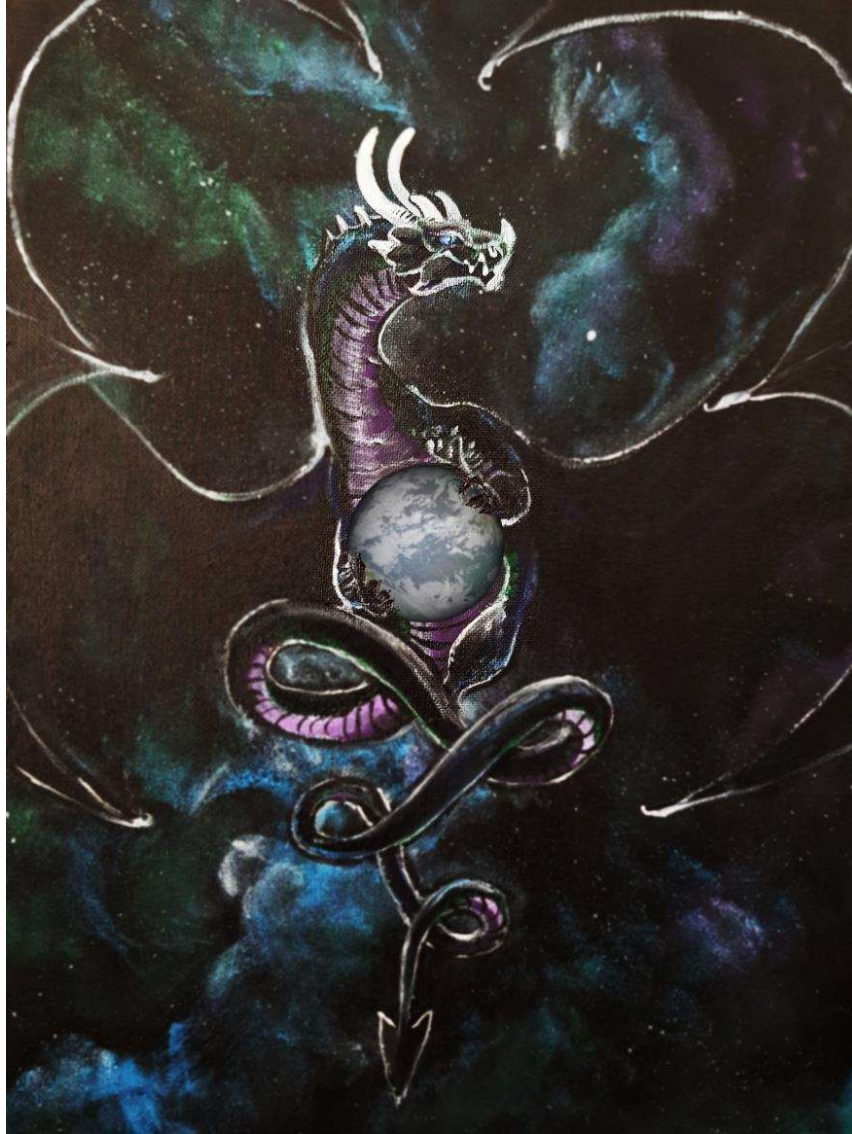


Book 4 Rage of the Dragonmen

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About the author

I like writing books, I really do. I like it much more than reading books, which I can barely stand. Which, I suppose, is a bit of a curious thing for a man 14 novels deep into his own storytelling, but that is me.

I'm currently training up as a Positive Behavioural Specialist, which is a bit of a surprise. I'm left wondering what to make of my now 'hobbies' of doing the occasional science show and lecturing in *Teaching Science* at the University – a total treat to be sure! All this does not help to answer the question, 'Who am I', but that does highlight the problem I have in answering that question just at this time. Maybe it's all just "meant to be", because I find it all very wonderful and vastly more palatable than being a tyrannical monster of authority that my community, the parents, and the children themselves expect me to be when I'm being a ... "teacher". <shudders> Hopefully those days are behind me now, which begs the question of why I'd even want to lecture, since adults can be the very worst of students. With kids, it's never personal until you make it. Adults will try to destroy you when you fail their expectations, and they will feel entirely justified in doing so, which is so, so very sad. Why do we wait till boiling point to mention something is upsetting to us, far beyond the point where something constructive could be done about it? Will we all one day learn to use reason, and perhaps some courage? But now I'm just winging, and you did not come here for that.

I don't know why I write this story, but I MUST.

Sincerely,
Dr Joe Ireland.

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And finally: *Creating Science 3: The History and Philosophy of Knowing*
(I do promise to get to this one day!)



6 Dragons &
Ruby
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coloured
w/ Hannah's
sneaker
perso)

Glossary

Main characters

Pure – Beloved queen of Pearl, lone survivor of the royal house of Orduu. The 1st dragon rider, she rides with the patron dragon of the world, the colossal areal drake Farwing, a powerful electromancer and master of portals.

Jayd – 2nd Dragon rider of Pearl and general of the planet's considerable military power. Gifted with the powers of the navigatoress, she can find almost anything by thought alone. She rides with the standard form dragon Darkwing, who quickly approaches the age of nobility. At 17, she is wife of Rayn.

Rhoc – lifelong friend of Rayn and Jayd, of the same town of the Celtwyld, 3rd Dragon rider. Gifted with superhuman strength. He rides a chariot, powered by his dragon Fairystone, a talented shifter.

Rayn – High priest of the planet Pearl and 4th dragon rider. He rides with the large standardform dragon Ironfang, the redeemed prisoner. At 19, he is husband to Jayd of the Celtwyld.

Snow – The 5th and youngest of the inner circle of dragon riders at only 16, she is gifted with the ability to speak to animals. She rides with the standardform dragon Windfyrth, first diplomat of the Pearl, with highly developed chameleon abilities.



(Image taken two years before the current story is set)

Darkwing, Ironfang, Windfryth. Fairstone on Rhoc's shoulder.

