power on our world."

Jayd was silent. She wondered if it was even more than that.

"Did... did you dream of your husband?" Snow asked them both.

"I get choices," Pure replied. "Lots and lots of options." She sighed contentedly. It made them laugh; she was the princess, what man wouldn't want to claim her?

"You, Jayd?" Snow asked most sincerely.

Jayd tossed the small pebbles at her feet away uncomfortably, this... how could she... there was just no justifying what she had seen. "I really don't know. I don't think I could have. It just didn't make sense."

"It will, in time," Pure assured her, but Jayd couldn't even meet her gaze.

Dawn arose and voices could be heard as the other women came, bringing new clothes and jewelry. They fussed over them mightily, insisting on plating all their hair. They burnt what they could of their childhood clothes, and Pure was only too happy to oblige them at that. Even Snow got

into the excitement, yelling and running around a fire as their old life lifted into the sky.

Then they walked them back to the fortress. Each of the women held a bronze or iron shield, or in some cases a cooking pan. With sticks they picked up from the ground they began banging their shields, crying out aloud, "Make way! The new women approach! Stand aside!" Jayd was so excited. This was just the way it was meant to be!

Within paces other women arrived and took up the call. Within a dozen breaths some more arrived, and soon they became a great procession. Dragons too, the females at least, took up the call: a thunderous roaring to startle the beasts from the forest. "Stand aside, the new women approach!" Windfyrth, Lightning, and a hundred dragons of Sanmarellis all moved by the ceremony.

Pure blushed at the havoc they were causing, but Jayd could not but cry out in joy. Snow was moved to tears. By the time they reached the fortress the men had retreated back to the line of the stone slope that marked its entrance. The slope formed a natural stage which all could see.

River Fern, their woman tutor, cried even louder, the cloak magnified her voice a thousand times, "You men! I call you out! Mark my words! We call you out!"

The men, young and old, as well as what children there were yet among them, stood by the wall of the fortress. The women lined the three of them at the foot of the ramp. "Mark well my words, you men of this world, and every other! I present to you Snow, speaker of beasts, spurner of death, pure heart of the Celtwyld. Men: you *will* respect her. You will honor her in

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

every word, in every deed. You will do nothing to disgrace her in life, or in death. Show your respect! I present to you: Snow!”

Only the men of the Celtwyld knew what their role was, but Rayn’s voice rung out so loud they all took cue quickly, “We honor the new woman! We honor Snow!” They roared, and the male dragons’ joined them as the children cheered.

And as Snow walked into the fortress, every one of them bowed. The soldiers of Thiaz drew their swords and saluted. She walked up to the representative of their people, Rayn, high wiseman of the fortress from beyond the clouds. With a bow to the staff she freely offered herself, and her life, as a new woman to the tribe. With nothing more than a nod, for what else could she need, he represented his tribe’s acceptance of her new status as a woman.

River Fern spoke again, “I present to you: Jayd! Heroine of the plague, goddess to Argentus, second dragon rider of Pearl. Men: you *will* respect her. You will honor her in every word, with every deed. You will do nothing to disgrace her in life, or in death. Show your respect! Show it now! I present to you: Jayd!”

Now the men knew their role, the roar was truly mighty. The warriors of Argentus, those that could be there, brought their swords down on the stones with such fierceness that it threw up a bright shower of sparks. Then they placed one knee on the ground with their swords before them, and were each moved to tears.

She walked up the slope, and bowed at the white staff. Rayn grinned as he nodded at her.

Completely oblivious.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

With deep expectation the crowd grew silent. When the woman River Fern spoke, her voice at first wavered. With each passing word, it grew stronger. “Men of the Celtwyld... men of *all seven worlds*. I present to you: Pure, mistress of fire, rider to Patron Farwing, beloved Princess of Pearl. Men: you *will* respect her. You will honor her in every word, in every deed. You will do nothing to disgrace her in life, or in her death. Show your respect! Show your *respect!* I present to you: Pure – Princess of Pearl!”

The resounding roar tore stones from the fortress, it shook branches from the trees. The dragons of Sanmarellis choreographed a fitting salute of flames to accompany her. All bowed, if not to the princess, then to a new woman. She walked up, and Rayn bowed to her, even as she bowed before the wielder of the white staff and high wiseman of her world.

She took her place by his side, and all cheered long and loud. Jayd took opportunity to steal a glance at the shaman from Tourmarelle, who stood alone with his dragon. Visibly moved by the ceremony, he refused to meet her gaze. She did not think it was shame, but the way of his people in showing profound respect to those honored today. She looked past him, to the general of Thiaz and his councilor. The councilor shook her head, visibly displeased, but he simply looked over, and nodded with respect.

Then she caught another man gazing in the shadows.

Caspina; that roguish prince of Thiaz. He was hard to see, even from this distance, even more without her helm. He looked relaxed, resting by the side of his man at arms, but he gazed towards them intently.

Or more precisely, towards the princess.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd's gaze dashed towards her and a moment later the princess, indeed, turned to gaze back at the prince. In less than a heartbeat she looked away again, clearly hoping no one had seen her looking at him.

But Jayd had seen, and a little smile curled along the edge of her lips.

That Evening

That evening, as red dusk turned to pale night, she hunted herself a prince. Pure was a woman now. The dream was clear; she could have any man she wanted. Rayn had embarrassed her, so Caspina would do well for practice.

She found him relaxing with the other men in the observatory. Their work done, they simply found time to peer out at the indescribable beauty of Sanmarellis. She paused at the thought. If she died tomorrow in the war, she would die grateful, having seen Sanmarellis in all his beauty. But there was another goal she wanted to achieve before death claimed her, and it involved a prince.

The room fell silent as she approached, soldiers standing to attention. She fixed the prince with a determined glare.

“Put all people out before us,” she ordered.

They hesitated, but on seeing the fire in her eyes, every soldier, student or scholar hurried out. One or two may have cast cheeky congratulations to the prince, but none dared speak in her presence tonight, and that was wise of them.

Caspina stood from looking out the window, taking a shuddering breath in. He was nervous. His man at arms stood momentarily by his side. Pure raised her eyebrow at his presence, and with a wave Caspina sent him away. The man bowed formally and left without meeting her eye.

He would probably stand guard at the door.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The night was cool, high in the air above the mountain. The bats of the air could be seen reflected in the pale light of Sanmarellis' three moons. Stars watched in silent vigil of a princess, and the prince.

He adjusted his vest, taking on the cool demeanor that he usually bore.

She walked up, by the window, and watched him from the corner of her eye.

"It is a cool night," he began.

"I don't have any desire for games tonight, prince. I am a woman now. I want to know what you plan to do about that."

He coughed. "No one has ever said that to me before!" He waved his hands in front of him, and shook his head, stepping back.

Her face flushed with anger, he was walking in the wrong direction.

He cleared his throat, and looked her in the eye, "A woman. Yes. I always thought of you as a woman. You have done things people forty times your age couldn't prevent. You ride a Patron. You are beautiful... beyond compare."

She blushed.

"But you are new! You cannot rush these things, Pure. Force them. You need to take your *time*, be patient."

Her fists clenched in frustration, the air about them licked with fire. "Am I still too young in your eyes, Caspina? I am over four thousand years old, even as it is measured on your world."

"I know, I know," he did not argue.

"Then why do you hesitate?"

"Hesitate from what?" he asked, looking innocent, "do you, young princess, even know what you seek?"

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She hesitated, knowing what he said was true. Images from the older woman's teachings crossed her imagination, and she turned away. She felt consumed, burned by a fire. Within, and without.

"Why must you rush things?" he asked. "All your people do."

His words, and their truth, stung her. But she didn't care tonight, "Because I *must!*" she shouted. "Because I am compelled by a fire within. I don't know, I don't know!"

She tried in vain to push back the unbidden tears. "I have... so little time..." she told him.

He was silent. "I think you'll find, if you stop stressing, everything works out for the best. In all my sixty years, waiting has achieved more for me than fire." He looked meaningfully at her conflagrated fingers on the windowsill.

With a thought she put them out.

"Caspina," she begged.

"No," he replied, then placed his hand on hers. It felt like electricity moving up her, and in an instant, she felt inexplicably weak. She wanted to fall in his arms. But she knew... they would not take her where she wanted to go.

"No," he repeated. "Some decisions cannot be taken back. You don't want to make that kind of decision when, well, when you are on fire."

She huffed. Perhaps Rayn would be more willing? She looked at Caspina and turned quickly away. This man was so annoying! Why was his face the only one she saw? Why did her heart skip a beat every time he spoke? Why, if she loved him, did he not claim her right now?

Is this how she'd made Rayn feel?

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She felt her anger grow, intensify. She knew the air would be turning hot around her. She wanted to expel that anger in a massive blue flame out the window, once again.

But that was what a little girl would do, and she wasn't a little girl anymore.

She clenched her teeth, and felt the air become cool once more. She looked at Caspina, who eyed her with an open mix of admiration and a touch of nervousness.

So she grabbed his vest, and pushed his back against the windowsill. Turning around she pressed herself backwards into his arms.

He hesitated a moment, then finally held her.

"Will you not even try for a kiss? My parents used to kiss, but the art is lost on the men of the Celtwyld."

He laughed, and she wanted to get caught up in his laughter. "Many things are lost... well... they are a race of survivors; I'll give them that. No one could have survived what they make seem easy."

"I expected more from you, Prince of Thiaz," she admitted to him.

"I am many things," he replied, "but not a scoundrel. Not... well, not anymore."

She waited in his arms until once again she could feel the cool of the night. After an hour she felt her eyes become heavy. His arms must have been quite numb, for he did not move them even once. She rested in his arms, and must have fallen to sleep for soon she felt him picked her up, and with the company of the guards, carried in person to her chambers.

There she allowed him to lay her down, while she pretended to sleep. The room was silent, and suddenly, his lips met hers, and he kissed her.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She didn't dare move.

He left with his men at arms, admitting nothing to the silence.

She smiled.

The Hidden

Rayn watched in awe as the fortress struck the mountain with a thunderous crash. A ripple visibly raced down the stone slope and into the surrounding forests.

Pure spoke to his mind, *We should know in less than a day.*

Only five days and the curse will have covered this globe. I hope there is at least some corner of Sanmarellis that we can keep free of it, Rayn responded. He was flying high in the air with Ironfang.

Now all we have to do is wait, Pure seemed to sigh.

A chill suddenly ran down the back of his neck, and the staff seemed heavy in his hand.

Something was wrong. A danger approached, not from inside, but it seemed to be coming from Sanmarellis himself.

Look lively! He told the few hundred riders that defended the sky around the fortress with him today.

What is it? Norwich asked.

Rayn waited.

“Woah, not sky trues! Looki that!” Starwing shouted, and pointed.

There, towards the edge of the horizon, the forest seemed to be moving. Or part of a forest. Rayn looked at it through the helm, as did the other riders, and all cried out in surprise.

A massive tree, twisted and blighted in the plague, was approaching.

“How is that even possible!” Norwich shouted.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“The walking trees of Sanmarellis,” Starwing panicked. “Say lights that it is not! Oh Trues, the disease has won the plant life here too!”

Dragons rushed to intercept.

Hold your lines, Rayn told them. This danger approaches from all sides. Starwing, take a teleporter and go and scout out that tree. I want the two lines from Thiaz to gather by me. If the very trees of Sanmarellis deny us, let them learn the meaning of pain!

Starwing vanished in his smear of light, returning several breaths later.

“Way Trues! Oh, we gotta fight on our hands now! She’s walk’n, she’s walk’n!”

“How fast?” Norwich interrupted his ramblings.

“Half as fast as you dragons fly, so fast, reeely fast!”

Rayn felt the dragon warrior’s quiver at this revelation.

“Oh, and like that be all! She’s bring’n pets. Tigers, ocelots. And the prebeasts a plenty. Think they been hid’n! They wanna fight, they gotta get past me! Ho!”

Calm yourself, Starwing. Rayn told him. He prayed for a course of action, feeling impressed to ask the Legionnaire from Argentus for advice.

He replied though the helm. *Set twenty and two wings on the tree, we will deal with the beasts down below. Get the teleporters to run strike attacks as often as they can, take out those heavy prebeasts if possible. Have the riders form a circle around the fortress – you are right, I’ll wager that this is just a diversion to draw us away from our high ground.*

You don’t think the trees can harm the fortress do you? Rayn asked in disbelief.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Have you seen what a tree can do to stone in a hundred years? It might take a plaguewrought only a few minutes, but yes. They are going to tear that place apart.

Pure! Rayn said in alarm, *get ready to raise the fortress.*

As they waited a shuddering echoed through the sky as the fortress attempted to lift off.

Nothing happened.

Oh dear, she admitted.

You, you damaged- he begun to accuse her.

We're working on it! she shrieked.

All wings, respond to me! Rayn shouted, *we act under Legionnaire of Argentus from this hour. Prepare to defend the fortress! Call up all resting forces. This is it, people!*

Legionnaire began shouting orders, when suddenly Farvoice interrupted. *High wiseman, there are reports flooding in from all over the world. Apparently, the plant life is acting strange, as if taken by-*

All forces, defensive positions, now! Let them come to us! Farvoice, the fortress is under attack! Get any spare riders you have to this location immediately!

Yes wiseman.

How did they hide them? Norwich pondered.

A moment later Stormclouds appeared by him, "They have prepared for our tactics!" he protested in his gravelly voice, allowing Rayn to see and heal his damaged wing. "The tree is surrounded by hordes of plaguecursed insects! It is impossible to get close in small numbers!"

What? Legionnaire roared.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Steady riders! We have got this. Rayn repeated, but still his neck grew chill. He spoke alone to Farwing, *Patron, please be ready to form as many portals around the world as we need. The Plague may be about to show its true strength!*

Gladly, he replied with fervor and a laugh, as though he found this news good.

It took an hour, as Pure might measure time, for the tree to arrive. It was truly monstrous. With impetuous effortlessness it lifted its huge limbs from the earth, and sent them crashing down again. So large was its gait that even though it appeared slow, it was moving at incredible speed, possibly more than half a dragon's flight.

They met it head on.

The air was cloudy as though filled with dust. But it was dust that stung, that would crawl under the armor and bite at the eyes. The cloud was met with a wall of elemental power from the dragons, and the soldiers of Thiaz who wore the diadem. The numbers of the insects thinned a little, and the perverted beasts roared in triumph as the dragons fell back.

Some of the insects were very small.

This will take a new tactic, Rayn pondered.

A spearhead of fire, from above. Legionnaire suggested, even as he and his dragons fell back from the ground assault.

Agreed.

I will do this, the captain of the guards of Thiaz offered.

They closed in the air above the plant, spiraling closer and closer even as they rose higher in the air. The dragons focused on heating the air, mingling their flames. The priests and students of the diadem taught that

flame to spiral in, heating more and more, turning at some points bright white. They fought back insect plagues and the few small bats that tried to stop them.

Then, at the peak of the dragon's spiral, the captain of Thiaz drove the white hot flames downwards. Twenty dragons followed, becoming a tornado of flame that floated down from the sky. Within a score of angry and violent dragons and their riders fought, and without every insect and plaguecursed perished.

Suddenly, as if in surreal slow motion, an enormous raptor that should not have been able to climb or jump this high burst through the flames and grappled the captain of Thiaz by his dragon's neck, snapping it instantly. Both died before they could realize what had happened.

The flames immediately began to dissipate, and Rayn only just held on to them for long enough for the other dragons to curve away from the flame as another thirty or so lesser raptors attempted to leap through the fire and grab them. Most missed, and it was a minor joy that those plaguecursed that were not slain by their terrible burns would die from their fall. Outstripping the insects for speed the dragon riders pulled away.

This is not going to plan, Ironfang panted.

Rayn said nothing.

The men of Thiaz were arguing. *Did you not see it! One's voice rang out. It was hiding within the bark of the great tree! They were concealed within!*

Rayn looked now, and by the helm could discern the warmth of their bodies within.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

It was a clever trick, and sure confirmation that, as yet, TigerHak drove the plague. Like a rabbit in a snare, they had fallen into a trap.

The riders fell silent as they mourned a great leader.

Enough is enough. Rayn declared. He rode up high in the sky, higher than the other dragons had been. He called on the power of the white staff. He called on the power of the Divine to destroy this abomination before it could take any more lives.

White hot light seared though his mind. Dark clouds lit with red light filled the sky above the walking tree. A moment later an enormous pillar of fire enveloped it, burning it deeply. Every rider covered his face from the heat and light.

And a moment later the tree stepped out of the wall of flames. Black and charred, trembling in agony, yet the plague still drove it on.

Dragons pulled back, and the huge tree limb reached out and smashed into the fortress. A huge crack appeared along the wall, and charred wood shattered in all directions.

Look! Ironfang roared in concern, and as they looked dark green shoots appeared along the shattered limb, growing into the crack.

Widening it.

Stop it! Rayn roared, struggling for breath from his exertion.

Dragons and riders incinerated the limb with all they had. Yet the damage was done.

Plague-cursed beings were trying to climb it to get onto the fortress, fought back by desperate dragons who no longer cared for the insects burrowing into their skins. Two more limbs were approaching at ferocious speed.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Suddenly a loud crack emitted from the fortress, and an instant later the tree reeled back. A second crack, and one of the approaching limbs was sheered right off.