Rhoc, Pure, Rayn, Jayd, Snow

Dragons

Farwing (Pure of House Orduu): Second oldest dragon on Pearl, the enormous Farwing is able to command lightning with ease and uses it to create portals that can span an entire world. He is well over two thousand years old and while not particularly noted for wisdom, has a near perfect memory. He forced a bonding with Pure in order to protect the circle of dragon riders and help defeat the plague.

Darkwing (rides with Jayd of the Celtwyld): A shy yet cunning dragon who kept his roost near dead man's fingers, sharp stone monoliths at the edge of the greatest sea on Pearl. His gifts include his weakening or charring black fire which works without heat, and his great wings which increase in size at night, allowing him to move at incredible speeds in darkness. He is over 900 years old, and many wonder if he is to begin his ascent to nobility soon.



Ironfang (Rayn of the Celtwyld): A dangerous and once very evil dragon, it took forty dragons to bring him to justice. Has spent sixty years with his head stuck to a pillar of stone for twenty hours each day for his crimes. His gift is his great strength and size, especially given his age (350 years old). Redeemed at his bonding with Rayn, he now relishes his role as protector and

guide of both men and dragons in this world, and is the first to confess and amend for his past sins.

Fairystone (Rhoc of the Celtwyld): The playful, yet very intelligent, dragon of the oasis whom Rhoc accidentally almost killed till another dragon, Lifebreath, gave her



life to save her. Fairystone is a capable shape shifter, demonstrating the forms of a mouse, otter, and her enormous battle form of a stone dragon. She is a very young dragon, only around 120 years old.

Windfyrth: A reclusive dragon (at least towards other dragons) from the southern edge of the central continent. Contrary to most dragons of the world she openly fraternizes with humans, ruling a large and successful town for over two hundred years. She is almost four hundred years old. She has developed impressive martial art skills based on intimate understanding of the nerve and energies of the bodies of both men and dragon. She wears bamboo armor and wielding twin bamboo poles. She has developed the ability to breathe a shower of bamboo spikes at such speed they can penetrate stone.

Stormbreath. Stormbreath's breath is a powerful whirlwind of energy that can disrupt other dragon's breath and flight, though it recently proved effective at disrupting their illusions as well. He gained his greatest wish bonding with his friend and rider Norwich two

years ago, and they now ride as the 6th dragon riders, one beyond the inner circle. Stormbreath is given to riddles and puzzles, and has the curious ability to remember limericks with ease.

Ethnomancer rides with a man known as Fallen, the 17th rider, whose family Ethnomancer slew in a cruel and ultimately failed attempt to prevent his own bonding and the rising power of the dragon riders two years ago. A capable strategist, sage and mystic, he is capable of manipulating a strange and debilitating form of interdimensional matter known as ‘ethnoplasm.’ Now, they work as lone guns-for-hire among the worlds, bringing villains of both dragon and men to justice.

Other people

Mendelain – treacherous young queen of Thiaz, she tried to steal the fortress away from Pearl by torturing Pure, and failed.

Caspina – older brother to Mendelain, he betrayed his queen to protect Pure, and later married her. He is now the prince royal of Pearl, and a devoted husband and soon to be father to the queen’s first child.

Twoswords – an elite warrior of Pearl.

Legionnaire – the highest-ranking military official of Argentus, adventured with Jayd to find the matron and reinitiate the dragon rider circle of their world, thus ending the thousand years of dragon tyranny. His actual name is Bruce, and he takes no wife or children.

The dragonmen

Gorund, the Emperor – the undisputed lord and ruler of all the dragonmen, having consolidated his power over the nine houses of the dragonmen in only the last sixty years.

Firebone Dragonheart – the great empress of all dragonmen, whose political marriage to Gorund sealed his final victory and ascent to power above all the houses of dragonmen. Considered the most beautiful and powerful female alive, her hand was coveted by all.

Greyskull, younger brother to the emperor and captain of the first battleship, a starship capable of interstellar flight along the golden threads. He helped Gorund secure the unity of the dragonmen houses, and was rewarded with a high-ranking post in the military.

Gharmak, the destroyer – champion of the battle arena, his twin axe style became popular amongst dragonmen warriors. Swore to slay himself if he was ever defeated in battle.

Places

Pearl – An M class planet of the local galactic cluster. It has a thick cloud cover all year around, giving it a pearlescent view from space, though the poles do allow the stars to be seen at times. It has one large moon to mark out the months.

Celtwyld – a rich grassland of the central continent of Pearl.

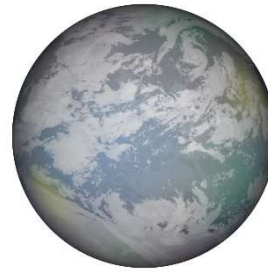
Venfyrrh – a powerful nation of the southern continent of Pearl, and the most powerful on Pearl at this time. Norwich, the 6th dragon rider and captain of the fortress, with his dragon Stormbreath, are from there.

The fortress from beyond the clouds – a massive planetary terraforming platform that uses mountains as a parking space, it is the largest man-made object in history. It has powerful military potential, and currently serves as the council site of men and dragons on Pearl.

Worlds

Pearl

Pearl is considered the first world visited and terraformed by humanity (and dragons) stretching out from Ethphraim 6000 Earth years ago. Much time and care were taken to bring life to a point at which



the atmosphere would support mammalian life, so it was ironically also one of the last worlds populated. During preparation several orbital bases were built, one of which became so large it easily outclassed every other space ship built by humanity even to date. This ‘fortress’ was used for research and to house humans while the world was preparing – many lived their whole lives there, never expecting to see the surface of the planet. Major settlement on Pearl began only a dozen years before the plague struck.