The weapons of the fortress were finally operational. They were firing bullets that were no larger than Rayn's chest, but they shattered into dust that flew at incredible speed, doing untold damage. Another two blasts and, with help from the dragons, the tree finally fell. The plaguecursed scattered back into the forest.

Riders cheered. Rayn sat back in the saddle, blessing Divinity, turning his attention to healing. They had only just survived that one.

That's bad. Pure said.

Rayn looked at the crack, no wider than his hand at the worst point, and surely not so deep it had penetrated to the other side of the wall that was thicker than a city. *Is there some poison in the wound? A scholar with the diadem should be able to seal this in less than an hour.*

No. That. She pointed with her mind, and immediately Rayn saw it. There were eight trees closing in from all directions on the horizon.

Can you get off the mountain yet?!

Not quite yet. We thought this through, but it looks like she's a little older than we'd calculated. We need a week.

You have less than one hour, Pure.

I know. She replied, fear evident in her voice.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Jayd knew something was very wrong long before the shouting had started. It had been silent here on the Northern Mountains. She and Darkwing could have flown the entire day and not met a plaguecursed, or another dragon. The mountains were deserted.

Then the shouting started back at the fortress, a whole world away.

We need to get back, Darkwing had said.

I know, she replied. But it worried her. *The fortress is in the day, we'll never make it in time even if we use the shadow of the mountains and the forest.*

I know, Darkwing replied.

She looked back at their wingman. Two men of Tourmarelle who used long sticks to hurl stones. It seemed like an unwieldy weapon, but she'd seen them shatter swords with it at a dozen paces. They were very good. They rode a strange dragon, one most feared as all the dragons of Tourmarelle seemed to represent the plague itself. It had missing patches of skin where its flesh and muscles were clearly visible, and a third eye in the middle of its misshapen forehead. But it clearly loved its riders.

I know what you're thinking, Darkwing commiserated, *and you are right. We can't abandon them.*

Trees. Jayd pondered. Now there was no trusting the trees as well. And what was that latest news, insects?

She didn't want to say it, but the war for Sanmarellis was lost already.

She made up her mind. *We need to get to the gathering point.*

Why? Darkwing pondered out loud even as he turned.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Because Farwing is going to open up the portals soon, as we'll want to use them to get back to the fortress. Come on, I believe we have less than an hour.

That's not enough, hey! Darkwing shouted.

She drove him on.



Figure 17 Farwing forms a portal - A stylistic rendering in the Neuwella art form recently developed on Thiaz

They were at the Happy Falls. A massive lake, completely guarded by the wisemen and dragons as the resting place for injured riders. Windfyrth had taken a gash to the wing and while it had done little harm, the adept of Thiaz had insisted she take an afternoon off. Perhaps they could tell how

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

anxious Windfyrth was? Shouting and her temper short, there was little hiding her fear. All the dragons felt it, just as much as the beasts. They were silent on this world now. Something terrible was coming.

Yet, here, those dangers seemed so far away. Snow rested under the water with another female rider or two. The dragons didn't seem to mind humans unencumbered in the least by clothing. The sun of Sanmarellis was warm, and even the birds, with their constant chatter, left them alone. Only a lone osprey serenaded his wife at the far end of the pool.

So when the alarm was first sounded Snow shrieked. It had caught her completely off guard.

The other women, warriors of Thiaz, were away in a second without her.

Windfyrth was still at the mud flats, over the hill. Snow looked out towards the sea edge of the lake, towards where all the commotion was happening.

Sea serpents. Dozens of them. All filled with the cursing. They were rushing towards the riders and dragons with evil intention. A lone student on a golden dragon tried to fight them back, but there were too many for him to tackle alone.

Snow suddenly realized she only had seconds to live.

She turned around and ran towards her armor. There was only time to grab one thing.

She grabbed the cloak.

Snow's memory flickered with something the teachers had tried to explain about the cloak, something about parallel... places... Legend told of

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

old mother Wicker who once used her cloak to hide from bandits in the woods.

It was her only hope.

She wrapped herself in the cloak and kneeling down fervently prayed. An instant later a huge, twisted serpent rose up from the water. It surveyed the land, hissing, its white eyes scanning the area. Then it struck, sweeping down to crush her armor, her cloak, and her.

She was surrounded by darkness. She pulled the cloak tighter, wondering if she was dead now, wondering if she could breathe. A moment later the light returned and she found herself beneath the great serpent. It swung out now, sweeping everything but her in a great swathe into the lake. Another serpent immediately took to taring the precious dragon armor to shreds.



**18 Snow was unprepared for the attack of the plaguecursed serpents,
and Windfyrth in the distance races to her rescue**

There was a sudden shriek from the sky, and a moment later a violent hail of bamboo spines impaled the cursed into the ground. Windfyrth landed, smashing the serpents head with a single, angry blow. She called Snow's name with desperation.

"Here, here I am!" Snow cried back, wondering how the spikes had not killed her as well.

Snow, where are you! I can feel you near, but I cannot see you! Are you alright! Windfyrth cried in dismay.

Snow tried to climb on her foot, but was amazed to find her hand moved right through. Only then did she notice how dark and shadowy everything had become, as though a dark wind moved the spirits of the

world. She looked down, and saw the green soul that was Sanmarellis held her up. Windfyrth was a bold yellow, the serpents were fading grey.

And one of them was charging Windfyrth from below the waters.

“Look out!” Snow screamed.

Windfyrth looked around in confusion, but managed to sense her danger with Snow’s eyes only just in time. Windfyrth ducked and let it sail overhead, snapping its neck with her rod.

Snow tried to climb on Windfyrth, using her spirit. She just floated right up onto her back.

“Where are you?” Windfyrth screamed.

Snow desperately wanted to return to the real world, to leave with her dragon. She sensed other creatures here in this shadowy place, ones that did not welcome her to their domain. She wanted to leave, now.

She tore off the cloak, and felt her weight settle on Windfyrth. The dragon turned around with such fright she almost impaled Snow where she sat.

The look of relief on Windfyrth’s face was timeless.

It turned to dread as they found at least six of the giant sea serpents surrounding them.

Snow bid her prayers, wrapping herself again, wishing desperately for a way for the cloak to encompass her dragon as well. After all, they were one soul, surly it would be possible? But she didn’t even know how she’d crossed over in the first place, or if Divinity would allow it again.

Dragon lightning struck to her left, just as another dragon appeared to her right in a cloud of fog. It was a dragon and rider from Chalcedonah. With unsurpassed speed and vengeance they tore at the serpents, even from under

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

the water. Windfyrth aided them with her breath of bamboo spikes. Four breaths later the guards from Thiaz arrived, six dragon riders including the resting warriors. The remaining serpents were slain in moments.

Then, in the flickers of the shadow dimension, Snow had a vision. She heard a voice, as though it was the voice of Sanmarellis himself “Look,” he said to Snow.

Snow looked, as saw the mountain where the fortress rested. Then she was shown within, and immediately recognized the cavern from Wiseman Rayn’s description.

“There is still hope, perhaps,” the voice told her. “If you can get there first, perhaps you may yet find a cure. Tell them where to find the door, for only you can open it.” Snow had no time to ask questions, but was shown a great door at the back of the cavern where the heroes of Pearl had made their desperate stand, and she saw how to enter the mountain through the shadows and how to open the hidden door at the back of the cavern.

“Come,” a warrioress of Thiaz ordered, inadvertently bringing her back to the present. “The war is turning sour. We are needed at the fortress.”

Windfyrth’s rage swelled within her. This cowardly rider had taken off without Snow. This rider could have been her cause of death today.

Snow ignored it.

She nodded, and wrapping the cloak against the wind rode up high into the sky.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

In all his life, with all his talents, Rhoc had no idea why Rayn had agreed with the shaman that he alone should undertake this mission. He would rather be accompanying Snow, protecting her again.

He was riding under the water, in the full dragon rider armor. It moved where he willed it, just like any greater armor in the water would. Fairystone rode as an otter by his side, and would occasionally take furtive breaths of air from a sphere he carried.

But why he was here, within the depths of the greatest sea on Sanmarellis, looking for the Wisest of all dragons here, he did not know. Weren't his talents better put to use slaying the cursed? Rayn had said something about his strength and endurance. Something about the other riders finding it difficult to breathe this far down.

Rhoc didn't know what they were talking about.

But what had made this mission particularly stupid was the fact that it was pointless. The Wisest dragon did not *want* to be found. She was hiding here, and hiding well. Even Jayd could not find her, so why was he looking?

He sighed, and kept looking.

The water was silent, and dark. Motes of light flickered in front of his glowing chest plate. But the water must have been incredibly thick here, the light disappeared quickly.

Even Snow would have had more luck finding her; at least she could talk to animals. She might have perhaps somehow convinced the Wisest of all dragons to talk to them.

The water gave a strange heave as something massive seemed to swim past. Fairystone hurried to his side.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rhoc swung his arms about as water moved around him. Something was suddenly stirring in the depths. A moment later a wall of stone seemed to be flying past him. Fairystone cried out in surprise, but Rhoc watched in wonder. Soon the rising stone seemed to curve away, then a very smooth, white stone took its place. It became a dark brown and after a moment a huge, dark slit appeared in the stone.

It looks a little like... Fairystone mused.

A dragon's eye, Rhoc finished for her.

Why? The dragon's voice was filled with impossible sorrow. *Why couldn't they just leave it all alone?*

Rhoc was silent. This dragon was huge, larger than any he'd ever imagined. She would have dwarfed the Matron from his own world. She must be more than five thousand years old.

It simply wasn't possible.

She seemed to laugh, her voice seemed young, but very wise. *You are a nice one, I like you. But why? Why couldn't they just leave us alone?*

Rhoc didn't know what to say. He knew the others could hear the thoughts of his heart through the helm. But he didn't really know what she was upset about.

She sighed, and seemed to decide to explain it for him. *It was my job. My only role. My only purpose. I had to keep the humans hidden, because we knew the plague was returning one day. We had to hide ... to hide... I helped hide them, and only I know where they have gone. We knew this world would become dust, but then the plague would have run its course, and they'd kept seeds. Every kind of life would survive within a generation. But now, that dream will die. Now, with that terrible racket they are making*

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

dropping castles onto mountains? It's only a matter of moments before they find... the humans.

Won't that be a good thing? Fairystone asked, dipping down to sip at the sphere, the dragons here have been so lonely for a very long time.

The Wisest seemed annoyed. So what of it? They lived, and lived much longer than they were supposed to. Once the plague had run its course here they would have been brought back. That was the plan. Now that plan has failed, because I know the moment you men find the hiding place... wherever you men go... you bring the plague...

Rhoc suddenly saw in his mind the huge cave, the cavern Rayn had spoken of. It was truly massive. Inside slept... billions... waiting for a world to die and then be brought back to life again. Then he saw the future. He saw them changing inside their coffins, being consumed by a form of the plague too small to see, that rode in the very air. That was in his lungs this very moment, and but for the Rayn's prayer would have killed him already.

He had to stop them from going to the cavern.

He had to stop them now.

With unmeasured purpose he and Fairystone shot towards the surface.

Time to Die

The fortress shuddered as another tree bashed itself against it. Dragons were rushing in now, in their hundreds. The guns of the fortress, many having been altered by the people of Thiaz during their unlawful occupation, were finally doing enormous damage.

But the trees were coming, dozens now.

All right Caspina, Pure whispered in desperation, I'm going to try this again.

As you wish, my princess, he replied. He had been very good to her, rushing down to the foundries with a headband to try and repair the unexpected damage to the buttresses. Most were functional now, and Pure could only pray they would take the weight of the fortress when it rose up from the mountain again.

For if they didn't soon, the trees of Sanmarellis would make sure it never mattered.

Your Ladyship, a voice called, speaking desperately. It was the general of the Eastern waters, the one trying to find the Matron. He sounded worried.

She did not need more worries at the moment.

She cut him off.

Pure reached out with her mind once more, looking into the fortress as though it was her own body. It reached down, five great spokes that divided again and again, leading out further and further till they reached the walls and held them up. She felt the great pounding of the trees, the moments

of relief when a dragon or rider managed to pull or burn the rapidly growing vines from the cracks in the wall.

The fortress felt heavy, and tired. She felt... old.

Pure filled every thimble of her being with the sense of the fortress. She abandoned the walls, and carried the strength inside her mind to strengthen the buttresses. They became like iron to her, stronger.

She commanded the fortress to rise.

Gently, it obeyed. She felt her feet, her five feet, lift off.

Then she felt the tilting. Three trees were desperately trying to pull her back down again. They'd got a good grip from the crumbling wall.

But down was not an option.

Suddenly another tree took hold, and Pure shrieked. With all her strength, with all her mastery, she could not break the trees. Suddenly a dark spirit surrounded her. It was as if... as if Sanmarellis himself was becoming infected with the plague. As if ... she could not fight something as powerful as the *entire world*.

Pure, a voice called to her, breaking through her distress, *open the portal, even if it leads to nowhere. It will harm the trees.*

It was Rayn. Like a bolt of light his words filled her with hope. She felt the fortress float downwards as her concentration shifted.

Trying desperately to cling to two realities she held it just above the mountain, and opened the portal.

Lights danced and shattered from the depths of the fortress, racing out to cover the mountain with light. Diseased prebeasts, and a few unfortunate dragons, shrieked in agony as their bodies were torn apart by the shifting space. However... she could almost feel the cheer as the tree's disintegrated.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The fortress was free.

Within seconds she had it out of reach of their enemies.

She collapsed, and some guards helped her up. She listened to Legionnaire making decisive commands for the rapidly intensifying battle. From the air the fortress continued to rain destruction down on their enemies.

Now, what did that Eastern commander ...

“Pure!” Rayn shouted with excitement through the dragon orb. “We found it. There is a cavern on this world large enough for all those people!”

“Well, where is it, we need to protect them this instant!”

“I don’t believe this... it seems to be hidden... inside the mountain.”

“But that’s not possible,” she whispered.

I believe it is, a soft voice replied. It was Snow. I have seen it. I was just there. I can see it now. You need to go across into a realm full of shadows. Be careful, I feel there are guardians there.

“Inside, inside the mountain?” Pure still didn’t understand.

“Yes,” Snow replied, “meet me inside the cavern where your first warriors almost made their last stand. I will show you that there is no back to the cavern, but rather a *door*.”

“Go!” Pure screamed, running outside, calling for Stormclouds, or any who might take her.

An instant later Stormclouds arrived at the window edge. She looked in his dark and angry eyes, watched over the scratched and bleeding scales. Stormclouds took no rider, but yet he fought with all his strength.

He looked at her, his dark, blood red eyes seeming strange and foreign. Did she trust this dragon? He did not like her, she could see that. But this was a war they needed to win.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

She bowed, and then without another word, she leapt on his back.

An instant later they appeared in the tunnel. In the month since the near defeat of Rayn and the others her forces had fortified the mountain considerably. A strong contingent of each of the seven worlds remained here, a small infirmary, and heavily armored fall back point in case of absolute necessary. There were others here too. Within the infirmary the surgeon of Ethphraim and her dragon tended the wounded of her world and others, including the little child from Argentus and her disappearing dragon. The shaman and his dragon Twisted rested from battle there too. And, somehow, Caspina and his man at arms had already arrived.

“Open the door!” Pure roared before the soldiers even had time to recognize her. “Get Snow of Pearl inside, now!”

They acted with impressive swiftness. Then another eight heavily armored soldiers of both Ethphraim and Argentus had her surrounded in an instant, protecting her with their own lives.

An instant later a reverent feeling settled on the group, and with a pleasant breath of wind Rayn appeared on Ironfang. They weren't travelers so for a moment she wondered how they had achieved it. Then she saw the white staff glowing, and realized it was an act of the Divine.

Ethnomancer and Fallen pulled back into the entrance, the dark clouds billowing to seal them from enemies. “They know we're up to something,” Fallen cried. “But we're keeping them back. Ethno will know when Windfyrth and Snow arrive.”

“How long?” Pure called.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“It had better be soon!” Ethnomancer roared, his exertions straining him, yet his power so advanced not a single fly or enormous prebeast could cross his dreaded gift.

“Last I heard,” a soldier of Ethphraim explained. “Snow and Windfyrth were out on the Happy Falls. They couldn’t have been more than ten minutes away; I don’t know how much the horde could have slowed them, however.”

“Where are they?” Pure demanded.

“They were just with us. We were out on patrol by the falls. They can’t be more than a minute away!”

A moment later a dragon appeared in a fog of cloud, the scholar of Chalcedonah muttering something like, “More fuss than I expected.”

“Something is coming...” Ethnomancer whispered over the shouts of battle. “...It is her?”

An instant later an image of shadow shuddered from invisibility.

It was Snow, and Windfyrth.

Was she a traveler now, too?

“I did not know you could do that,” Ethnomancer seemed to speak Pure’s very thoughts.

“It is good that you removed your fumes,” Windfyrth hissed. “My rider’s new talent was sorely tested.”

“She should not have been able to pass at all!” Ethnomancer roared, seeming indignant. “I see though many dimensions, and had I not guessed your nature I assure you she would not have survived!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Enough,” Snow spoke in a soft voice. She seemed to be wearing nothing more than a cloak. She continued to speak, “I can see it. Just there, behind the stones.”

“You mean it was here, all this time? The graves of Sanmarellis?” Pure asked.

Soldiers gasped.

There was an eager hoot. From the far wall Starwing covered his maw. “This place was always sacred to us. It felt... protected. You mean... they are here? Right behind this wall!!! All the people we ever lost!”

“Calm yourself, Starwing,” Rayn ordered. “You and Hope may have your riders soon. But not yet.”

“Let us!!” Starwing almost roared. “Let us have riders! How that will turn the battle, a hundred million riders of Sanmarellis! No plague will fear us then!”

Pure kept silent. No world survived the plague with anything less than great sacrifice.

“Do we go in?” she asked Rayn directly.

Ironfang waited, standing up tall and proud as his rider concentrated. Rayn spoke, “The noise of battle is so loud... the dying... Sanmarellis himself seems to be darkened against my will. I don’t know... it is so unclear. I think the decision must be ours to make.”

“Go!” Starwing pled. “Go on, let us meet them!”

“There is something more here,” Pure whispered, a silent misgiving in her heart. What was it? What was she not remembering? But in her heart she did not want this world to die, and would do anything to save it though

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

it was not her own. If she had any connection to the Divine, it seemed to be saying that the answers could be found beyond that door.

“Seal the exit,” she ordered. The men of Ethphraim complied within seconds, the thunder of their small sticks mastering stone in an instant.

“Open the door,” she told Snow.

She nodded, then she disappeared.

“I guess we will wait here,” Fallen told her, seeming nervous.

They waited a whole minute, at least twenty breaths. Suddenly there was a rumbling, and a sacred feeling washed over them. Pure could almost feel this moment spreading instantly across the entire world. They would all feel it, the dragons of Sanmarellis, and the plague.

The crypt of Sanmarellis was opened.

Rhoc roared with frustration. He felt it, he knew it, and he knew the Wisest knew it too.

He was too late.

Fairystone and he had only just broken the waters, still a world away from the fortress. He had only just managed to get a message to his commanding officer at the Western, but it was clear that message had not reached the princess in time.

An instant later a dragon appeared in a bolt of blue lightning. She looked at him, hovering in the air on her enormous wings.

Without a word, she nodded at him.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rhoc nodded, and tucking Fairystone into his armor allowed himself to be swept up by the massive dragon.

How did you know? he asked her.

Lady Jayd sent me to fetch you. She heard your message and is gathering all to the meeting points. Come, it will take many leaps to get there. Hold tight, so that I don't lose you.

The blinding white light and thunder did not cease around him for many hundreds of breaths...

The People of Sanmarellis

Pure looked out in wonder as a moment later the stones at the back of the cavern shimmered, and disappeared. In their place appeared an enormous steel door. Slowly, it began to withdraw into the roof. Beyond lay a black shimmering veil, as though they would have to step into another dimension to enter.

Within there would be a cavern the size of the mountain itself.

“Go!” Pure ordered, and all within disappeared in seconds.

“Close the door,” Pure ordered, and in a moment war seemed so very, very far away.

“This is incredible,” Ko, the student from Thiaz, muttered. “The walls are interdimensional; I don’t know how they managed to confer such irriescinity to such a large body of matter. I... it’s amazing. We ...”

“Are in another place,” Rayn finished, and the golden student nodded. “The plague cannot reach here.”

“Neither can our radios,” the surgeon of Ethphraim muttered, banging a little black box on her hand. Her enormous wyvern stood behind her, listening silently. “Can anyone get a message out?”

Pure checked her headband, “No. Not a thing.” It worried her.

“I can sense the staves outside, and everyone in this room, but that is all,” Rayn confessed.

“Then it is up to us,” Pure said, trying to sound confident, silently wishing Farwing was here.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He would have fit. The cavern was enormous, large beyond imagining. It easily took up the entire inside of the mountain and twice that beneath. It held massive corridors, leading off in every direction, many times the size of a huge dragon. And on each and every wall, going right to the roof, were cylinders stacked one upon the other.

She knew those cylinders perfectly. There were the pods, the escape pods where she herself had laid for four thousand years. The pods Rayn had called –

“Graves,” Snow whispered in terror, trembling backwards to clutch Rayn’s staff protectively. “The guardians are here.”

The white staff burst out with light, “*Stand away, guardians!*” Rain ordered the unseen assailants. “We are here with the princess of Pearl. We are here to awaken the sleeping. We are here to reunite you with your dragons!”

There was silence.

Then Snow sighed with relief.

“They are gone,” Ko said, looking into the darkness through his orb.

“How many are there?” the Fiery Wyvern asked, indicating towards the graves.

“Two hundred billion,” Ko replied. “I’ve managed to get in touch with the central orb. We appear to have already initiated the awakening process. It will still take many years, however.”

Suddenly there was an explosion of colored light, Starwing’s breath. “I told you they were here!” His voice was suddenly dark, and threatening. “You could not keep them from us! They were here, all the time!”

“Starwing, what has come over you!” Pure said, fearing the worst.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Our humans! Our riders! Why have we waited for them, when they were hidden all the time right here! I can feel him, where is he!!”

“Enough,” Rayn said, his staff flaring. “Stand down, Starwing my friend. You-”

“Why should I!” He roared, and Ironfang tensed. “These are our men! I will tell the others, and they will come and claim their own humans!”

“What, and break in here, tearing sleeping humans from their suspended animation? It will kill them,” Ko shouted.

“And you threaten to bring the plague with you,” the surgeon cried. “Think, Starwing. I’ve always found I had a certain respect for you.”

Starwing roared, rising up on his wings. His passion was too great.

His human must be waiting, somewhere right in this room. Rayn told her.

“I did not want to do this,” Pure said, pouring her full talent into each word, “but Starwing. Fold your wings. Rest. Do not worry. Close your eyes. Sleep. There is time. Sleep.”

He was overcome easily; perhaps he longed to find the strength to comply?

“I am glad we only brought one dragon of Sanmarellis. They want to save their world, and they think these sleeping men will do it,” Ko surmised.

“Do what?” a voice said.

Emerging from the shadows a man walked. His clothes were emerald green, and he held a dark rod in his hand; a healer’s wand.

They almost all pointed weapons at him.

He laughed, “Four and a half thousand years, and you lot finally turn up. Where are you from? I missed the first part of the conversation – thawing

out and all you know. And I'm afraid you'll have to use telepathy, I can't understand a single word any of you are saying!"

They looked at him in silence, was it really a man from Sanmarellis, alive and well?

After all this time? His face was round, his skin chocolate colored. His clothes were bright, and a red feather adorned his headband. But he seemed honest, without guile.

Pure stood back, the soldiers and dragons surrounding her.

Rayn stood forward, speaking in both his mind and voice. "I am Rayn, wiseman of the Celtwyld. We are come with the armies of each seven worlds to save this one from the plague, we-"

"Plague? Oh no, not ... oh." The man in green seemed to become terribly sad.

"Here," Rayn offered, "Let me share the Northern Prophet's blessing with you, so that you may understand all our words."

He nodded, and allowed the white staff to touch him. His eyes widened when he saw the staff, but he said nothing.

"I, sorry, I am Godnor, watcher of Sanmarellis. Every... every hundred years we wake for but one day. I cannot believe it ... after all this time. The plague still exists? And it made its way here? How?"

"It came on an escape pod, hidden, I assume, in the fortress of Pearl," Pure explained. "We came here to stop it."

"But let me guess, you're not succeeding."

"But we will," Ironfang roared.

Godnor nodded in acknowledgement, then sat on the ground and shook his head, as if thinking. "It wasn't supposed to go like this. The Wisest

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

was supposed to wake us as soon as the danger passed. We were trying to find a cure, but failed. I would have thought four thousand years was long enough for someone to develop a cure... but instead, she kept us sleeping? And now it's all for naught, the plague is here?"

"Not lost," Pure assured him. "But the battle goes poorly. We hoped we might find some help here, inside the mountain."

"That you might," Godnor stood, "but not the sort you hoped. You, scholar, you look like you're from Thiaz. You know about the microbial life from that is the plague?"

"Of course!" Ko agreed.

"Then you know it can spread through the air you brought inside you, don't you."

Deathly silence echoed through the room.

"I... I'm so sorry," Ko muttered.

Pure's anger flared, and the air burst into flames around her. Her soldiers stepped back.

Rayn stood between them.

"Don't worry," Godnor insisted, "it will take months for it to adapt to the air conditioning in the suspension pods. But yes, you have forced our hand. We cannot hide here anymore, we must join you and die, or die in here anyway I suppose."

"You dragons have missed you," the surgeon said, a tinge of bitter irony in her voice. Ethphraim had killed almost all its dragons.

Godnor walked up, and taking Rayn's hand clasped it, showing he had no fear. Then he walked up and offered it to Pure. She refused, because he was only a scholar, not a personal friend.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The guards of Argentus seemed to approve.

He stood back. “Well, now what do we do?”

“You said you were studying a way to defeat the plague?” Rayn asked.

“Perhaps you can take us to your place of learning. We have good scholars here, and the very presence of the Divine. We have a new prayer; perhaps we can finally help you.”

“Prayer? Is that what you Pearlians call it now? Trues, I have been asleep for a long time. Ninety eight years to be exact, so I thawed out quickest. Kinda a neat job really, but you only get it by being the student of the man who invented this place. It required the might of every staff on Sanmarellis. You know, we never really moved in here? Eight hundred years preparing this world and then the plague comes? We hid rather than risk polluting it. Keeping it pristine was our greatest objective!”

“Mine too,” Pure agreed, her face scowling.

“House Oordu?” Godnor asked.

She nodded.

Suddenly the mountain shook.

“That’s... not supposed to be possible,” Godnor muttered, steadying himself.

Snow spoke, “There are dark shadows... everywhere. They are inside the earth.”

“What?” Ko wondered, “I see them... by Divinity, they are pushing the magma towards the mountain! How is that even possible?”

“I can deal with the fires of a world,” Rayn smiled.

“How... you don’t...” Godnor said, breaking out in a sweat. “Peleaolcutes. Extremophiles that can exist in temperatures of up to four

thousand... how is that possible!” He screamed. “That can’t be possible. They’re not even carbon based!”

“What are you talking about man!” The general of Ethphraim demanded.

“The life of Sanmarellis is far more advanced than you can imagine,” Godnor replied. “It goes deep, almost to this planet’s core. It is almost as if this entire orb is one enormous living being.”

“A being that is turning to evil,” Rayn replied. “I can deal with the fires of the planet. But give me a moment... I will try to talk to Sanmarellis. His voice has been strange of late, and now I know why. The planet himself is being taken by the plague.”

“Is that even possible?” the surgeon wondered.

“Yes,” Pure said. “Everything is happening just as the mathematicians have predicted. I don’t think you understand. We only have a few hours – ”

“A few hours till when?” A soldier of Argentus demanded. The others looked at him in shock.

Her heart beat fast within her.

She could not tell them this secret yet. She did not want to have to tell them at all.

“Stay with me,” she begged.

“The Nohorovic contingency,” Godnor said. “You know that’s impossible.”

“No. It is very possible,” she replied.

“I need... I need to leave,” Ko replied.

Suddenly the white staff struck the ground, “You will do no such thing.” Rayn ordered, and Pure felt within her heart the irresistible desire to

obey that voice. From the looks on each of the others she knew they all felt it too.

“Come hail or thunder, death from the heavens or from the earth. We will not quit the hunt till we have healed this world, and all others,” Rayn replied.

“We’d better hurry then,” Godnor replied.

Jayd screamed.

A huge flock of flying prebeasts had attacked without warning. They came with insects that made it impossible to gather a strong defense. The riders were falling apart.

Suddenly the insects vanished.

A dragon rode up next to them, breathing green fire. On her back a man stood, chanting. Within the sound of his voice no insects could be found. A wiseone of Venfirth had saved her once more.

She called the remaining riders to her, and soon they had a circling spiral from which they could defend themselves. The prebeasts knew they had them cornered, back to back, but a dragon can outclass a flying prebeast any day. They tried to draw them out into the air, but the riders knew better.

Suddenly they pulled back.

“Come!” the other warrioress shouted, her greatspear dripping with ice, “Let us take them as they flee!”

Every warrior instinct in Jayd agreed.

But in her heart, she felt such fear.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Riders tried to charge, but the insects drove them back.

“No!” She ordered, and the eager warriors swore at her. Only one man nodded, a soldier of Ethphraim seated with a rider from Chalcedonah.

An instant later a teleporter arrived. Rhoc was with him.

A sudden weight lifted off her chest.

Jayd looked out at a world filling with the plague. Her helm allowed her to see further than was wise.

Mistress? Darkwing asked her.

Something in her soul was stirring. She knew something was coming. Something worse than every horror so far experienced.

“Get every rider to their escape points,” she ordered.

“But mistress!” The frost warrioress replied. One look in Jayd’s teary, determined eyes silenced her.

“Sound the retreat!” She ordered. “Get back to the jumpoints and wait for Farwing to open the portals. Be ready to ascend to the fortress of Pearl. All riders, now!”

Pure watched as Ko, the surgeon, and Godnor poured over the strange symbols that flooded over the glowing green stones. They tore apart Rayn’s prayer, they added dozens of their own and tested them in something they called a ‘matrix.’ More than an hour had passed, yet nothing they found would stop the plague.

Then it began. Every silent fear she’d held in her heart was becoming real. The very nightmare she’d feared from the start was happening. She felt

it in her soul, and in her dragon's soul, like a sickening disease creeping up within her body against all her will: The Nohorovic contingency.

Pure screamed.

She looked over at Rayn.

He knew what was happening. *Sanmarellis is opening up the threads!*

"Stop him!" she screamed.

He knelt quickly, breathing heavily. His staff burst out in a brilliant white light, while tiny flecks of baleful green danced within. As she watched his fevered battle she noticed the flecks growing, and knew with perfect certainty that when they consumed the staff... Sanmarellis would win.

"And the plague will be free," Godnor said, his voice choked.

"To infect the seven worlds once more," Ko agreed.

"And turn all to dust," the surgeon whispered.

"No!" Pure shouted. "Not this time. Not ever. We will find a way! We must find a way. Open the door. Ko, do what you must do. You warriors of Argentus and Ethphraim, I release you from my service. Rayn and Caspina, stay with me."

"We die with you," the men of Argentus said, and his men nodded.

"We are not welcome back," the captain of Ethphraim admitted.

"What?" Snow asked.

"We all knew this was a one way mission," he told her, a sad look in his eyes. "We were going to fight a disease, one we could not risk returning to our world."

"So that is why," Snow whispered in awe. "Why you sent so few."

"A hundred lives," he smiled, a tear finding its way into the corner of his eye. "The beginning of recompense for your own."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Her tears fell freely, and she held his arm.

He blinked away his, and stood at attention.

“When the door opens,” Pure explained, “you will only have a moment. Tell Farwing to gather everyone. Get them back to the fortress. Tell them to warn the worlds the plague is coming. Rayn will hold off for as long as he can.”

The motes of green grew quickly now. A moment later Ironfang bowed his head, resting it on the staff. For a moment Pure wondered where she had seen that before, and suddenly recalled it must have been the very posture Ironfang would have taken for sixty years working out penance for his murders. Instantly the white light gathered in strength as the two drew on their indomitable bond to fight a world itself.

“How long?” She asked them.

“An hour, he hopes,” Ironfang replied.

It would have to do.

Jayd knew something was wrong the instant the threads threatened to open up. Dragons fell silent, warriors clutched their weapons. The next moment they snapped closed again, but it felt like they were just pretending to rest, like at any moment they could open up again, and plaguecursed dragons would race to each and every star once more.

But when the lightning began to form that was the portals of the great patron Farwing, she knew all was lost.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Wings four and seven, guard Farwing. The rest of you, retreat to the fortress immediately!”

As she suspected the hordes of plaguecursed prebeasts returned. As she knew, they targeted Farwing. In spite of her orders, many that were told to flee turned to fight. And many that were ordered to fight, turned to flee.

What does this mean? Rhoc asked her.

Sanmarellis is lost, Jayd whispered.

Snow! Rhoc roared, *I must get to Snow.*

You, Jayd began, then had to admit she knew that ordering him around at this point was a lost cause. His talent was sorely needed, right here. Only he could puncture a dragon’s ironscale with his bare fists, and if any arrived with the horde...

She’s probably at the fortress, Jayd told him, and he was gone in an instant, his bronze chariot screaming into the horrible melee that was the air above the fortress in an instant.

Sanmarellis sure was putting up a fight.

“Seal the door!” Pure ordered.

“Not yet,” Snow asked, her voice begging.

“Why?” Pure ordered.

Snow said nothing, her eyes only holding on to some hope the other woman could not see.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Pure found it easy to guess, it was for Rhoc. “Snow, we don’t have time. We need to seal these doors. It might only give us a few months, or only a few hours. But we need all the time we can get.”

Snow said nothing.

Pure glared at her.

Her lip trembled, but her eyes became hard.

Pure felt for the battle Snow was having inside, but Pure, herself, had sent too many warriors to their deaths to indulge her. She had failed. The seven worlds were about to die. They could afford to lose another warrior, even if it was Rhoc.