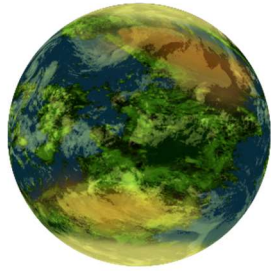
Pearl, so rich in habitable land mass and centrally positioned, was always expected to be the central and governing world of the seven. This, however, has yet to happened. Pearl holds the archetype of the staff, the organizer of community, since Rayn recovered the head from Chalcedonah and reforged the stem himself.

Matron Dragon: Farwing, aerial drake (wingless, 4 limbs).

(Amarii)



History: Amarii was a purple world from the start, rich in amethyst and with an atmospheric composition that gave it a noticeable purple hue. Fragile silicate life (as opposed to carbon-based life) existed in a delicate balance. When humanity and dragons arrived, they built massive biodomes to live in comfort while they researched ways to enhance the natural life to provide the abundance necessary for sustaining a world-wide culture. Enormous success had been achieved, and then the plague struck and obliterated every species, natural and enhanced. Many survivors preferred to perish with their world, the remaining survivors fled to Argentus. The purple world is, for now, a barren place filled with ancient, archaic curiosities and decimated ruins.



Argentus

Argentus is far away from the central seven worlds but had been visited for several thousand years by humanity beforehand. It was looked at for some time as a potential site for sincere terraforming should the seven royal houses of men ever

require another world. It was essentially unpopulated, though did see some use as a penal colony prior to the plague.

Argentus' fortunes changed when Amarii was rapidly overrun by the plague. The humans and dragons only just managed to create a portal sufficient to carry the remnant of the population to another world, minus the plague. However, Argentus was still many centuries away from being fully ready to support human life, and in spite of every attempt the humans were dying by the millions. Eventually a civil war broke out between the dragon riders and a new alliance of dragons who believed humans were inferior – and the alliance eventually won. They took to farming humans, which in the long run might have helped to assure their survival, but in the short term weakened humanity's faith in itself. Humans quickly lost the wisdom of the teachers, their ambition, and their independence. Soon they came to believe they really were the dragons' servants. At the same time the dragons, without the bond, became lost souls. Desiring unity with the humans that quailed at their feet, they settled on a hollow and meaningless tyranny over them. For thousands of years humans have been, essentially, slaves to dragons. This resulted in a breed of humanity that is tall and physically impressive, yet very emotionally sensitive and docile unless they have a rigid external structure imposed on them.

The dragons were, almost without exception, autocratic rulers of humanity. Humans were freely used in the interdragon wars like pawns. The dragons each claimed the humans in their territory, using them in pointless battles for power. Some form alliance with other dragons to gain more territory. In order to prevent dragons from using human knowledge and tools in these wars, a human priestess took away humanities ability to use the teachers and thus technology collapsed back to an Iron Age.

However, Jayd of the Celtwyld, accompanied by one of their greatest warriors whom she and now all else call “Legionnaire”, recently convinced their glacial matron to reignite the circle of the dragonriders. A brief civil war took place between dragons and dragonriders, and this time the dragonriders won. Now the world is pushing back against its warlike nature to embrace a fragile and often violent alliance between dragons, their humans, and their city states. None know if the peace will prevail, but all do not doubt but that the strongest and most impressive, warriors – skilled in the use of the sword and shield, are all of Argentus.

Argentus houses the archetype of the blade, which may help to explain their troubled and warlike nature, as such was never meant to be exercised without its brother archetypes to defend.

Matron Dragon: Empress of the North.



Thiaz

The royal houses of Thiaz, proud from before the settlement of Ethphraim, chose this world to display their glory and honor. Practical to a fault, yet also fiercely loyal and hardworking, Thiaz has always prospered.

They have the unique position on government, always choosing the first female born to the queen as her successor. The old queen slowly relinquishes her rule once her daughter turns twenty. Initial centuries of conflict between an old mother that won't let go of her real power, and the daughter who was trying to exercise hers, has been generally avoided by the royal couple choosing to not have a daughter until they are very old and ready to retire anyway. Sons never rule Thiaz. How much real power the queen wields depends on the cunning and ability of the individual queen and her ability to work the politics and people of her world.

The plague never really reached Thiaz as they were able to isolate and destroy several early forms of the bacteria. They thus have held on to their technologies, such as the ability to transmute base materials into the gold they so love for decoration and war. Thiaz protected itself during the plague, severing the threads to their world prior to when Pearl shut the whole system down. It is not known why

Thiaz hid from the other worlds thereafter, and that is a question they may to have answer for themselves.

Being bred to display as much gold as possible has unfortunately limited the otherwise immense genetic variability of the native dragons. They appear very tame compared to the other seven worlds.

Thiaz holds the archetype of the wand, crucial in genetic and sub atomic manipulation. It is the home world of Prince Caspina, husband of Pure, Queen of Pearl, and father to its single heir about to be born.

Matron/Patron dragon: A single, mysterious, individual known as ‘The Council’, this individual has never been seen by any who live, nor made itself known among men or dragons. While its existence is a matter of conjecture among humans, the dragons tend to act as though it exists without question.

Chalcedonah

Chalcedonah was the most intensely terraformed world of the seven, hundreds of years before humans began to seriously consider settling it. Life was created or engineered from extremophiles from all other worlds to create life that could survive and thrive here. It is quite young as worlds go, with violent volcanic action constantly across its surface.



When the plague hit, the humans and dragons took to building secure biome bunkers while the plague ravaged the outside world for eight hundred years. They assumed the violent landscape would eventually kill off every trace of the disease, and they were right. The time of rest allowed plant species better suited to the world a small chance to diversify and cover the planet. Humans then began to explore the world outside their cities (and were talking to Thiaz occasionally too). They were releasing animal and insect species to fill the world with a biome that could support life. A minor division occurred between the people, those in the cities who had technologies and schooling, and those outside who loved to live and farm the land.

In the end, it wasn't the plague that brought down Chalcedonahn civilization, but the natural violence of the land. Every few thousand years the planet appears to undergo a particularly rough patch, tectonically speaking, and the patch after the plague was exceptionally rough. The entire face of the world was altered. Those that remained in the cities were slain, only those that could flee survived. The teachers were destroyed and only anecdotal evidence or a few minor objects remained. Over generations the farming communities lost their history and assumed themselves the planet's natural residents.

For their part, the dragons felt terribly guilty over not successfully preserving human culture from the volcanoes, and shortly after erupted in civil violence. Without a conclave to bring new riders,

power factions and interdragon wars were common. Centuries after, ignorant humans took to hunting the ‘monsters’, embedding deep fear of humanity within the dragons’ psyche.

When Rayn arrived there two years ago, he was able to overcome the natural scientific skepticism of the people and reunite them with their dragons. Chalcedonah holds the archetype of the orb, which is used to gather and organize humanities constantly growing knowledge. This world also has impressive planetary military capability granted by the wisdom and hard work of its ancestors.

Patron Dragon: The First. A plasmic serpentine (capable of living in a star, prefers magma. No limbs or wings, but of a much larger size).

Ethphraim



Ethphraim was the first world populated by humanity, about 6 thousand years ago, when it was around 90% covered with either ice or liquid water. From here, humanity began to explore the local worlds, encountering dragons shortly after.

Ethphraim was covered by the plague approximately four thousand years ago, though it was populated for at least two thousand years before then, and was visited for tens of thousands of years before that.

When the plague swept Ethphraim only small groups of life survived. Now, only a weakened form of the plague seems to continue today, resurfacing very occasionally and not on every continent. It is easily managed now.

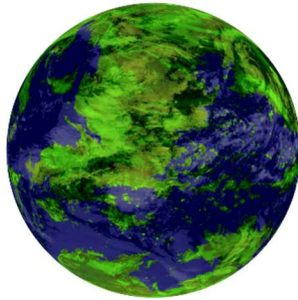
Shortly after the initial outbreak, however, humanity tried to build a large sky ship that could take them from what they felt was their dying world, ‘drowning’ with the plague, led by the famous captain No’e. While initially successful, shortly after vicious infighting ensued, during which all the teachers were destroyed on their world, resulting in a fracturing of humanity forever. Their technology rapidly collapsed back to Iron Age level. Sadly, due to a natural disaster several centuries later, the conclave of dragons was destroyed on an ancient city called Launtis, which was ruled by a great dragon scholar referred to as “The Bull”. From that time, there were no dragon riders. Over the next millennia, misunderstanding and discord between dragons and humans resulted in the dragons sequestering themselves away from human eyes, influencing and at times ruling them from the shadows and in secret. And, indeed, protecting them from the unusually high level of supernatural trouble the planet seems to attract.

Ethphraim is dominated by a small but powerful country that keeps its own people unaware of its own deviousness and treachery using economic means to placate or distract the populace. The world

itself is struggling under much pollution and dishonesty. How it manages to function at all is a puzzle to most other worlds.

Two years ago, when the dragon riders of Pearl sent Snow as an ambassador, they captured and tortured her and her dragon Windfyrth. Misunderstandings long forgiven, they work well with Pearl and the other worlds now, though they still insist on keeping the knowledge of dragons a secret from their own people. Ethphraim holds the archetype of the boots – emblem of trade and commerce.

Matron Dragon: An aquatic standardform



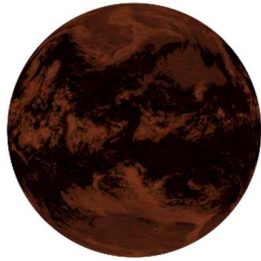
Sanmarellis

Sanmarellis was a celebrated find for humanity and dragons alike, and they took over a hundred years studying it before risking setting up anything. It is clearly the oldest world of the seven, estimated to be over a hundred million years older than Pearl. The biodiversity is enormous, with unique forms of life, mammals the size of dinosaurs, and giant squids which are over 200 meters long. This huge planet is 60% land, 40% water, and divided into four great continents bordered by mountain ridges (since they are all in contact). The air is filled with a constant fragrance that is both pleasant and relaxing to humans and dragons.

When the plague struck no effort was spared in defending Sanmarellis. The humans were all sequestered by the gigantic aquatic Matron rather than risk corrupting their paradise. The hardy dragons were left in charge but have not fared well with the isolation, and are not able to leave their world.

All this changed two years ago when Aurorellia, dragon rider of Pearl, was sent as an ambassador to their world. The plague soon followed her and wrought devastation upon the world. It was here, however, that the humans were found and together great heroes of all seven worlds joined forces to return to the research facility where the plague was first made, and defeated it forever. Sanmarellis holds the archetype of the harp, which helps explain how dragons didn't die of boredom without humans around.

Matron Dragon: Aquatic serpentine.



Tourmarelle

Tourmarelle was well established with life, for far longer than even Ethphraim, by the time it was discovered by humanity. As a world it holds the unique position in several ways. It has a day longer than its year, resulting in massive migratory patterns of local life. Its ancient, brown dwarf sun is so dim it scarcely warms the planet, the entire life cycle relying on the active heat from within the planet or the refuse of rotting vegetation. Several

fungi have roots so deep that they are able to transport heat to the surface of the planet which is, thus, reasonably warm all year round. The fungi also photosynthesize the most prevalent form of light the sun provides, ultra violet, which is so abundant humans had to develop very dark skin to live without constant sunburn.

Tourmarelle bore the plague reasonably well, defending their land and people with great efficiency. However, it was a battle they knew they'd eventually lose without drastic measures. Those measures were taken when the dragons willingly took the plague into their own bodies, permanently deforming them and preventing the bonding, but allowing humans and the world's natural immunity to eventually overwhelm the plague. Sadly, the toll on humanity and the loss of their dragon riders was very great. Those that used the teachers grew fewer and fewer, eventually becoming a rare secret that finally died out. Dragons tried to prevent the slow disaster but were at a loss of what to do without oppressing humanity's right to choose. It may have been that the humans were lost without the bond with dragons, losing their technologies while the dragons looked on bemused and regretful.