Snow raised her hands, preparing to close the doors. Her hands became mist as she reached out towards stone, preparing to pull a lever or throw a switch that would close them in their alternate dimension within the mountain once more.

Then she paused.

“He’s coming!’ She shouted.

“Snow!” Pure shouted in anger, wishing for a moment she had the same talent with people as she did with dragons.

“Wait, just a few breaths. He is coming!”

Pure glared in frustration. Let her have her man, and hope he did not bring plague with him.

Snow’s face grew momentarily concerned, “And he is coming in very fast.”

An instant later Rhoc and his chariot broke through the barrier with an enormous explosion. The chariot raced into the darkness, showering sparks as it crashed into the ground. It was broken beyond use, covered in

the remnants of a shattered mountain entrance. Rhoc leapt off it, and digging a single armored hand into the ground tore a great gash in the stone. He stopped in only a few paces.

The door sealed.

“Rhoc!” Snow whispered in relief. It took Pure a moment to notice how carefully she’d taken watch for him. Carefully, and personally.

The silence of the moment was broken as Rayn cried out.

Pure turned in alarm.

“I’m going to say we have only a few minutes, at best,” Caspina said, and for the first time she had ever known Pure heard the edge of fear in his voice.

“I will not allow the plague to take the worlds once more,” Pure insisted. “We have to find a way.”

“If only we’d found TigerHak,” Snow said. “Perhaps we could have stopped it.”

“No,” Pure realized. “The contingency would work even with his death. Sanmarellis himself has turned against us. What of you, scholar of Sanmarellis?” she turned, a coarse accusation in her voice.

Godnor sighed. “I don’t... maybe... if we had more time! Like, maybe.”

“Not unless you know something we don’t,” the surgeon said. “Four thousand years isn’t long enough to overcome this level of complexity.”

Godnor sighed.

“You do know something, don’t you?” Caspina guessed.

“I...” Godnor stumbled, seeming lost for words.

“Tell us!” Pure ordered.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Ah. Well. You see, long ago we located the venue where the plague first originated. A research colony out near a star system called IceScape point, quite near the seven worlds actually. We downloaded all the data we could, but there was nothing we didn’t know.”

“Then why are you telling us about it?” She asked.

“Because we couldn’t *go* there!” Godnor huffed in frustration. “*Someone* had closed down the threads. Who was it, oh yes, *Pearl*. We always wondered if there was some information, some hidden console there that might have uncovered something we didn’t know. But we never found out. That’s... that’s all I got.”

“Not something you know, but something you know you do not know,” the dark skinned man and his dragon Twisted noted.

“It’s all I got now,” Godnor shrugged.

They fell silent. They seemed to be waiting.

Waiting for her.

Rayn grunted. She looked over at him. She knew he was drawing power from every staff on this world, every staff on seven worlds. He was giving it all he had.

But it would not be enough against the strength of an entire world turned against him.

“In a few moments,” Caspina pondered. “It will make no difference.”

She felt the tears on her face, “If it’s all we’ve got, it will have to do. Riders, take to the air.”

“How will we get out of the mountain?” Caspina asked them.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“I can do it,” Snow told them. “I haven’t just been sitting here you know. Just stay within my wake. How do you think I got Roc in here? I can get us back through the mountain and out into the space between the stars.”

“You can do that?” Godnor said in wonder, looking over at Rayn. “Another mystery of the last four thousand years. And one who bears the archetype? That’s pretty impressive, I have to add.”

“They’re all full of surprises!” Caspina smiled.

Pure looked around. Her heart ached to be with Farwing, but she couldn’t even feel him here. “When the threads open up, tell everyone to get back to Pearl. We need to be prepared for when the plaguecursed dragons of Sanmarellis attack. They cannot reach their humans here, and they’ll all be dust by the time they can. If I were you Godnor, I’d be telling them all to stay asleep.”

“Already done,” he replied. “But I’m coming with you. I’m not about to die here. The others will take hours to arise; I’m the only one who can go with you. Look about you Princess. You have the best minds and warriors of each of the seven worlds right here, and eight of its most noble and powerful dragons. There is hope yet, and even if not, in a few hundred years the seeds will return life to each of the worlds. The plague always had a fatal weakness. It was *too good*. Once a world was destroyed, it could be reseeded.”

“It is true,” the surgeon said. “We think that’s what happened on our world. A modified form of the plague still exists, and occasionally wipes out half the population. But it’s not like this one.”

“What about him?” Snow asked, pointing at Starwing.

Godnor walked up to him, as though he’d only just noticed, and sighed, “I don’t believe it. It’s just like in my dream...”

Starwing woke up immediately.

They gazed into each other's eyes.

"Rider?" Starwing mused.

"I... didn't think I'd ever be a rider..." Godnor said in wonder.

"Why not? Think the Divinity would not choose you?" Pure mocked him.

"I don't know why you consider the bonding between dragons and men to be so ... mystic." He argued, seeming lost in his own thoughts, "it's a relatively simple process where the specific thought sphere of an individual resonates within the ethropic field, creating a form of pressure wave that quickly develops a syncopathic resonance with all compatible dragons. These waves increase in amplitude until the resonance forms coalesce into a singularity, a final point form where one dragon and one human are found to be telepathically most compatible. Quite simple really ... but the link can be actually established with many humans if necessary, and while it can be used on more than one dragon we've never found that to be wise."

"That's just what I was going to say," Starwing muttered.

"So that's how she did it!" Pure whispered.

"You understood that?" Snow asked her.

"Well, no. But I wondered how the Empress of Argentus was able to force the bonding. Now I see. Yes, it's quite possible. And you, Godnor, think Starwing is your dragon?"

"Well, I suspect a fine dragon as this could have many... many..." His voice trailed off as he calmly gazed into the dragons eyes.

"Fool," Snow muttered.

"Let us go," Pure declared. "Tell Rayn to stop. It's time to go."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Two dragons assisted Ironfang and Rayn, and the men piled on top of the remaining dragons as best they could. Fairystone rode with Rhoc, on the back of the enormous Wyvern of fire.

An instant later Rayn's staff grew dim.

"Go," he whispered.

"Go, GO!" Pure screamed. The dragons rode towards the silent roof at full speed. As they did it suddenly began to seem shadowy, immaterial. Her mind flooded with ideas as the headband took over, trying to take measurements of the place they were now in. It seemed to be having great difficulty. Snow had spread her arms on Windfyrth, and the air trembled with tendrils of shadow that covered them all.

They flew through the stone and rocketed out of the mountain.

There was one moment, one torturous moment, when Pure felt her dragon nearby. He was suffering terribly, trying to keep the portals open across an entire world for as long as he could.

His heart pained as soon as he realized she was leaving.

Get back to Pearl, she begged him, get healed. Get ready, the plaguecursed of Sanmarellis will be coming. But we can defeat them there, and maybe help the other worlds. Somehow we will find a way.

He asked no questions.

I'm going to IceScape point... I'm going to the birthplace of the plague in order to find a way to stop it. She tried to beg his forgiveness with her excuse.

He said nothing, but she could almost feel his heart breaking as she left the world without him.

The City of Lights

Rayn watched in silence.

Pure seemed oblivious to her own screams as they fled Sanmarellis. She was leaving her dragon in dire peril. That she managed to hold on to her sanity, that she managed to still command the one course of action she believed to be good, was a testament to Rayn of her indomitable will and deeper beauties.

Rayn looked over at Caspina, who held him on Ironfang with one arm, his man of arms assisting them both. Ironfang was strong, but had given all that strength to hold back the vicious tide that was Sanmarellis' perverted will. How he managed to stay conscious, let alone grab hold of the golden thread that raced them along among the stars now, was beyond Rayn's comprehension.

He must have blacked out too, once or twice, because he could scarcely remember the journey, or the sudden appearance of the small mote of dust among the stars that was their destination. It was a ring-shaped platform that supported a small town made entirely of stone and glass. It drifted in space alone, as though it had no purpose, as though entirely untouched by time or the plague. Lights still shone from its many lamplights and windows. It was oddly shaped as a floating city, seeming almost unnatural against the beauty of the purple clouds between the stars.

But this was the place, Rhoc assured him though his heart, *that the plague was first made.*

They were about to find answers.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They touched down on a circular dais that seemed made for such a purpose, Pure guiding them. As soon as they did the region filled with air somehow, and they could breathe again.

“This way!” Godnor shouted, urging Starwing on. The eight dragons, nine including an excited Fairystone that flittered around Rhoc, followed after.

“This city is indeed strange,” the scholar of Chalcedonah murmured.

Now they were here it seemed to be made of silver stone with bronze metal inlays. It had glowing ovals for lights, perched on arms of iron thick enough to hold a dragon’s weight. If it was obvious to Rayn, it was even more obvious to Ironfang: this place could defend itself.

Instinctively he reached out, finding himself powerfully weakened by the rebellion of Sanmarellis and his doomed attempt at stopping him. Yet there was no real soul within this place, not in the same way as with a world. It was just a great building. But all around him there pervaded an intense sorrow, an unyielding regret.

“The building is this way,” Ko told them again.

“I thought we’d find it in the libraries?” Godnor replied.

“No, there is a large energy field over there, at that building. I mark it a research facility.”

“Unlikely,” Godnor replied.

The shaman of Tourmarelle cut in, “Is that way,” he indicated in a tone the brooked no disagreement, pointing the same direction as Ko. It had been easy to forget the silent man and his twisted dragon were here.

They ran.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They passed by the strange, abandoned city. There was no sign of damage or injury in the past four thousand years. No sign to indicate why the place was so abandoned.

They ran till they came to a door, and that perception changed. Still floating about in the abyss between the stars the twisted and perverted forms of slain plaguecursed floated. They had been attacking a massive door, and shattered it apart. A new door had formed, made of some kind of blue stone.

“It is beyond here,” Ko spoke all their thoughts.

Their dragons began incinerating the bodies of those slain and unburied four millennia. The humans studied the barrier.

“Any ideas?” Pure asked them all.

“I’m going to suggest,” Ko started, “that this was a secondary defense, activated later. Let me try and find the ... hmmm... very well, this may be a problem. There are no activation sequences. The legendary steel here was summoned, permanently, by a dragon I’ll wager. It may only be unsummoned by its creator, or destroyed.”

“Seems the plaguecursed died attempting just that.” Legionnaire informed them in a voice that discouraged discussion. “Those wounds are blunt instruments, self-inflicted. I say they died trying to break through this barrier.”



19 At the door

“Whatever,” Pure said, and began trying to twist the metal with her mind. It shifted, but merely smeared. She grunted with exertion, but the metal disobeyed her. In her frustration it grew white hot, but nothing she could do would break it.

I miss my dragon, she thought out loud.

“Enough!” Rayn begged her, the heat was beginning to endanger them.

“What are we to do!” she shouted. “I tried the stone, and there are no other passages here. What have we that can overcome steel?”

“We really only have one option,” Rayn replied.

“You are too weak,” she said, shaking her head.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“You’re right, at least, perhaps to overcome steel. But I do have enough strength for this,” he replied, “when our need is so great.”

“Rayn,” Snow asked, her voice sounding curious, and worried.

“Brace yourselves. Form a circle around me, Ironfang by the door. What I am going to do will take all my strength. But I already know it is the only way to enter here.”

They obeyed, some quite sullen.

He took a long drink from a waterskin, and entered the center of the circle they had formed. Already his staff was glowing brightly without him even intending it to.

He closed his eyes, and his staff took him away as Ko’s orb had. His spirit moved between the stars along the golden threads. In that moment he felt the power of all the staffs among the seven worlds, no, eight. He sensed other staffs out there too, or were they beings? The kind of beings that inhabited his staff right now? Were they watching, were other worlds of strange and very different beings, vastly more advanced than all the seven worlds combined, watching him?

He had no time to ponder, as a breath later he arrived.

The dragon he sought for roared, and skittered back against the far wall of its prison. Against the blinding white light of the staff it looked, and it felt to Rayn, absolutely terrified.

Doomclaw the murderer cringed in fear.

Guards cried out, but threw themselves to the floor as soon as they saw him.

“Doomclaw,” Rayn told him, “you are needed. We are leaving. Now.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The dragon hissed, and cringed. Clearly his treacherous mind was pondering his options. He looked at the guards, perhaps trying to catch a glimpse of the other dragons awaiting the call of death for their crimes.

Yet for whatever reason, he nodded.

It was all Rayn needed. He turned back to the guards. “Get back to Pearl, protect it with all we have. Then rise up and help defend the other seven worlds. We still have the dragon riders. We still have the fortress. We can still make a difference in this war.”

They nodded, but he knew they were not the only ones who had heard his voice, which spoke the will of the Princess. His voice had echoed throughout the fortress.

Turning back to Doomclaw, he nodded. Flying beside him in spirit, the treacherous dragon ran through the fortress and in a few short moments was out in the air of Pearl. As a dragon driven with a true cause he wasted no time, and simply clutched a golden thread and shot out into the space between the worlds. He quickly followed Rayn back to the space where his body waited.

The nine dragons roared, their riders and all the soldiers lowering weapons at Doomclaw.

He crouched, battle wary. Then, when it was apparent none would harm him without Rayn’s command, he stood up and grinned malevolently.

“Enough.” Rayn told the angry dragons. Only Ironfang had been silent at Doomclaw’s arrival, and eyed him dangerously.

Doomclaw bowed venomously at him, “I am, after all, here by *invitation*.”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Only because the hour of your trial had to be pushed back due to the war!” Windfyrth shouted at him. “Bind him, bind him, Rayn! We cannot trust this monster!”

Rayn nodded at her, acknowledging her desire. “Perhaps, after he has completed his task.”

“So one more favor, for my enemies, and then I die!”

The dragons roared in anger.

It was Snow who spoke up. “One more favor for all those who hate the plague.”

He sneered at her, but seemed to agree. She and Windfyrth simultaneously pointed towards the steel door.

He walked up, touched it with his tongue, and smiled.

“You may want to stand back,” he said.

None did. In fact, Ironfang stood closer, gently pressing Doomclaw’s rear foot to the stone.

Doomclaw shrugged. “Suit yourself,” and with that, he reared up. With violent thrashing his steelbones slid across the door, scarring it deeply. Again and again he slashed, great chunks of red hot metal flying away at his whim. He struck repeatedly, like a doomed dragon enjoying his last true battle.

It was over in less than a dozen breaths. The blue door was sliced into a hundred thousand pieces, impossibly sharp shards lining the way now into the building.

“After you,” he teased. There was barely enough room for a human to fit.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

But Rayn sensed they were already out of time. He walked forward. With the destruction of the barrier the metal shards held no purpose now. They twisted away at his will like wilting leaves on a hot day.

Doomclaw fell silent.

They all strode purposely forward, leaving two as guards outside. Inside they found a simple room, large, shaped with a round roof as though they walked inside a huge ball. There was very little within, some strange metal boxes along the walls, and a table for studying with a large stone dais in the center. It looked like an altar.

“After you,” Ko told Godnor.

Godnor walked up to the table, seeming to talk to it from his heart. A moment later the stone dais lit up from within, and complex images made of twisting lines coalesced from specks of light in the air above. It was beautiful.

“DNA,” the surgeon whispered.

“The entire sequence of the very first plague. Look, I can recognize it here.” Godnor smiled.

“As do I,” Ko replied. “Codones A13 and J994 are dissimilar, and there may be other changes, but yes, it is the plague.”

“Curious... I can... how can I understand it all?” the surgeon asked.

“Direct projection to the frontal cortex,” Godnor explained. “Technology very similar to the teachers, or the orbs. Even the staff uses it. But if you really want to get inside the code of life, if you really want to experience life in all its realities, you need the wand.” He pulled his tool from his belt, and with it made the images in the air dance.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Disgusting,” Doomclaw hissed. They turned to him, but he seemed to be calm now, not intending any harm. “To see you men trying to undo what you created so many years ago.”

“What do you mean?” Godnor asked, sounding innocent. Apparently, no one had told him who Doomclaw was. Either that or he simply didn’t care.

“Men *made* the plague,” Doomclaw hissed.

“Whatever do you mean?” Godnor repeated, and Doomclaw hissed. But the scholar of Sanmarellis continued. “Isn’t it obvious to you? This room is too large for men. They did not work alone in here. They must have had... company.”

Doomclaw’s frills straightened at his words, and the dragons and warriors tensed.

Godnor continued, seeming very light hearted. “That rumor was bound to start, sooner or later. That men did it. Or that dragons did it. Or that some god or another did it. No. I doubt that,” he turned back to studying the images in the air, whispering as though to himself, “I doubt very much that it was men alone that did this.”

Doomclaw hissed, clearly preparing to launch at Godnor, but it would be his death.

“Look, I have found something here!” Ko interrupted, “a journal entry, the last one made. I am sure it will bring answers.”

The lights in the room dimmed.

A man’s face appeared in the air. He seemed to be sitting at the very dais they were at.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

There was a thumping noise, and he jumped. It sounded very much like enraged plaguecursed trying to break down a door. Rayn jumped too, till he realized it was coming from the image.