That is, until Rhoc was sent as ambassador two years ago. He managed to help them reform the dragon riders circle and reclaim the power of their teachers. Tourmarelle holds the archetype of the cloak, allowing interdimensional transport and conversation with

interdimensional beings, which they use often and well. While boasting neither advanced technology or weaponry, they are known as skilled warriors and capable survivors of almost any environ. Their strong wills and powerful spiritual capabilities make them formidable opponents.

Matron Dragon: Mother, five headed drake.

The Archetype tools of humanity

All the professions and sciences of humanity, when coupled with more complete knowledge and understanding, resolve to nine clearly defined categories. These categories are best represented, and enacted, with the nine tools. Millions of these tools and their necessary variants exist, however, above all rest the archetypes. These nine individual tools summarize and complete the works of all the various implements in their category. The archetypes are extremely powerful, perhaps infinitely so, reaching so far beyond mortal might and capacity that it is rare to find any more than one artifact operative upon any one world at a time. Those who would wield an artifact must often combine the powers of several artisans at once. Even so, the true end of their capacity has never been fully tested. This is a brief summary of the tools and their powers.

The orb

Found 6 months ago and brought up by the patron of Chalcedonah recently. This orb acts to confer and consolidate all knowledge between the orbs of men of all known worlds, and far beyond. Its reckoning is so deep it can take millennia for mortal minds to plumb the depths of its understandings.

The diadem

Hidden by the dragonmen, the diadem is the ultimate expression of the manipulation of matter. Rumored to have created worlds over the eons, it was lost to humanity when the Plague took hold 4000 years ago.

The blade

The sword of all swords, as wielded by the now legendary Legionnaire of Argentus. This blade easily sundered entire battleships alone during the war with the dragonmen, till its short-term capture. Thankfully the part-draconic nature of the dragonmen prevented them from utilizing its truest powers, and it was soon recovered. The blades more subtle powers of discerning truth and inspiring creative solutions to problems are lesser-known powers of the blades, yet find their full expression in the archetype.

The staff

Held by Rayn of the Celtwyld, the white staff has the power to communicate with every staff bearer on all worlds with an alliance of the bearer. The primary tool of community, it has a powerful range of powers for both defense and protection.

The boot

Some protest the more accurate imagery of winged boots, nevertheless the archetype lays on Ethphraim. It invokes curiosity and exploration upon any world, or individual, it touches – speeding travel and inspiring trade and commerce. It noticeably affects the interactions between various cultures.

The harp

Found abandoned on Amarii only recently, still clutched in the previous matron's desiccated claw, the harp had nonetheless lost none of its power to influence any of the worlds. The harp inspires peace and rest, but also inspiration and power. Its lesser known powers of developing unity of commitment sorely missing in the flight to Argentus by the refuges 4000 years ago, indeed, missed on all worlds it would seem. Perhaps by yielding it to the dragonmen its influence will again strengthen in the worlds, but few think the dragonmen should have it. What becomes of this archetype of power remains to be seen.

The wand

Guarded by the mysterious matron of Thiaz, the wand explores the infinite depths of the infinitesimally small. It has many powerful and curious abilities, but is primarily the tool of healers. While it lay upon another world at the time, its role in the stilling of the plague was unnoticed at the time, but has become a well-documented fact by now.

The cloak

the archetype of the cloak appears to be a form of corporatized interdimensional rift that allows the full exploration of the infinite number of near and far dimensions that surround our own – including the ones where souls enter before the birth, and the dimensions where our souls go to when we die. The cloak is wielded by the rider of the matron of Tourmarelle, and was key in protecting their world during the submission to the dragonmen as ordered by the council of the worlds at the high priest Rayn's suggestion.

The shield

Gifted to the world of Sanmarellis by Amarii just prior to the fall of humanity by the plague, the shield no doubt kept the planet safe for millennia. Protection brought boredom, and Sanmarellis did not prosper while its effects were too dominant amongst the people and dragons of that world, which is perhaps why it may have chosen to

withdraw its protections recently. The devastating results did eventually cause the final overthrow of the plague, however. The shield now stands in the great cavern in the mountain, unclaimed since wielded so successfully by the mighty Rhoc and Fairystone of the Celtwyld – may they find peace in the land of rest, as they say.

Lesser tools of humanity

The sash – usually used as a device to conceal interdimensional pockets, this tool can be folded and unfolded in multiple ways to holds far more than an individual normally could.

The obelisk – typically an orb about one arm length in diameter, it is added to a sensory unit (in the shape of an enormous obelisk) capable of enduring the enormous heat of the inside of a planet. It is then usually sent down to the planet's core, for safety, where it will record and transmit the information humans create; including telepathic, electronic, and sonic. A fabulously useful device, Ethphraim somehow managed to destroy theirs, though Thiaz helped them build a new one (at great expense, of course). One common use is to help translate foreign languages.

The rod – the rod is a form of half -staff, capable of most of the powers of the staff but less taxing and requiring less skill. It works well in most small colonies. Not to be taken for granted, some master the tool so effectively as to rival even accomplished staff wielders.

Chapter 1 - Beginning

Jayd screamed as another contraction took hold, a trembling hand pressed against uncaring stones. So fiercely now, she hardly had time to notice how they made her bleed this time. The alarms were thundering in the air, the sounds of battle coming from every direction.

The midwife screamed, 'Hurry my lady!'

Jayd did not move. She could not, and it took all her strength just to stand. She sighed as the contraction subsided. It was not supposed to be this way. There were supposed to be healers, and the women. And a cloak and a wiseman. But they were not here. If not for the midwife she was abandoned.

As if to echo her horror the ground shook, and all fell to the floor. Great cracks appeared in the ceiling.

Jayd sat there, weeping. She had waited too long, and the Divine would not forgive her. But would her son?

The midwife crawled over to her, 'Make haste, my Lady! If we make the escape vessels in time, we may yet have the honor of a proper birth. You are still only in the early stages, and this is your first birth. You have many hours to go yet.'

‘Hours?’ Jayd pled, not understanding how any woman in history could have withstood such pain. She clutched her womb, holding desperately to the fragile life that struggled inside. A life she could not believe she would be required to bring into this war-torn reality alone. Where was her dragon? Where was her husband?

How had they let this happen? Where did they go so wrong?

“There is still time-” suddenly the wall behind the midwife shattered open. She was thrown to the ground, never to rise again. Smoke filled in the dim light, and a stunted silhouette of their enemy filled the breach.

Tears flowed freely on Jayd’s face, but she did not scream. There was no point now.

They would *never* hear her scream.

Birth

6 months previously

The woman bore down her weight on her abdomen. It wasn't really necessary, it just felt natural. This birth was so much like she'd known it should be, like her own parents had enjoyed; painless, almost effortless, accompanied by the best priests and scholars of her entire world.

Her daughter was coming into the world – the crown princess of an empire.

The high wiseman hummed to himself. She did not mind. If Rayn wanted to hum to himself while he helped deliver her child, so be it. It made her smile, how reluctant he had at first been when she'd told him she expected him to be there. He had been raised among a primitive people, who thought only women should witness birth. But his young wife was pregnant too – and there were things he should know. Besides, in her heart, there was no truer friend that she trusted more. While yet so young he was the high priest of his world. He was one of her best and longest friends. He had raised her from the dead: Rayn of the Celtwyld would do as a midwife this time.

Again, her husband clutched at her hand, hurting this time. “Hey!” she shouted, and almost back hand slapped him for it. But her anger melted when she saw his face. Caspina, fallen prince of Thiaz, prince risen of Pearl. He was usually quite gentle, his façade a playful professionalism at all times. But this was not such a time. His face pale, his eyes wide. It seemed he never hid his feelings from her, or felt more with her. And right now, the man was more afraid than he had care to admit.

She smiled at him.

He looked ashamed. Taking her hand in his, he caressed it. “You’ll be all right, I know.”

“And so will your daughter,” she promised him.

The ground shook as if in agreement, and Pure felt a thrill of hope surge through her. It was her dragon, Farwing. Largest and mightiest of all dragons on her home world, and the other half of her soul. He had coiled himself around the castle where the birthing was taking place. He could see through her eyes, and would be with her every moment. With a dragon’s courage filling her, she was never afraid. Almost never.

Another voice spoke, the surgeon from Ethphraim. An observant woman, and dragon rider to a noble of their world – a mighty winged wyvern of fire.

There was probably no safer place in the galaxy right now.

“Your highness,” the surgeon asked, “you’re dilated to two finger widths. You’re doing very well.” Then she turned to the overseer of the birthing, the high priest. “Is it time to fully open her cervix?”

“Hmmm,” Rayn muttered. She knew he had studied all her world had to teach on the matter; millennia of human knowledge and understanding from worlds that no longer stood. But this was a sacred work, and one that could not simply be accomplished by mechanical means. There was work to be done. “Yes. The others are ready now. Let us begin.”

Pure smiled, and gripping her husband’s hand snuggled down into the bedding. She’d wondered her whole life what it was like to bring children into the world. It was exciting to finally be a part of it.

Another dragon watched in silence in the room, Rayn’s dragon, the redeemed prisoner Ironfang. Without comment the mighty dragon lowered his armored head, and placed it on the tip of Rayn’s staff, adding his formidable dragon power to Rayn’s unparalleled accomplishments. She was suddenly very grateful to have such good friends.

Instantly she felt overshadowed by the high priest’s spirit. Her vision blurred, and it seemed for a moment as though she’d lost all sense of her body. She was floating somewhere between worlds.

“Pure, over here,” Rayn told her. She felt her spirit move again, this time back where it had come from. She was in a room of some sort, filled with pink light. Beings made of blindingly white shadow moved around. The room was filled with such peace and love it was actually touchable. There stood one figure, the outline of a grown woman upon her, gleaming with bright yellow. Pure recognized her the instant she saw her.

It was going to be Gayl. It was the soul of her daughter. Forged outside time, this being was about to join her in the creation of a new life. Without words they held hands, their souls seeming to communicate the entirety of creation without a sound. But one thought struck her most powerfully; *Mother, I love you.*

“I love you too, my child,” Pure whispered.

“It is time,’ Rayn announced softly from nearby, but where she could not see. “Come, Pure, and bring her with you.”

Pure saw in the distance a blinding light, and within, a stark image. It was the birthing room. Other souls nearby whispered their love and encouragement to the new human. Gayl was nervous, she could tell. But she also talented, and ambitious, *wonderfully* ambitious. She was going to bless the world she would be born in to. She was going to change the world forever!

The image of the birthing room grew. Then, suddenly, it stopped. Pure looked around, and saw Gayl had paused. There was no fear, no judgement from the others near her. Just pure *acceptance*.

Pure held her future daughter's hands, and looked deep in her soul. "What is it?"

When she replied, it was never a single word; but a vast ocean of pure wisdom. Transcending time, this being of light and perfection communicated an entire lifetime of her impending trials. Every bumped knee, each broken heart. To a being who had never known mortality; forgetfulness, regret, indecision... the whole experience seemed ... infinitely daunting.

But Pure had prepared for this. "They would not send you, if you could not handle it. Yes, it is tough. It's *very* tough! But you are so much stronger. You can do this, after all, I did. And you are *my* daughter."

Gayl's spirit brightened with courage, more than Pure had ever imagined was possible. But there was still such sadness to her wisdom, such dark lining on the clouds of her perception. It held one single thought; *Oh, but mother! Whatever will I do without you? What will I do, if you are called back home, and I am left to handle it all without you?*

Pure wasn't sure how to answer that. She'd known, been told and retold, that one could never, **must** never force a soul to take on

their new life. It was an invitation, or it did not happen... and the child's body would soon die.