“Well. This has not gone as well as we might have expected... I told them it might happen. It got out. The, oh,” there was another mighty thump at the door, “it seems I’m going to die today anyway, or suffer starvation in the coming weeks. It might as well be now. My only regret is that the dragon orb is damaged. I can’t get this message out, so it must remain in this stone.”

Loud thumping.

“So, um. To begin. I, Delphos, along with my sage dragon Melonitus, are the ones responsible for creating the plague. We take full responsibility. He’s out there now, trying to fight them. Fighting our comrades gone mad. Oh, how did this happen?!” Tears began to fall from the man’s eyes as the thumping increased. “Dais Oohlan, chief of the council insisted we altered the microbes. Just in case. You know. In case it was ever necessary to use it. We protested, but what can you do against a noble dragon’s will? I’m not making any sense. We made the ... plague... to be a thing of kindness. It was supposed to strengthen the immune system of humans, make them live longer, and make the bond between riders and dragons so much stronger! But we realized quite quickly of the invasive potential inherent in the combined life code of this ‘chimera’. Instead of backing down Dais Oohlan insisted we explore it further, and what a horror it became! We now know it can infect any life form; fungi, plants, velocutes. Nothing is immune! I begged him to destroy it, but he would not allow it. Melonitus even tried, but it survived anyway. Somehow, the blasted life form survived!”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

The crashing on the door changed in pitch, the man looked around in alarm.

“It’s not possible. It’s not even possible,” he whispered, seeming to speak of the door.

He continued, and Rayn was wrapped up in the horror of the past. “It got out, weeks ago. It’s gotten onto every world since then. Just recently it manifested a most alarming quality, I knew it was theoretical but... it appears to have gained some measure of forethought, even sentience. It’s here now. Here to destroy us and all our work.” The crashing continued, the man drew his wand, a pointed white selenite stone no longer than his hand.

“We haven’t slept in two months, trying to find a way to destroy what we created. But it will adapt, it will survive! It is... living...”

He looked down at his hand. “But only now, this hour, do I realize what we were doing wrong. We were trying to *kill* a life form... which we had created. We were trying to destroy life entirely, life which our society was responsible for creating! So I did this, look, here is the file,” the images shifted to more curling lines, and in the flashing light Godnor swiftly whispered to his wand. The man in the images continued, “It’s a solution. It’s the cure. But it’s not a cure. It’s a weakened form of the plague, it is the plague, but not dangerous at all. If we can get it into every being on the seven worlds they will become immune, and the plague will have nowhere to go. That’s what we have to do. That’s what-”

He was cut short as the door suddenly shrieked. The man turned in alarm, and plaguecursed flooded into the room. The light from his wand must have wounded many of them. Then, with a cry of alarm, he saw the door fill

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

with steel, “Melonitus!” He wailed, a cry familiar of those who have witnessed their dragon’s last act.

Suddenly his eyes filled with understanding. Some idea had crossed his mind. He seemed to look right out at them and pointed the glowing wand at his own brow.

Whatever wonder he had hoped to unleash never took form, as he was suddenly cut down by two plaguecursed humans, wearing the same uniforms as he was.

The image fell dark.

The room returned to silence.

“Then... it was not humans... alone?” Doomclaw whispered, sounding in a fever of astonishment.

Rayn looked at him, and was amazed to see Doomclaw trembling.

He had no time to contemplate this, as then a voice cried out from the platforms outside the room. A voice, coarse and animalistic; “Rayn!”

It sounded like a half man, half tiger.

Rayn realized they were out of time.

And a moment later a woman cried out.

It was Jayd.

The Hour

He didn't run. If it was too late it wouldn't matter, and if he was too early he would only lose the only advantage he now had - time.

Rayn walked toward the door. Snow disappeared. The two guards at the door ran in, an image of the arriving army of the plagued shared with all their hearts.

"The plague finds us," Legionnaire spoke the grim truth.

"Wait!" the surgeon whispered.

Rayn turned, but kept walking.

"Don't you see!" she said, running up to him. "That man, that man in the images. He told us what to do!"

"What?" Pure demanded.

"It's like an inoculation! Oh, thank Jenna and his cows. We use it on our world all the time! Introduce a minor form of the illness and the body develops immunity to the major form."

"Yes, and the key to the success of the Rayn's prayer, more or less," Ko explained.

"And how does that help us now?" Rayn asked.

"If we can, if there's time. He showed us, pointing the wand at his own brow." The surgeon urgently whispered.

"Do it," Rayn replied.



20 Tiger Hak. "This time his transformation seemed a bit more... monstrous."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“Have this,” Godnor told the surgeon, handing her the selenite wand that had made the plague. Rayn recognized the brief moment of joining as a tool found its way into its true master’s hand. She stared at it in wonder as light and symbols Rayn could not recognize danced around it.

Godnor began fiddling with his own wand frantically, falling to the back of the group with the surgeon. “We still need a means of deliverance to the entire disease,” he told them.

Use it to poison their leader, Twisted explained.

“How will that help?”

“The psychotelepathic joining will spread the ‘inoculation’ to the entire hive,” Ko explained.

“Yes, only one in every four cells are infected,” the surgeon agreed.

Rayn stopped, his heart daring to hope once more.

“Rayn!” The gravel voice shouted. “Come now, or she dies waiting!”

“We’re coming!” He shot back, walking once more.

“How did they get here undetected?” the scholar of Chalcedonah asked.

“They only just arrived, the instant he spoke. The elite plague,” Legionnaire replied.

“TigerHak,” Pure hissed.

“Finally!” Rhoc grinned.

The scholars were still speaking to each other frantically, “Do you really think it will work? On my world an inoculation typically does not affect an autoimmune system response sufficient to drive off current infection,” the surgeon whispered.

“Working on it,” Godnor replied.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Rayn quickened his pace; for a man at the end of his strength never did he feel more alive than right now.

They walked past the shattered door, and to his curiosity found the entire platform beyond covered with almost two hundred plaguecursed. There were many dragons, and they'd carried prebeasts between the stars, one of which was an impossibly huge behemoth.

And before the twisted and gloating horde knelt Jayd, beside the wounded yet still breathing form of Darkwing. He was pinned under a mountain of twisted and perverted limbs of the plaguecursed.

Rayn's breath caught in his throat, and a bile of anger rose there. *How dare they do this to her, forcing her to kneel!*

"Stand away from my sister," he told them.

They mocked him.

But before the laughter had died down, the surgeon spoke. "Ahh, Rayn. That's not your sister."

He glared at her.

She was pointing her wand, her new wand, at Jayd.

"I was scanning her wounds and it wrote out her entire DNA sequence. She's not your sister. I know it's probably a bad time, but look, you can see right here in your comparative profiles."

"We share a father."

The surgeon was silent for a moment, "I may be new at this... but it's clear here you no more share a father than I and thee. You share a common great, great aunt, but look, see, she is not your sister."

The shaman of Tourmarelle nodded. A wiseman had spoken, and even Rayn felt the confirming truth in his staff.

Jayd ... was *not* his half-sister?

She never was.

Did she even know?

He looked at her, wondering what secret his step mother and blood father had kept from her all these years. Then it struck him, the shame of bearing a child outside of marriage in their culture. His father must have taken Jayd's mother in marriage even though the child she was to bear was never his own. The depth of that compassion stung him.

He looked at her, with new eyes now. Jayd, warriorress of the Celtwyld. She was so brave, so unafraid under a horde of pure evil. She comforted her dragon with one hand, knowing either of them could die at any instant. Yet her eyes darted about, not with fear, but with an unflinching confidence that she would find a way to fight her way out. A faith that he, her... closest friend... would find a way to set her free.

"Rayn!" TigerHak roared in triumph. "Set her free? Of course, of course we will! If you surrender *yourself!*"

The plaguecursed laughed.

"Don't," Legionnaire insisted, covering him with his enormous silver sword. "Do not bargain with the monster god."

Then Rayn felt the certain pressure of a wand, Godnor's wand, against his wrist.

"I see no alternative," Rayn replied, and releasing his staff allowed it to float in place in the air.

The beasts roared.

Jayd looked at him in desperation, begging him to not trade his life for hers.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

He took off his robe, and they mocked more. All except TigerHak, who seemed in some way to be touched. Perhaps he recognized the ritual of one preparing for a sacrificial death?

He commanded the armor to leave him, and took off the sash. He had only his trousers on, and the boots he always wore.

“Let her go, and I will come to you!” Rayn shouted.

Legionnaire stood in his way, “I could take them all, for the goddess!” he swore.

“I know,” Rayn said, resting a hand on his muscled arm, “but that is not what is needed this day.”

Rhoc stood out, glaring down at him. He knew what his old friend was thinking.

“Remember this moment soldier. Today you will live to see the plague destroyed forever,” Rayn smiled. “Windfyrth, Wyvern. Please, hold fast to Ironfang.”

“What little good that will do,” Pure said, eyes full of tears. “After they kill you, they will come for us all next.”

He nodded.

“You don’t have to do this,” she begged him, holding Caspina close.

They looked good together.

He didn’t reply.

“Take all the time you want!” TigerHak roared. “For I will not let her go till you stand before me! Come, boy of the Celtwyld!”

Rayn started walking slowly forward.

TigerHak roared in victory, “You see! I told you! I told you always it would be this! Now I am everywhere! Now I will claim these dragon’s riders,

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

and make their men slaves! Their knowledge will set me free, and I will claim all the stars! You see them? You see them all? I can hear them..." He grew almost religious in his mannerisms, waving his hands mystically, his voice a soft perversion of reverence. "They are calling me, trembling. They know they cannot stop me, and I will subdue them all, just as I subdued the Celtwyld, just as I subdued Sanmarellis! Just as I subdue you!"

He shouted, and shoved Jayd down.

Rayn stopped.

"Keep coming, Rayn!" TigerHak shouted.

"Stand away from her dragon!"

TigerHak laughed.

Rayn turned away.

Jayd cried out as Hak pressed his foot down.

Rayn took a step away.

There was a tense moment of silence.

TigerHak barked a command, and with a wave of his hand all his minions stood away from Darkwing. He stumbled up, moving closer to Jayd.

She pushed TigerHak away.

Rayn turned back to face him.

Suddenly scorpions began to rush forwards, and formed a wall between Jayd and Rayn.

Ironfang roared.

Rayn continued to walk forwards, and the plaguecursed insects clicking, yet moved aside to let him pass.

"That's it boy, keep coming. You know me, you know Hak, trapper of the tribe. How many times did you enjoy my conies, my deer? Does not

your sister still wear the boots of leather I hunted? Perhaps I will make boots of you when I am done?"

"I remember Hak," Rayn told him, "who knew the stories, and protected the children. I knew Hak, who kept us from the shadows and cold. That is the man I knew, but I do not see him here today."

"You weren't there," TigerHak's voice trembled, and he continued with a growl, "when I found the man with the red cloak. When I struck hands with him I knew what I was getting into. The promise of power, for the price of blood! I demanded immortality, and I knew he could give it to me. Now I have been sundered, cut from head to toe... yet I live! This is the blessing, the blessing which you will shortly enjoy."

Rayn glanced down at Jayd. Her eyes were wide, her face pale. He could almost read her thoughts; *You've got to have a better plan than this, Rayn! You can't just give your life for mine, he will take it anyway! Why, what good can your death do us this day? Do you do it just to prove you care? I am not worth it, worth every life and love of all seven worlds.*

"Yes, you are," he told her.

She seemed surprised, and smiled. He knew he'd guessed her thoughts.

TigerHak shoved her aside, "Quit your pathetic ogling, siblings. You disgust me. There is no love. There is no life beyond my own! I am the life, the one being. I will consume all!"

"And let it be dust," Jayd whispered.

"No! I am more careful this time. Your pathetic joinings, making new children. I hate it. No, only I know perfection, the breathing of life by the spilling of blood! I am... perfection! I can live inside any being! For you

see, I have no need of love, or romance, or conquest! It's simple, see, isn't it woman? All I need... is blood!"

It was like a pronouncement of judgement, and with that TigerHak leapt forward towards Rayn. In less than an instant his enormous tiger jaw closed around his neck and shoulder and bit down hard. Rayn cried out with intolerable agony as the giant teeth dug into flesh and sinew. TigerHak twisted his face, tearing deeper and deeper into the bone and Rayn cried out in torment. He hardly even noticed the mighty twist as the abomination flung him sideways and away, like a child's toy.

His mind was consumed with suffering, and the enormous roaring that was Ironfang. He felt the powerful dragon surge forwards, willing to destroy every plaguecursed on the battlefield. Only the Princesses' gift could stop him from rushing to his doom.

He heard a tearing sound close by as Jayd ripped her cloth from under her armor. He winced as she pushed the fabric against his gushing wounds. Darkwing tried to wrap himself around them, trying to protect them from the thrashing of the blood enraged monsters.

"This was your plan?" Jayd said with tears in her eyes.

"It was the best I could come up with at the time," he told her.

TigerHak laughed, licking his lips. "You see! Soon I will control the leader of men! The high wiseman of the fortress. You should all watch, watch as he becomes mine!"

The monsters roared. They jeered.

"This is really not how I thought it would end, my brother," Jayd said.

"Actually," Ryan struggled to breathe through his suffering. He felt his lungs filling with blood, and involuntarily coughed it up, new pain

wracking though his body. He could feel his spirit fighting the infection. The prayer was still effective, but it was an enormous and highly infected wound the monster had given him. Sometimes a prayer was simply not enough.

“Actually, I have it on good authority ... that you’re not my literal sister,” Rayn smiled.

She looked like she didn’t believe him, and gazed back at the assembled warriors.

The shaman nodded.

She turned back, and showed him a full smile he’d never seen before. Always it was twisted. Now, it was full, “I *always* knew it,” she said.

He nodded, and shut his eyes against the pain. “If we survive this,” he told her, “I’m going to take you to the Othlam lake to swim.”

“That would be nice,” she whispered. “I would like that. And after, let us built a fire with our own hands, and cook on it the meat we hunt for ourselves in the forests.”

“I would like that,” he smiled.

Suddenly, there was a strange bark from TigerHak.

“Be ready,” he told Jayd.

But instead of drawing her little knife, she gently awoke her flying bracelet, the one with the winged boots.

“What, what is this?” TigerHak suddenly roared. He stumbled forward.

From the ground, Rayn laughed, and coughed blood. “Something you bit down on recently?” he jeered.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“You...” TigerHak roared, but his voice was divided, as though it was half a man, and half a mindless growl. A moment later, he threw himself to the ground, holding his face, pressing his body desperately together.

The plaguecursed stopped laughing.

“Get them!” TigerHak roared in two voices, “destroy them all!”

The next moment a wave of impossible heat shot past them, momentarily disrupting the charge of the monsters: The child of Argentus’ talent. It was only a moment, but it was long enough, for in that very instant his white staff appeared as Snow handed it from the shadow dimension and clamped it down on his chest. Rayn reached out and grabbed Jayd’s ankle an instant before she took off, and with his other hand took hold of Darkwing’s claw.

Then they all disappeared together.

Jayd looked around in alarm, and Rayn showed her Snow, whose cloak now held them in its power. The Plaguecursed surged forward and through them. They seemed made of shadows now.

The monsters raced to meet the score of defenders by the gate’s edge. By their sheer numbers they would have the victory, but even the shadowed form of the ground seemed to shake at the approaching of the behemoth prebeast.

A moment later, flying through the air in the opposite direction, there was a small mote of bright light.

“An otter?” Rayn said before he’d had a chance to think.

Someone had thrown an otter at the behemoth. Before his very eyes the otter shifted and changed, becoming much larger and far more massive.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

It even seemed to speed up, spurred on by the prayers of some priest or scholar.

Within moments the otter had become Fairystone, in her massive stone dragon form. She collided with the behemoth's head, and crushed it to pieces. The enormous being collapsed to the ground, and she turned herself back into a glitter of light.

A moment later a man seemingly composed of red flames shot up through the sky and caught her. Slashing about with his demonic claws, he began to lay waste to the Plaguecursed around him.

"Rhoc," Snow breathed, sounding very impressed.

It brought Rayn back to the present.

He healed himself, Jayd and Darkwing in an instant with the staff.

"Come, we'd best be joining the battle!" Jayd smiled.

They rose high into the air, and his staff lit up with white fire. Then Snow brought them back into the normal world. The plaguecursed cringed, momentarily distracted by the light.

Rayn surveyed the battle. They were outnumbered ten to one, and the plaguecursed dragons were many. The princess was surrounded by the warriors of Ethphraim and Argentus, cutting down the plaguecursed with stones and blade. One man of Ethphraim threw a small rock into a plaguecursed three-horned maw and a moment later it became fire.

Behind them the scholars battled with wand and orb. Their dragons flew around them, a flurry of protection.

"There," Jayd pointed.

Starwing and his friend, Godnor, raced around the edges of the battle at the speed of light, inflicting little damage but distracting all the foes.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

A moment later a horde of flying monsters and dragons attacked Darkwing and his three riders. Rayn turned aside their dreaded breath, and Jayd flew among them. Ironfang arrived, and they took the battle higher in the air.

Rayn called down the light of Divinity, and the plaguecursed cringed. Yet still they pushed on, desperate for murder. There were so many of them! A man of Argentus fell, then a soldier of Ethphraim collapsed choking.

A prebeast Juggernaut of Sanmarellis saw its opening, and charged the princess.

Rayn knew he had to stop that monster, but first he had to cut his way through his own enemies. He swung his staff, blasting asunder the head of a poor dragon that was charging them, but still its body careened into Ironfang, almost knocking him off. They struggled in the air as even more monsters closed in. He realized his own strength was failing, and all that remained was the power of the staff. He could not muster his full strength anymore.

It was him, or the princess.

Yet even as this dread realization filled his heart, his eyes lay upon an unexpected sight. A dragon, whole and uninjured, leapt over the few remaining soldiers even as the princess filled the air with a half orb of intense blue fire. The dragon slashed against the plaguecursed with miraculous power, sundering all it touched in a single blow. Stone, dragon bone, and all plaguecursed fell before the whirlwind of destruction.

It was Doomclaw.

Like a tornado of death he spun around with incredible speed, teaching all his enemies a new meaning of pain, forcing the entire

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

plague-cursed horde to pull back. In that one moment, Doomclaw forever earned his true place among the greatest warriors of the seven worlds.



21 Doomclaw, the Redeemed

But it could not last, and his enemies were still so many. An instant later Doomclaw stumbled as a huge prebeast sacrificed its life in an attempt to crush him, but the damage was done. The horde pulled back to focus its attack on Doomclaw, and while all who touched him knew death... he soon disappeared under the mountain of his foes.

Yet even as Rayn watched the horde began to adopt strange tactics. They were no longer attacking as one. Suddenly all pretense at order failed them, and they ran amok, devouring even their own kind that were wounded.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Almost as quickly as it happened the heroes of the seven worlds responded, and turned the battle against the beasts, cutting them down by the armful. They fled in all directions.

A horrible, gurgling roar surged up from the pavement below. TigerHak was twisted, bloating, oozing pus.

The end had come.

Jayd floated down, Rayn rode down. A moment later Rhoc leapt from the sky and split the stones as he landed. They moved in on the wailing form of the man they had once called family.

Behind them, ignoring their own great wounds stood Darkwing, lord of the night, Ironfang the redeemed, Windfyrth the speaker of men, and Fairystone the ... unstoppable.

Rayn looked at TigerHak. It was clear now that the graft of a tiger to the right side of his body was failing.

He was beginning to split in two once more.

"You will never defeat me," a voice gurgled from the being's depths, "I am eternal. I am life. I cannot be killed."

"We're not trying to kill you, anymore." Rayn explained, and Jayd looked at him with a puzzled expression. "You are life, and life deserves... to live. We are just going to restore your form of life to balance, to harmony between your life, and ours. To let all exist in peace."

"It is not possible, I will destroy all."

"No more." Rayn told the plague, the being within TigerHak. The last moment of its awareness, well, ever it was hoped. "Destruction, no. But we will restore the harmony of life. Not death, but peace. Return to your place, life form. Return to what you were made to be."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“No!! I will not! I will destroy *everything*...” and with a fowl gurgling noise TigerHak split in two once more. The tiger half died instantly, but the man crawled away for a pace before succumbing to the call of death.

Rayn heard Jayd gasp, and turning around he saw the plaguecursed. In that moment most of them lay down, and died. But a few raised their heads. Their eyes began to clear.

Some even lived, and began to heal.

“Harmony restored,” Rayn smiled, and then, since his work here seemed to be done, he fainted.

Reckoning

Three months had passed.

Caspina was clearly uncomfortable in the ceremonial clothing of the Celtwyld, but his new wife had insisted on a proper wedding, and that meant he had to get used to the clothes. Rayn found he had to keep adjusting the shirt Caspina desperately seemed to want to hold open. The small room was full of Caspina's closest friends and honored representatives from each of the seven worlds, but it didn't stop him from fidgeting.

"You look good," Rayn told Caspina, but the older man had only a thin smile to share. It was clear he needed some help lightning up, "I hope you're looking forward to the initiation."

"Yes, except no one will tell me what that involves!"

"Oh," The scholar of Chalcedonah said, not looking up from his orb. "Rayn here gives you a long lecture about how important it is to keep your marital vows, that sort of thing."

"Not I," Rayn replied, "but my father. It must be a married man to give that lesson."

"Oh, that makes sense," the scholar agreed. "Yes I think I remember reading something about that. Was it your people? Oh, I'd better get my next entry ready for submission for inclusion in the teachers straight on this matter!"

"That is a good idea!" Rayn said. "Still, only a wiseman such as myself may perform the wedding vows, and I am honored you asked me, dear Caspina."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

“So you wed us, is that all? No further favors as a friend? On Thiaz we traditionally stay up late the night before drinking till all sense leaves us!”

“No, there is one more service that we traditionally perform,” and with that, he slapped Caspina solidly, and reverently, on the back of the head.

“Ouch, what was that for?” Caspina said.

“All the stupid things you’re going to do, and the times you will forget to be kind to your friends, and kind to your new wife.”

“Vile!” he joked, “you’ve got a real swing there man. I hope I get to be your best man at your wedding.”

“What, and deny Rhoc the privilege?” Rayn smiled with mock indignity.

Caspina’s grin grew wider. “You realize he’ll smash your head into the stone if he-”

They all laughed.

“This is a good,” Rayn confessed. “I mean, this is the way I would have had the war end.”

“I have news,” The scholar of Chalcedonah suddenly piped up. “Sanmarellis has accepted the treaty terms with Thiaz. They’re sending dragons now to help re-establish the decimated areas of their world, in exchange for the chance to study the life there. I think it is a good deal.”

“Well,” Caspina explained, “with the art of transmutation on Thiaz there is no real need for raw elements. Only peace, and the chance to learn.”

“A chance greatly increased by Thiaz’s flight from obscurity,” the scholar insisted, pointing to Caspina as though it was his fault Thiaz had hidden themselves away when the plague first attacked.

“Of that, none agrees more than I!” Caspina laughed.

“Hardly a point,” Godnor muttered, “when the teachers share the secrets of transmutation with any.”

“True, true,” Caspina agreed.

“What of Ethphraim?” Rayn asked.

The scholar replied. “Oh, they still insist on keeping this all secret from their people. Apparently they have spread rumors of all sorts, men in black, aliens abducting people and bringing them back in the morning, that sort of stuff. I don’t think anyone will guess the truth.”

“And we have to respect that?” Caspina raised an eyebrow.

Rayn nodded.

“That world is crazy,” Caspina shook his head.

“Thiaz has nothing on the Empress of Sanmarellis!” The scholar grinned.

“Yes, how is the good Queen?” Caspina asked.

Godnor spoke, “Oh, I wish you could have seen it! The re-joining of men and dragons of Sanmarellis! I... oh...” the man seemed lost for words. “She rose up from the water and declared the banishment over. She broke down the wards with a single breath and brought the entire cavern back to our dimension. They’re still thawing people out now, and I must admit they’re happy. Just surprised so much time has passed. I imagine they’ll have it done in a year or two. And within a decade we may be surpassing Thiaz for productivity!”

“That remains to be seen!” Ko grinned.

“And... I have found my dragon, Starwing who rides on light, and does not stop talking!” Godnor grinned, and grew serious again. “I’m afraid

the experiential phenomenon far exceeded cognized expectations... I'm sorry for those who cannot find a dragon.”

The room fell silent.

“What of your people?” Godnor finally asked the scholar, as if to break the silence.

The scholar of Chalcedonah cleared his throat, hiding a grin under a professional façade. “They prosper, and with the dragons’ help we are safer on our fiery globe now more than ever. There is great excitement, and a council forming of all the nations. This is an unprecedented time for us, made possible by the dragons, and the old wisdom of men.”

“To that, I raise a drink!” Legionnaire agreed.

“And your world, too, has peace,” Ko asked him.

“Not at all!” He roared, “What, and be boring like the rest of you? No, we live for war. There are games now, *violent* games. Very satisfying. But best of all, humans are no longer slaves. Men and dragons ride as one!”

Rayn could share his enthusiasm, but also knew the warrior meant it as a challenge. The room was friendly, bonds tested in battle. But each world still eyed each other with a mixture of friendship and concern. The hearts of men and dragons were not always to be trusted.

Just then a man walked in, the shaman from Tourmarelle. As was their way, he started speaking without introducing himself, “Where is Rhoc?”

“Shaman, come join us!” Caspina offered.

The man stamped one foot, his peoples’ way of saying, ‘No, thank you.’

“Is it true,” Caspina insisted, “Twisted is, well, no longer twisted?”

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

His eyes shot up, and he seemed to glare at Caspina for a moment. It took Rayn a heartbeat to realize; it was no threat, the shaman was showing his enormous gratitude and pride. “He asks us call him ‘Spirit of flame and mud’.”

Rayn smiled. He knew this man spoke his dragons’ name with reverence, especially since they had bonded. As the plague had fallen from the seven worlds, racing throughout the stars as though on waves that cannot be seen, plaguecursed had died all over. Then, with a new prayer in the wands and staves, the wisemen had set to healing the dragons of Tourmarelle. Yet since so few wisemen yet existed the burden of this task fell to Thiaz. There were hundreds still on their world, offering healing to any dragon who allowed them for now burden or price. At least, no price as yet.

“I know,” Caspina replied, then responded in the man’s own language the most respectful greeting they had. “Dark mist upon thee.”

“Dark mist upon thee, golden son of a great chief,” the shaman said. “And may the spirits of mud, and heart of the dreams, warm the fire within you on this joining day.”

Caspina nodded.

The shaman looked down again, showing respect to all present, “And when you see the boy Rhoc, tell him he missed midday meal and we are not pleased. The air is dry, and he will need to bring mud again if he wishes our forgiveness!” and he burst out laughing, as though it was a joke no one had told them.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

They looked at each other, and the black shaman, seeming oblivious to their utter inability to get it, probably interpreted it as respect and with a sort of a bow, he left.

From the staff Rayn received the impression it was soon time. “Men, put yourselves out now. It is time.”

Clasping hands and such as was their way, they left Rayn and Caspina to the final quest.

“You sure you don’t need anything?” Ko asked before leaving.

“We are fine,” Rayn told him. “I could not have hoped for a better way for everything to turn out.”

Caspina waited till everyone had left before looking at him seriously. “Do you, Rayn?” He asked, face inclined with sincerity, “do you really?”

He felt a momentary twinge of uncomfortableness at Caspina’s honest stare, and cunning persona. But he was right.

“I do.” Rayn insisted, “Pure is a good woman, very beautiful. Arguably the most beautiful woman on this world. And she is the Princess, heir to an orb. Gifted, more than any man deserves – and that is why she must be yours, not mine. She is destined to rule, and I am destined to guide. She needs someone like you, who understands the cunning of men, their guile, their politics. She needs an experienced man of your years, not mine. She, and you, have truly chosen well. It is my honor to see you marry, and call upon the Divine to bless you with every happiness that that can endow.”

Caspina blinked, and it took Rayn a moment to realize the prince fought back tears. “She humbled me, you know. I always thought of myself as, you know... a bit of a player. But then she took away the game! I just couldn’t... phew!” he said, adjusting his collar.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

If Rayn didn't know any better, Caspina looked... ruffled. He had never, *ever*, seen him ruffled. Fighting the plague, crossing words with the elite of other words, stealing a fortress. Yet it was only in marriage that Caspina looked ruffled!

Rayn had to call on his composure not to laugh.

Caspina noticed anyhow, and looked indignant, "And what of you, Rayn, why do you delay marriage?" Immediately he looked regretful, as though he wanted to withdraw his own words.

But Rayn welcomed them, "It was the most open and honest conversation we've ever had. Jayd and I went to our "parents" as soon as the war had ended and we returned here to Pearl. My father already seemed to know why we had come. We didn't even have to ask."

"And?"

"My father married Jayd's mother two years after my mother's death. She was already pregnant to another man, but they didn't tell anyone. He just realized that if anyone found out the child would have borne a great stigma her whole life among the people of the Celtwyld, being born outside marriage. He isn't Jayd's father."

"Do they know who is?"

"A man of the Celtwyld, we don't know who. A travelling hunter who lived in the village for a week before moving on, probably now dead from the plague. He and Jayd's mother should have never come together, but she was so lonely after losing her husband in her youth to illness four years before. The man never stayed, and Jayd has no desire to find him if he wants to stay hidden. She considers my father her father, and that is enough."

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Then with the honesty only a best friend could muster Caspina asked, “Are you troubled about those who will say you are courting your sister?”

“After Rhoc’s offer to rip their throats out? Not really. After all, we know the truth, and their opinions do not matter. She is less my sister than any other I may have married in the village. Let them search to Divinity with the wand or staff for themselves. We are quite happy.”

“And after all, happiness is what it is all about.”

“Yes, I think you may be right, Caspina. Happiness. She...”

The prince waited.

“She... she completes me.” Rayn admitted. “She always had, and I could never see it. She challenges me. She advises me honestly, and does not serve me from fear. I think I have no better word for this, I love her.”

Caspina smiled. “That is good. What of Rhoc and Snow?”

“What of them?” Rayn asked, wondering why Caspina would ask under the circumstances.

“You can’t tell? They have quite the crush on each other.”

Rayn wasn’t sure Caspina was just playing games again, “Rhoc has the deepest affection for the woman, it is true. But she seems uninterested in him, or any man, for the time being. I’m not sure Windfyrth would approve of the joining, either. I’m afraid I just don’t see it happening.”

Caspina grinned, “Oh, we will see...”

Rayn still did not believe him, and Caspina laughed till it made Rayn chuckle too. “Come,” he said, “let us get you married.”

They walked out into the floral garden, decked with glowing lanterns in the fading light of their ever cloud covered world. The wisemen had grown up a corridor of flowers that led to a concealed garden of white and green.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

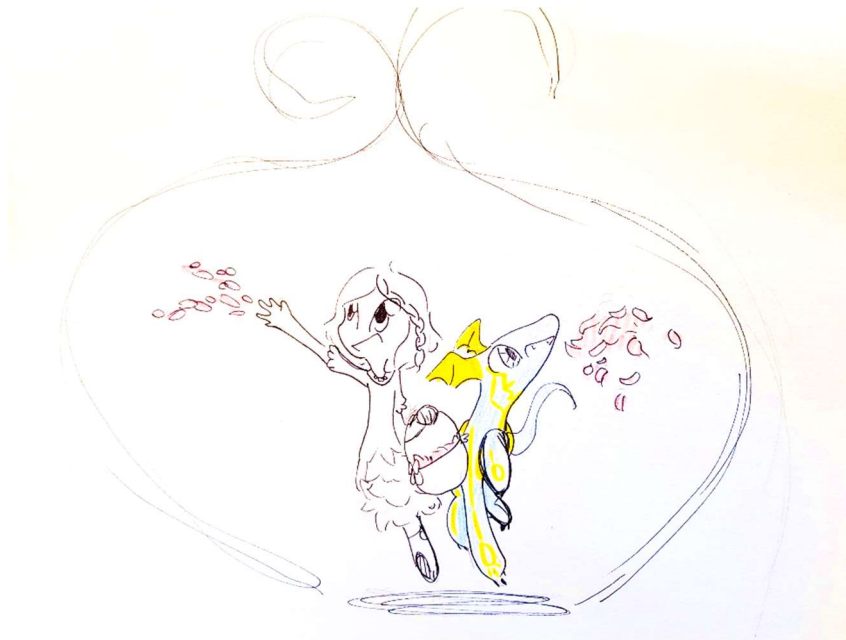
Along the wall of the garden dragons perched, and deep in the sky, Farwing, Patron of Pearl circled. Nobles, royalty and ambassadors from each of the seven worlds were there. The scholar, and his dragon Cloudform. Ko, with the general's assistant from Thiaz. The surgeon of Ethphraim and the fiery wyvern. Godnor and the infamous Starwing, bonded now as one. The Shaman and Spirit of mud and flame, as well Legionnaire with Irealia and the lame child.

They walked to the dais at the front of the area, and there waited for the bride to arrive. Caspina shuddered a nervous sigh. She did not keep him waiting long, but in a moment Pure, Princess of Pearl arrived. She was trailed by seven young maids in white, and the ground before her strewn with rose petals by a little blue dragon and a little human girl. The minstrels fell silent, and the dragons sung to herald a queen.

Pure walked up, and with a bow nodded at Rayn. He smiled in reply. She turned to face her future husband Caspina, and grinned broadly. Then she just pressed herself into his arms, and Rayn had to pull them apart. Still she smiled, tears that carried her happiness trailing down her blushing cheeks.

They waited for Rayn to begin.

This is the perfect time for a marriage, he thought.



(A little human girl and 'the Littlest Dragon', act as 'flowergirls' at the wedding of Queen Pure of Pearl)

The End.

(of the first three books.)

Dr Joe

Appendix

(by Wenthis, the Scholar of Chalcedonah)

Kinds of Dragons

Binomial nomenclature is used, and stretched to its limits, when describing the major forms of dragons most commonly observed. Other unique forms exist, occasionally limited to a single individual. Indeed, as has been said, the variation among their kind is limitless due to the infinite possibilities in their manufactured recombinant DNA.

The first name typically nominates the dragons environment, the second, their body form.



22 An Aquatic Drake

Environments

Aquatic – lives predominantly in water, i.e., the matron of Sanmarellis.