Pure sought deeply for the wisdom to answer her unborn child. "You can do this. We would have never chosen anyone who could not."

It did not satisfy her daughter.

"You see?" she said, pointing to the room within. "You see that man who sits by my side, and holds my hand. You know he is your father. You know he will love you as purely as he does me. He will take care of you."

The mighty soul quavered. It did not hide its thoughts. It loved the man that was her father. It saw him perfectly, flaws and infinite perfections. It knew him already, and it knew how he would love her. But even knowing all this did not seem to give this unborn child the courage to move on. Bright lights began to darken, and the child seemed to turned back.

How Pure's heart hurt! More than she could have ever imagined. But never, never could she bring herself to force that soul, in any way, to take on the challenges of a mortal life without full exercise of free will.

But she still threw her arms around her retreating form, hoping, just perhaps, that her love alone was enough. "Gayl... I want to promise you. You will not always see me. You might not always be

able to hold my hand. But I will be there for you. In life, or in death I will watch over you. You will never be alone. I will *never* leave you alone.”

Something in her promise broke through the gathering fears of the child, and shattered apart any lingering doubts. Again, she spoke, *It is so very far... but I know I can do this if I have my mother's love.*

Without another thought the child's soul rocketed towards the birthing room. Pure had to rush to catch up. As soon as she reached the blinding light, she felt again the heaviness that was her physical body. Instinctively she reached out, desperately searching for her baby girl.

All was darkness. Then she heard a cry. It was a baby's cry.

It was *her* baby's cry.

All her strength returned, and her eyes flew open to let in the natural light. There, in the arms of the surgeon, was her daughter. Her eyes were piercing blue, her skin pink and flaxen. Her tiny arms reached out for a touch she knew only she herself could provide.

Caspina was holding Pure's hands, but let them go once he saw her awake again. She cried out, and they handed her infant to her. Almost instantly Gayl's cries subsided, and she visibly relaxed.

The surgeon pulled out her selenite wand and began scanning the child. “Perfect health,” she announced.

Rayn performed the naming ritual. “Welcome, Gayl of the Celtwyld, child of Pure of the Celtwyld and Caspina, prince of Thiaz – so named after the storm that rends the heavens, and changes the face of the entire land.”

Pure was in tears. Her husband was in tears. She even saw Rayn wiping his face on his sleeve.

“Was there a problem? You were gone for so long!” Caspina said as he held them both close.

Pure watched her child as the living miracle rested in her arms. “Nothing a mother’s love could not handle,” she told him, and with her other arm, put her arm around his neck and held him close.

Men

Rhoc stood back, proud of his work. Today was the day the new princess would be born, if she wasn't already. None had asked if he would attend, for this was a battle no warrior could face. This was the task of mothers, and their wisewomen, or maybe Rayn.

But Rhoc had needed to celebrate the occasion anyway. Tradition held that someone in the village would carve a new cradle for the new mother. But Rhoc also knew this was no ordinary mother, and this would definitely be no ordinary child. She would, he hoped, one day be his queen. And as fourth dragon rider he knew he would probably spend the rest of his life protecting her. So, they may as well start off as friends!

The bear was huge – much larger than a real bear. But even though it was made of stone, it had the appearance of being something so much softer. His work with the chisel and knives had progressed a hundred times that of a normal man due to his dragon gift. And even more so once the tools had been properly blessed by Rayn so as to never blunt or dull with use. Even so, carving the granite into shape by hand had still taken the better part of two weeks. They could have fixed any mistakes he'd made, they'd learned how to by now, but

Rhoc smiled to himself. He'd never let that happen. It was perfect; mistakes and all.

Fairystone, his beloved pocket dragon, raced around the bears crossed legs. She was still in otter form, one of her most favorite, and not at all practicing the snake she had promised herself to be today. But Rhoc couldn't care less. She was always worrying, always two steps ahead and full of ideas. It amused him to hear the constant chatter of her vastly more intelligent mind, and the incessant bubble of thoughts that crashed and mingled in her spirit. It was why they were made for each other – he could think about nothing all day and still call it well spent.

She reached up and he put his arm down in the same moment, both feeling the need for each other's touch at the same instant.

It's beautiful, she admitted. I so wish I had hands to make something as noble as that bear.

You do, Rhoc told her.

I do? she questioned.

Yes, he said, and held out his own hand, with a promise to make anything she wanted.

She laughed, and placed her paw in his, looking up at him. She was very, very happy.

Rhoc smiled, and turned again to look at the bear. There was more he could do, but then again, that would change what it already

was. His mind might not agree, but in his heart, he knew; the work was done.

Fairystone skittered down his legs even as he bent down to pick up the cradle itself. He had made it last, after making sure it would fit. The rods slotted perfectly into place and he smiled. The task was done.

Fairystone glowed, puffed out fire, and jumped twice. In an instant she had assumed her true dragon form, the miniature dragon with insect like wings. She buzzed up to the cradle, and sat on the edge.

With a gentle nudge, Rhoc pushed it, and it began a slow rocking back and forth. The stone pendulum at the bottom of the cradle made sure it would swing for a very, very long time all on its own.

Fairystone rode the crib, watching far away, her thoughts her own. It worried him, for just a moment. He never felt very sure of himself when she hid her thoughts from him like this. He bent down, and watched her carefully, his face worried.

She smiled, and held his chin, *The new princess will love this*. She told him.

He sighed, and had to agree. Turning, he grabbed the broom to sweep up the clutter in the workshop one last time.

Fairystone has just informed me that the crib for the princess is prepared, Windfyrth told her.