Aerial – lives predominantly in the air, and can usually sleep there. I.e., the patron of Pearl; Farwing. Any body type can potentially manifest aerial ability, using anti-gravity, simply being less dense than the surrounding air, or through other mysteries not yet fully understood.

Terrestrial – living on the surface of the land. This is the most common type, dwelling in general biomes including forests, deserts, and such. They are often named after the local biome, for convenience.

Glacial – preferring temperatures below the freezing point of water. These dragons are usually harmed by plasmic temperatures. They are often to be found in arctic regions or the deepest of deep space.

Fiery – preferring temperatures above the ignition point of common materials, i.e., 1000 °C+. They are often found inside volcanoes, etc.

Plasmic – preferring temperatures above the ionization point of most materials, i.e., 10,000°C+ These dragons are usually harmed by glacial temperatures. They are often found dwelling in stars.

Parasitic – rare, and usually only found on other dragons. While this potential exists within every known dragon's DNA, once manifested a parasitic individual is typically persecuted to death.

Desolate – preferring inhospitable, lonely areas, such as the airless wilderness of a barren moon – without food, water, shelter or air. Few

examples exist, fewer are willing to come even to a conclave. Thus, how they survive, and indeed thrive, in such places is poorly understood.

Ethereal – composed of matter that does not interact much with the matter of this dimension, they appear translucent and levitate effortlessly.

Countless other forms are mathematically established to be possible, including inter- intra- and extra- dimensional, even a dream variety.

Body forms

Serpentine – Long and sinuous, without limbs, these typically grow to enormous size and mass. The Matron of Sanmarellis is a good example, as well as the recently deceased patron of Ethphraim; the Rainbow Serpent. They occasionally have prehensile tails or facial tentacles to act as opposable digits, though some are left to develop latent telekinetic powers.

Quetzalcoatl (or winged serpentine) – a snake with wings, named after the legendary noble from the continent south of the Northern Wyvern of Ethphraim.

Wurm – A snake like body with two limbs, usually used as hands and arms. Also known as tatzelwurm in places.

Wyvern – body with legs, and wings for



23 A feathered Tatzelwurm of Argentus

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

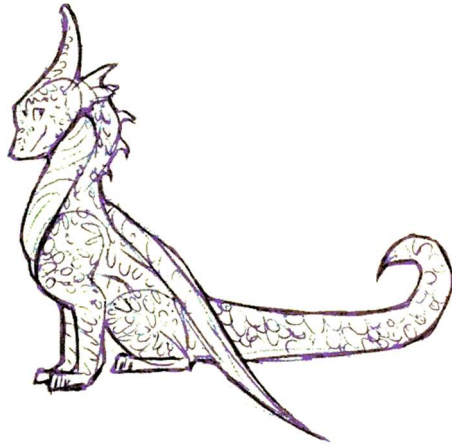
arms (4 limbs). The most notable example is the mate of the five headed matron of Tourmarelle.

Drake – another common form, with four legs and no wings. It does not prevent them from learning how to fly, however.

Standardform – six limbed; four legs and two wings (with the front limbs also able to function as hands and arms). Highly common, such as the slain Matron of Pearl. Wings can be bat like or birdlike, though smaller dragons also manifest butterfly or fish-like wings.

Mutant – exhibited almost exclusively at Tourmarelle, Swirlwings of Pearl a notable exception, DNA reacts in eclectic and seemingly random combinations in response to environmental pollutants. Asymmetrical, misshapen and malformed mutations are the tragic result, although dragon gifts and powers seem unaffected, even enhanced.

Mixed forms are possible, such as the aerial drake (also known as a clawed serpentine); the glacial matron of Argentus, or the sinuous Mt Huji of Ethphraim are two examples.



24 A Runescaped (mutant)
Standardform of Sanmarellis

Again, mathematical analysis indicates a far wider variety is possible, including, sensationally: human form (although none to date have been observed).

Dragon sizes

Dragons, regardless of size, continue to demonstrate all the powers and ability of dragons at any size. Most gain one size rating when they reach their 1000th year or so, graduating to become 'noble' dragons. At this point they either die of old age, or if a particular cause drives them, their mindset often changes to become interested in sociological and scientific concepts; similar to a human except vastly more intelligent, and with a memory that can access their ancestor's experiences. Curiously, these are the only sizes mathematically derivable from the DNA, and the only ones so far observed. But given the surprises dragons have for us we can only wait, and wonder!

Fey – small, typically able to fit in the palm of a human's hand

Shoulder – able to perch on a human's shoulder

Small – about the size of a human or horse

Usual – about the size of a small house

Large – about four times larger, the size of most noble dragons

Massive – Truly large, only the most venerable of dragons reach this size

Exquisite – almost unfathomable, the matron of Pearl was such a size, easily able to circumscribe the average mountain. The aquatic serpentine matron of Sanmarellis thus far holds the award for the largest dragon ever on record.

Dragon matrons / patrons

Matron / Patron (Pearl)

Farwing is acknowledged the oldest and most venerable dragon of Pearl by over seven hundred years, nearing his three thousandth rotation. His gift lies in lightning and, when coupled with his advanced studies, he is able to forge portals through space. He rides with the Queen of Pearl – Pure of the Celtwyld. He is an aerial drake.

The First (Chalcedonah)

An ethereal serpentine, The First is known for his highly pragmatic, and at times emotionally detached, approach toward the humans and dragons on his world. He has a known love of song and music. He rides with Taroze the servant, fireproof high priest of Chalcedonah.

Motherdragon / Fatherdragon (Tourmarelle).

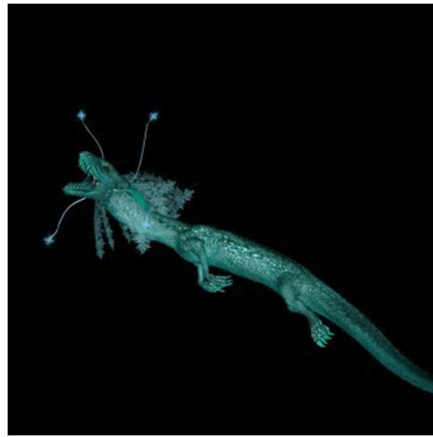
A mud-dwelling mutant, the matron of Tourmarelle is distinguished for having five heads and yet only one mind. Each head appears to take a turn at speaking and interacting, while the others observe the environment and communicate telepathically with each other. With a vast and detailed memory, she has advanced in her noble years in the studies of life and medicine. After the plague war was won, she bonded to a local shaman's wife, who has 13 children.

Archwurm, or Key (Ethphraim).

An aquatic drake, Nessie maintains her environmental preferences by telekinetically moving several thousand tons of sea water with her wherever she goes. Like all dragons on Ethphraim, she insists on maintaining the secret of their existence from the vast majority of humans on their world for reasons which seem strange to those of other worlds. She is bonded to a local of her home region, an accountant.

Empress / Emperor (Argentus)

Having survived the fall of Amarii, the Empress of Ice (a glacial aerial drake) kept the humans on her barren world alive through a cold pragmatism that serves her to this day. Few dare challenge her, as her elemental and illusionary powers are truly legendary. She rides with Lelleth, high priestess of Argentus.



The Wisest (of Sanmarellis)

An aquatic serpentine of unparalleled size, this dragon is believed to be the largest, and oldest, of all dragons known. One report tells that her eye alone is more than twice the height of the average man. She is known to have successfully sequestered the humans from her world from all for over four

thousand years, a science which still defies easy interpretation. She claims through the bond a local orb scholar who specializes in astrophysics.

The Council (of Thiaz)

Reportedly an extremely cunning dragon, she is rumored to have extensive influence in human affairs and politics. How she has been able to remain hidden in such a public arena for over two thousand years is yet another mystery the dragons of Thiaz prefer to keep to themselves. Sadly little is known about this reportedly female terrestrial drake, but that she exists, and is unimaginable wealthy, is undeniable. It is not known if she is bonded or not, but a dragon circle has existed on her world for millennia.

Dragons

The complete list

Bell – Dragon of Auroriella of the Southern continent. Bell was tragically executed by Doomclaw during the rebellion against the matron of Pearl. Her contributions include allowing Rayn and companions to mend the southern oracle, and thus all teachers on Pearl. Bell was instrumental in the return of Sanmarellis to contact with the seven worlds. She and her rider are honored by a silver statue in the heart of their city.

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

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

university, particularly those on astronomy and history (of which his rider, Wenthis, excels).

Darkwing – A dragon preferring the company of solitude, Darkwing wields blackflame with practiced ease, being able to use it to weaken, sicken, or completely debilitate both inanimate and living material. He rides with Jayd of the Celtwyld, and is next among those in line to become the Patron of Pearl. As he is 900 years old and verging on becoming a noble dragon himself, this event seems likely to occur within the next 2 to 8 hundred years' time, depending when Farwing steps down (usually at the death of his rider due to old age).

Dais Oohlan – Almost nothing is known of this dragon and his rider, though they appear to have been a very successful at business. One of his research colonies developed the plague and rather than destroy it, he required his researchers to explore its destructive potential. The results of that selfish and tragic decision are well documented.

Doomclaw – A vocal opponent to the union of men and dragons, Doomclaw led the rebellion against the Matron on Pearl, beginning with the murder of the treasured Lifebreath. While imprisoned for this and other crimes, he was called upon by the wiseman of the fortress of Pearl to assist him on IceScape point, and there learned the true origins of the Plague. He met his death saving Pure, the princess of Pearl, whom he had at one time sworn to destroy.

Deathwalk – A cruel and vindictive dragon of the Western continent of Pearl, Deathwalk awaits execution for his crimes of assisting the rebellion against the matron – an event many look forward to.

Dothmere – A dragon of the Venfyrrh of Pearl, first ever dragon slain of the great plague. Dothmere, a poet at heart, was known for his skill at wrestling and other feats of physical prowess.

Enfathomer - A cunning dragon known for never actually breaking a law, but making life difficult for others. His talent is reputedly being able to exist in two places at once, though no confirmation of this talent exists.

Ethnomancer – Sage and mystic, arguably *the* most important of the Rebels during the defeat of the plague. He is capable of manipulating a strange and debilitating form of interdimensional matter known as ‘ethnoplasm.’ Once known as a compassionate dragon, his growing disdain of humanity has been well documented for centuries. Despite his bitterness towards humanity, he turned against his rebel leaders to assist the dragon riders in completing the first circle. He now rides with Fallen, whose wife and young child he once slew in a cruel yet futile attempt to prevent his own bonding.

Fairystone – The playful, yet very intelligent, dragon of Rhoc of the Celtwyld. Fairystone is a capable shape shifter, demonstrating the forms of a mouse, otter, and her enormous battle form of a stone dragon. Records exist of a fly, kangaroo, halpotter, and rhinoceros. An insuppressible optimist, she is still a very young dragon, only around 120 years old.

Fireyes – Second ever slain of the great plague, his inner mouth pieced by men’s bones sharpened and placed inside plaguecursed sheep. Fireyes was able to produce high intensity plasma beams from his eyes capable of melting steel.

Hazetail – A shadow-teleporting standardform terrestrial dragon, second to offer his services at the conclave of the children of the Matron of Pearl.

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.

Hope Starlovecrossed – A young noble of Sanmarellis, noted for his apparent nonchalance and calm. This all gives way as an illusion, however, as he attempts to force Wenthis to become his rider. He is placated by the words of the redeemed prisoner Ironfang. He is a terrestrial standardform with noted prowess at correctly identifying a plant's uses by its smell and form alone.

Icewing – The first to offer his services at the conclave of the children of the Matron of Pearl, and one of many who publically longed for the companionship of humans. He is a glacial standardform, and his rider is immune to low temperatures.

Ireala – A terrestrial standardform of Argentus, now rides with 'the child'. Her courageous rebellion against the status-quo of Argentus and public decrrial of the forced employment of human's during the inter-dragon wars saw her become a target for mockery, plunder and abuse. She survived only by her cunning, and the fact that she could turn invisible to both human and dragon eyes. She is now the second dragon of Argentus behind the

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

glacial matron, and likely to be the next matron in the next few hundred years.

Ironfang – A redeemed prisoner, ridden by high wiseman of the fortress, Rayn of the Celtwyld. The first of the terrible three, Ironfang’s crimes of murder, violence, and occasional extortion are well documented.

The Jailer “Stonewalker”– Once respected as a law abiding yet proud dragon, he was slain during Thiaz’ rescue of the fortress. It is not known why he chose the path of traitor, though scholars suggest Rayn’s blithe disregard for due process in claiming Ironfang no doubt was used as an excuse. ‘The jailer’ was a terrestrial standardform capable of swimming through stone. He is primarily credited with the fall of the dragon riders in the absence of the Princess shortly after the initial dragon circle was initiated.

Lifebreath – A stern and courageous dragon, concealing a compassionate and tender heart given to stories and songs. She was murdered by Doomclaw at the beginning of the rebels uprising against the Matron of Pearl. Her breath was instrumental in the development of the healing waters that saved millions in the final outbreak of the Plague.

Longstride – A dragon of Pearl noted for his long stride and excellent running skills, though they are rarely sought after skills among most dragonkin. He rides with an unnamed rider who was a cook of some note among his people.

Melonitus – Recorded as a kind hearted and capable dragon sage of his people of Amarii, Melonitus is nonetheless remembered for being the dragon that created the plague. While his life was given in an attempt to save

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

his rider from this fate, giving Delphos time enough to create but not employ a solution to the situation, his name is ever associated with this tragedy. It is believed his attempt to destroy the plague, contrary to his leader's command, may have actually been the cause for its escape from containment.

Modelium, "The Brown Tyrant" – One of the more successful dragon tyrants of Argentus, known for his cunning, diplomacy, brute strength, and caustic fire breath. Modelium, at his own request, was slain by his intended rider Legionnaire.

Shrieker - Not her real name. Shrieker has mastered the art of sonic manipulations to varying degrees. She is able to drown out thought itself, targeting specific individuals with her talent. Other abilities exist but few are reported to have much use beyond disorienting, confusing or nauseating her enemies. She is a long term ally of Doomclaw, and now awaits death for her crimes. She is over 600 years old.

Starwing – A scholar dragon of Sanmarellis, known for his prodigious memory and devotion to intellectual pursuits. He possesses the paradoxical yet almost unique ability to travel at near-light speeds. He claims Godnor, the scholar of Sanmarellis, as his rider – perhaps because he is one of the few supernaturally patient humans who can bear with ease Starwing's constant thoughts and frenetic mind.



25 Starwing, sage and scholar

Stormbreath - The dragon of Norwich of the Vestran. Stormbreath is almost two hundred years old. His breath is a powerful whirlwind of energy that can disrupt other dragon's breath and flight, though it has also proved effective at disrupting their illusions as well. Stormbreath is given to riddles and puzzles, and has the curious ability to remember limericks with ease.

Stormclouds - A bi-winged aerial standardform, Stormclouds holds a noted preference to not touch the ground. His powerful and highly coveted talents include the ability to see distant lands and teleport instantly to any point in his sight. He is over two hundred years old and a son of the Matron of Pearl. While taking part in the rebellion against the Matron of Pearl, he was promptly pardoned by Pure for his contributions against the

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

plague, his withdrawal of support for the rebels and assistance in claiming Fallen for Ethnomancer, and in the war on Sanmarellis. He refuses still to take a rider.

Tornfang – The dragon of the Polar Warriress, little is known of this dragon.

Treeheart – The third to offer her services at the conclave of the children of the Matron of Pearl. An aerial standard, she studies life in all its forms, eats only vegetables, and eschews buildings of any material.

Twisted, “Spirit of mud and flame” – A noble of Tourmarelle, an aquatic standard who has regained flight ability since his healing from the plague. He was also born without a voice, also since healed, yet developed respectable telepathic abilities in its place.

Wildblizzard – A standardform 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.

Windfyrth – A terrestrial standardform with exceptional chameleon skill, Windfyrth’s grandmother dragon is descendant from the dragons of Amarii but was stranded on Pearl when the Perish struck and Pearl cut the threads that allow easy travel between the worlds. Windfyrth is known for her diplomacy and tough, yet even handed, leadership of both men and dragons. She holds enormous authority among the humans of the fortress. She rides with Snow of the Celtwyld, speaker of beasts.

People

Auroriella – Instrumental in current events, the contributions of the young priestess of the Venfyrrh of Pearl and her dragon cannot be understated. She helped Sanmarellis reconnect with the seven worlds, and was third chairperson at the first-ever council of wisemen on Pearl. Tragically, her dragon was shortly after executed by Doomclaw during the rebellion against the matron. Despite the enormous personal loss and resulting debilitating trauma, Auroriella single handedly managed to force a subspace link between Pearl and Thiaz that brought about its liberation from the rebels and prevented the death of other dragons. She passed away shortly after due to a broken heart, yet her contributions did not stop there. Having permitted herself prior to admit she preferred a deep brown over lively green for her staff – the color ‘required’ of priestesses of the Venfyrrh – many other priestesses have since claimed the courage to embrace their own unique gifts and style as evidenced in the brilliant rainbow of colors the priestesses, and priests, of the Venfyrrh now offer.

Black Stown – The father of Rayn and adoptive father of Jayd. He is named after the dark stone that burns well in the night. He married Jayd’s expectant mother to prevent her bearing a child out of wedlock, a taboo in their culture at the time.

Caspina – A prince of Thiaz, and as a male is not eligible for the throne of Thiaz. He recently ended his days as a philanderer and proposed to the princess of Pearl, Pure, and they are expected to be wed shortly. He adds

a capable planet-wide political career and the vast experience of a mind raised at the foot of the teachers to a world new to both.

Enasthperilla, "The Child" – An unnamed child from Argentus and presumably having returned there, she manifested extreme transdimensional heat production from her retina at a young age, and was an outcast from her people because of it – her persecution resulting in the maiming of her arm by her own father. This young maid was only six when forced to flee to IceScape point in an attempt to save her life as she and others tried to explore the original source of the plague, but her contribution there was invaluable in saving Jayd, Rayn, and Darkwing. Little else is known as she, like her dragon Irealia, seem to have disappeared. Where they are and what they are up to is anyone's guess, but popular rumor suggests after a short visit home and with the reopening of the threads among the stars they went to explore the seven worlds and countless other settlements of humanity.

Courage – Pure's older brother by about fourteen years. He rode an unnamed dragon at the time before the fall of humanity and the severing of the threads. Tragically little is known about him, apart from his obvious cunning and patience when fully plaguecursed, although it is not known how much rightly belongs to him, the plague, or its original creators. Pure speaks only well of him, and she was four when he was slain. It is understood the plague took control of him though his dragon's gift, but it is still not fully understood how this may have happened. He was a cloak wielder, and it appears to have malfunctioned at the time recent events take place, making it blood red and interphasing with the local ground, although some scholars

point out it may also have actually been to circumvent corporeal degeneration due to the moral crisis commonly experienced by those who commit murder.

Delphos – The human responsible for creating the plague from the leukocytes of his dragon Melonitus. He thereafter sought its destruction and is, therefore, somewhat ameliorated from the guilt of creating the most dangerous life form in the known universe. He also derived the solution and means of defeating the plague but was, it is believed, killed only moments before he could act on it.

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 fourteen children. He is bonded to Twisted, who prefers to be called ‘Spirit of mud and flame’.

Fallon Oak, the “Village wiseman” – Rayn’s first mentor, known as a kind tutor and gentle servant, he was nevertheless known for his stern rebuke when moved to anger. He was slain by Hak with plaguecursed strength for not allowing the trapper to kill the white maiden, Pure, when it was discovered that she could wield fire. The Wiseman passed his staff on to Rayn, who eventually passed it to Taroz of Chalcedonah since they had

no staves of their own on that world. Fallon Oak left behind his grieving wife, Wind Song and two young children; Hallow and Evening Song.

General of Ethphraim – The general has not been seen or heard from since his failure which included the imprisonment, torture, death and dissection of the diplomats sent to help his world re-join the seven – namely Snow and her dragon Windfyrth. Typical of Ethphraim, what has become of him is a matter of great secrecy...

Godnor, the scholar of Sanmarellis – Little is known about the first man of Sanmarellis to awaken after the plague, but a clear mind and constant heart are spoken of by those who have met him.

Hak – A tragic story and perhaps the actual main antagonist of recent events, including the defeat of the plague. It is widely assumed Hak sold his soul to the ‘man in the red cape’ by murdering his brother Fallow. He did so in exchange for power and influence among his own people, which he tried to use to and make them reject Pure whom he had come to mistrust and hate. Despite numerous fatal wounds, Hak survived by the plague’s powers, eventually not even dying when sundered in two from head to tail by Rhoc. His left half, which appeared to maintain the final shreds of his humanity, went on to slay the man in red cape by powerful self-sacrifice. His right half, welded now to the left half of a plaguecursed tiger, ascended to take command of the plague’s self-awareness in only seconds. He shortly after, it is believed, used a vessel constructed by the man in the red cape to fly to Sanmarellis and began to infect it there. His power to influence the plague worked against him in the end, and is the very means used by Rayn and the

surgeon of Ethphraim (and others) to neutralize the plague rather than destroy it.

Jayd – Considered the half-sister to Rayn, Jayd is a warrior of great respect among most every people who have encountered her, despite her petite appearance. Among those of Amarii she is widely called, and even considered by most, “The Goddess”. She has a reputation for being quick to observe and decisive in action. She rides the terrestrial standard Darkwing, and is second dragonrider to Pure, queen of Pearl.

Ko-ran Migusan – A scholar in high repute among the educated of Thiaz, Ko is gifted with a near eidetic memory, and at the young age of only 17 was already adding to cutting edge theory in genetic mathematics. His soft spoken and congenial demeanor was sorely tested during his companionship with Rayn in their recent negotiations on Chalcedonah.

Legionnaire – The mightiest warrior and commander of armed forces first at the local lands of Amarii where Jayd arrived, and eventually the entire armed forces of the seven worlds. He was intended to be bonded with the Brown Tyrant Modelium, but slew him at the Tyrant’s wish. Strangely, this seems to have strengthened the man even more so. Scandalous rumors whisper that he had an intimate liaison with the goddess Jayd of Pearl, although it is all without substance.

Lelleth – High priestess of Argentus, and rider of the glacial matron. She is known for having a sharp mind and compassionate demeanor, and was instrumental to the success of the dragon rider uprising there. Her recent tour of the seven worlds resulted in the opening of trade routes with all of them. She is a known friend and associate of the goddess Jayd of Pearl.

Mayor – The mettle of the man known as a “sniveling sycophant” was sorely tested when his town was torched by the Brown Tyrant, and he was left in a leadership role with over 2,000 terrified and homeless citizens of Argentus fleeing for Sanmarellis. He rose to the occasion, even negotiating their return on the ascension of the dragon riders of Argentus. A staunch pragmatist, he is keen to do whatever it takes to survive.

Mendelain – The most successful queen of Thiaz in several centuries, the young woman heralded a golden age of her planet’s future – until she overstepped her authority and attempted to force Pearl and their princess to sign over the battle fortress known as the ‘fortress from beyond the clouds’ to Thiaz. She is now under house arrest, though many suspect this is more of a “rough patch” in her career than the end of it. It is rumored her brother, Caspina, was instrumental in her fall, helping to explain why he did not return to Thiaz when she did.

Norvich – A widely respected warrior of the Southern continent, drawn from the ranks of local city guard for exemplary service and chosen personally by Stormbreath to be ridden first as dragonfriend, now as bonded. Norwich again holds the title as foremost rider of the Southern, and has governed the entire fortress in the Princess’s absence many times.

The polar warrioress – A warrior chieftain of great repute, she hails from the far northern tribes of the Northern continent of Pearl. She began a journey with her people long before the current events even began to unfold at the bidding of her prophet. Through much meditation and unique personal experience she learned as a young teenager how to conduct ‘cold’

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

through any object she touches. Her two husbands were both recently slain by the plague, yet she has four sons.

Pure – The heir apparent to the world of Pearl, awaiting only marriage to claim the Queenship. She is noted as a paramount genius and excelling at all forms of matter manipulation, especially fire. She was initially bonded to the Matron of Pearl who gave her life to save hers, and now she has bonded and rides the Patron of Pearl, Farwing.

Rayn – The high wiseman of the fortress from beyond the clouds. His active engagement has been the major catalyst for much that has beset our local stellar region in the recent past. He hails from the Celtwyld of Pearl, a region recently devastated by plague. He is generally regarded as a kind hearted pragmatist, powerfully intuitive and keen student of people and politics, but young. He rides a redeemed prisoner, the large and impressive terrestrial standardform Ironfang.

Rhoc – A companion to Jayd and Rayn from the beginning, Rhoc has been found to exhibit a minor phagial variety of the plague from birth, which grants him unrivalled physical strength and prowess. Deaf from birth, his hearing was recently healed by Rayn. He rides with the fey sized terrestrial standard (butterfly winged) shape-shifter Fairystone.

Rising Ahx – A mighty chief of the Celtwyld, now second in command regarding civil matters on the fortress. His wife, healed by the power of the teachers, is now bearing their first child in her 42nd year, which is about as old as anyone expected to ever get on Pearl before the plague was defeated.

Singing Dish – Jayd’s birth mother (her blood father is not named or known). Singing Dish is named after the bronze bowl that the Celtwyld people use occasionally; believing its ringing sound is able to drive away evil spirits, or to help calm lost ones.

Slippery Elhm – A great chief of the Celtwyld, second in command of the “eastern” wall of the fortress – a moot point since the fortress can rotate to face any direction of the compass. He is regarded as a keen student of military matters and a fast study in modern machinery. He is credited with the rapid deployment of crystal cannons during the battle on Sanmarellis against the walking trees. He has two children to his first wife, slain by the plague eight years ago, and two to his second.

Snow – A companion to Jayd and Rayn from almost the beginning, she exhibits an unparalleled psychynchronicity with animal life forms that transcends language, and indeed worlds. She rides with the speaker of men, the diplomatic terrestrial standard Windfyrth. In contrast her dragon, Snow is one of the shyest and least outspoken of dragon riders in known existence. She has refused all public interviews and disdains all attempts at contact. Nevertheless, her determination is uncommonly resolute, as demonstrated in her crossing half a continent alone, at only fourteen years of age, to meet her dragon Windfyrth, and her unequalled ability to safely enter the Shadowrealm, even if only temporarily.

The Surgeon of Ethphraim – Known properly as Jane Jones, the surgeon has served on many councils of the seven worlds since her joining with the massive northern fire wyvern of the dominant culture of Ethphraim. As with most of her people, she was once caught up in the belief

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

that secrets could be hidden. She admits to participating willingly, even enthusiastically, in the dissection of the diplomats from Pearl. Since an awakening brought on by Snow and Windfyrth's allies (namely, having Rhoc break her back and Rayn then heal it) she has become a far more honest contributor. She was instrumental in both defeating the plague, and discovering that Rayn and Jayd are not, as was assumed, siblings. Rumors that she is the betrothed of the missing general of Ethphraim are without substance, but who can say in a world of secrets?

Taroz – Once a personal assistant to Wenthis of Chalcedonah, the gentle hearted Taroz now is the rider of the mighty ethereal serpentine patron of that world. Similar in persona and temperament, they are both given to service. Yet both are stalwart, indeed, meteoric in defense of what they believe to be right.

"Twoswords" – BaHak Drohuaman, a talented and respected warrior of his people of Pearl, who lead a small contingent of them to the gathering at the fortress. He was instrumental in the break out from the fortress and defeat of the rebellion against the matron at the start of the final plague war. He is commander of the walls at the fortress at this time, though he is sometimes called on as fortress commander even though he does not claim a dragon at this time. He and his wife have seven children.

Wenthis – A minor yet capable scholar of the dominant nation on Chalcedonah, Wenthis met with meteoric rise in fame as he was present when Pearl first began to try and contact the seven worlds. He was the first to use and indeed, to master, the use of the orb on their world. He rides with

the scholarly dragon Cloudform, and they have already authored several important papers together.

Places

Brook of Mindron – A river of the Celtwyld, noted for its calming qualities. High concentrations of silver are found there, and the brook does lie on the intersection of two main meridians, but otherwise said qualities are assumed to be primarily psychosomatic. The last punishment of Fallon Oak was to banish Hak for a little over a month until he had washed in the lake.

Celtwyld – A large section of the people indigenous to the central continent of Pearl. They reside within the sparsely populated highlands west of the central mountains, and while genetically related to the people of the lowlands and areas further towards the sea, do not consider themselves to be of similar nationality. They have pale complexions, brown or copper hair, and blue or green eyes. Their culture is primarily early medieval/tribal, with strong extended family ties, communal meeting halls for eating, and a strong hunter/gatherer diet supplemented with some agriculture. Four of the five of the inner circle of riders of Pearl hail from this unremarkable place (Rayn, Jayd, Rhoc and Snow). The area includes the small towns of Grenswold, Ferriswold and Shenswold.

The fortress from beyond the clouds – An interplanetary battle station and carrier ship, designed to be a holding ground for Pearl's future inhabitants. It is the largest manmade interplanetary object to date,

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

with fearsome defenses, a portable interplanetary gateway, and ability to travel by thread between the stars just as fast as any dragon.

Fartown – The large provincial city where Jayd and Darkwing first meet the citizens of Argentus, including Lelleth, Legionnaire, and the Brown Tyrant.

Ferriswold – A town half a day’s journey north of Grenswold. It is currently being rebuilt after the dishonor of hosting the first great horde of the current plague war.

Grenswold – The home town of Rayn, Rhoc and Jayd, a small yet robust town of the Celtwyld whose higher altitude predisposes it to cooler weather. It is respected for its excellent strawberries.

IceScape point – One of what would have to be millions of minor research outposts and colonies, IceScape Point was tragically the very birthplace of the Plague that became the Perish. It was here that a solution was found 4000 years before it could finally be employed.

Nelwyn Peak – A large mountain of Pearl where the oldest and mightiest of all dragons lived – the Matron.

Shadowrealm – A place of legend only recently re-discovered by Snow of Pearl. It resists further exploration, being inhabited by strange denizens that appear to be actively hostile toward intrusion from ‘materials’ such as ourselves. Not much is known of this place.

Shenswold – A town not a day’s journey south west of Grenswold. Decimated by the plague, it is unlikely it will ever be rebuilt, as the soil reparation will take years even given current technology.

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

Venfyrrth – The most major city of Pearl, and potentially dominating culture if technology was sufficient (which it may well have been some time in the next century as sociocultural norms indicated a renaissance had begun there). Steeped in tradition and history, this large and beautiful city is largely ignored by those outside Pearl.

The nine tools of humanity

After millennia of advanced science and understanding, it has become clear that every branch of knowledge, form of wisdom, and even function in society, can neatly and completely be summed up in one of nine categories. Each category bears a standard implement, known simply as ‘the tool’. Unlike dragons, who carry their wisdom and power within, humans place their wisdom, and tools, without.

Each tool is psychokinetically activated, and powered by the faith and conviction of the wielder, though external power sources can also be used. The tools will work for any who hold them, unless constructed otherwise, but only individuals with the right personality and training can access their tool to its fullest potential. Each tool can do more or less the works of the other tools, but each excel in one area. Each tool projects their information directly to their wielder’s mind, including complete images and pure understanding when necessary.

Each tool is governed by a community guild that governs research and polices misuse of their respective powers. The guilds usually respond to the minister for wisdom, who answers to the planetary government (whatever it may be). Both humans and dragons, usually noble ones, have performed in this latter role.

The orb – The orb is designed for knowledge. It can scry and has countless sensors within, constantly active. It can also scan the minds of people, and generate language tools from scratch. It has the fullest capability

Dragon Riders of Pearl: Return of the Plague

of all the tools to compress and analysis the vast array of all human knowledge in an instant. Its power also extends to revelations and scrying. The orb is the tool of both scholars and rulers. It is the key tool of knowledge and research.

The diadem – A tool for elemental and psychokinetic manipulations. The diadem is not only used for war, but more commonly for manufacturing. It is the key tool of creation and destruction.

The staff – Typically in use by community leaders, healers, and prophets. The staff grants wisdom, patience, and empathy. It has excellent all round powers including limited scrying, moderate telekinesis, reliable revelations, and strong working of miracles. Of necessary it includes a large antenna required for many of its functions. It is the key tool of community and teaching.



26 A Wiseone's Staff

The wand – This device deals with the infinitely small, required for working with subatomic particles, DNA, etc. Thus it often finds use among doctors and scientists. It has a wide variety of uses and moderate elemental powers, occasionally

finding use in war and more specifically assassination. It is the key tool of precision.

The boot – The boot represents transport, including communication and trade. Typically worn as a broach rather than as footwear. It is the tool of messengers, postal workers, and many athletes. The boot aids in swift, safe travel. It has moderate revelation, mild telekinesis and transport, and a generic ‘luck’ ability. It sees common use in military. It is the key tool of marketing sciences.

The blade – A mentally reshapable blade, particularly mastered by those of Amarii and their descendants on Argentus. It can be reformed by its wielder to form daggers, blades, even shields. This blade is so sharp as to penetrate stone, and a properly trained wielder can learn to psychokinetically alter it to sever almost any material known. When slung, a microscopic slither can be designed to fly off and used as a mentally steerable missile weapon of devastating penetrating ability. While typically used by the military, it also sees more peaceful applications in medicine and science. It is the key tool of war and violence.

The cloak – This powerful tool deals with interdimensional and alternative realities. Typically used by both healers and counselors, it does see some military and espionage capabilities. It is able to move between the nearly countless other dimensions – for example, to claim the soul of a baby at birth, to send on the dead, or to simply turn invisible. It is the key tool of mysteries.

The harp – This tool is a simple standard of the arts, particularly musicians, but also sculptors, painters, etc. Its resonance is placed in any instrument of the arts. It is the key tool of rest and plenty.

The shield – The shield represents order and protection. It has moderate scrying abilities, powerful telekinetic abilities, and reliable defensive capabilities including precognition and empathic telepathy. It is the key tool of those typically employed by those in community defense, i.e., policing.



27 A mist form dragon practicing his art

Blurb:

4000 years it had waited...

4000 years, and men and dragons had sacrificed both life and civilisation 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?

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