Snow had to admit, her old dragon's highly sociable nature was finally beginning to rub off on her. "Good, just in time for the celebration." The princess had promised to bring her daughter down to the council chambers an hour after the birth, all going well. And Snow knew her dragon had prepared a large event for the occasion. There would be diplomats and dignitaries, royals from each of the seven worlds and their thousands of colonies. And almost a hundred musicians; a celebration fit for a crown princess.

But Snow knew her dragon better than that. This was a chance to test the people's allegiance to their rising queen. They all knew her father was from off world, but did that mean their allegiance to her leadership would wane, or falter when first tested? Windfyrth would watch each and every guest for the entire time. She would see who first rose to greet their new queen, what significance was held in the gifts they brought, what meaning could be taken from their words to their young regent. Windfyrth would be very busy today. Busy, and very happy.

Snow smiled. She was at a table with three serving girls, folding napkins in a kind of peacock tail. They talked among themselves, seeming unsure of what to say to the dragon rider in their midst. Snow

did not mind; it gave her more time to keep Windfyrth's double-minded plans in check. She knew it was her dragon's nature to offend any whom she wanted to know better, just to see how they might react. Try as she might, she just could not get her to stop doing that, and she smiled to herself at the thought. Would it next be the chieftain of the Westfrands, who still had not forgiven her for taring him down in council for coveting the entire western wall? Or perhaps the high priestess of the Vestran who still refused to be humble?

In any event, it was widely whispered that any queen would prosper with the wisdom of the great Wiseman Rayn to guide her, the cunning of Lady Jayd to watch over her, and the might of Rhoc, or the sheer elemental prowess of her mother to protect her. But this young queen might well be immune to harm under the wing of Windfyrth, first speaker at council, guide of men, and the queen's own voice to the seven worlds.

They needed Windfyrth. They needed her a lot.

And she knew; Windfyrth needed to be needed – responsible for an entire empire, imbued with great authority, and the center of attention. Windfyrth *loved* her job.

And Snow smiled. It brought her unmeasured joy to see her dragon happy.

A prescient moment of concern crossed her awareness. Snow looked up to see one of the maids hanging the banners along the

balconies. She had set up a ladder, and it was slowing falling sideways.

And the young girl hadn't even noticed yet.

Snow clutched her brooch, the one that kept her healing cloak around her constantly.

She hoped it would not be needed. Another boy, a young one at the table, grabbed out his wand. Snow was impressed, she did not know any were adept at the tools today, but they were all nobles so it was not really that surprising. The wand was used for subtle manipulations, individual molecules and such.

And the poor boy using it somehow managed to catch it on his pocket and it went flying out of his hands.

Snow sighed in exasperation even as the young girl began to realize the gravity of her situation. She let out a terrified scream, and Snow had to wonder why she'd even been leaning so far out in the first place – advanced technology sometimes made people overconfident of commonplace dangers.

Snow reacted, even before the scream had reached her ears. She'd been practicing with the cloak a lot. It had many powers, but one she seemed so very much better at than most – changing 'dimensions', the space between places, and the entirely different places that had all kinds of life and being humanity was still only just

beginning to rediscover. Even the kind of place where children would wait before they were born.

She went to the place where time moved slower, a gift the boots made use of in order to move, it would appear, faster than even light could. She used her familiarity with the rules in this place, and walking calmly over, floated up, and took hold of the little girl long before she would hit the ground. She came back slowly, giving them time to float down to the ground. Then time snapped back into normal.

Snow held the child out at arm's length and was just about to scald the young miss, much like Windfyrth expected her to. But one look in those wide, terrified eyes convinced her that this little girl didn't need chastisement to learn from her mistake.

So instead, Snow held out her arms to the trembling child, and she threw herself into her embrace. Then the tears started, and most of the other people in the room ran to comfort the child. She must have been someone important, but Snow did not notice that. People were calling the child's name, and thanking Snow with tear filled eyes, but their voices seemed to drift away.

She looked down as the child still clung to her with primal fear.

"Thank you!" the child wailed.

Something inside that intense need seemed to touch Snow. Nothing in life seemed real to her most days; she ignored people, and spoke only to animals who lived a life almost nobody could share with

her. Her greatest accomplishment was bonding with a dragon who everybody knew and loved, or feared. She could neither fight, nor talk, nor council anyone with wisdom.

But in that sudden, surprise moment, Snow found something. She found she was needed, and not just needed to stand their either. Someone, really ... *needed her*.

Having a dragon was the best thing in the world, Snow knew. But she'd never really been personally, individually, important to someone for who she was, and what she could do. She might have just saved someone's life, and that really mattered to them. To that little girl it was clear, she really cared that Snow existed that day.

She wasn't sure what the feelings meant, but she held on to the weeping child for as long as the little child needed.

Someone else arrived, and began kissing Snow's face and hair – a mother perhaps? From her pale face and trembling hands Snow assumed she had witnessed the entire scene from nearby – utterly helpless to do anything to save her own daughter.

The child turned, and gripped her mother more fiercely than Snow could have imagined possible.

She felt unaccustomed tears in her eyes, and they did not stop for her laughter for *then* the chastisement started. Never was the potential of a mother's love more profound and real to her than in that moment.

This is something truly special, Snow thought.

Rayn wept. To see into such a place – the place where they took the children to be born! It was beauty beyond imagination, and love beyond words. Had he his wish he might have never left. It took all his strength to move away from this place to which he no longer belonged, and he didn't envy any who visited there regularly to bring children into the world. It was a task beyond his strength, at least, too taxing to be taken often.

Oh, there are sure to be priests and priestesses who would, and who could do so willingly and gladly. Ironfang assured him, and Rayn knew it would be true.

But he was so afraid he might get lost there.

He breathed in deeply, allowing his spirit to feel the dirt of this world, rubbing his bare feet and hands in the soil. It was the best way to acclimatize to the return. His mind had always been full these past two years since they had freed the Princess, and sometimes there seemed too many thoughts for one man to handle.

They had moved out to the gardens surrounding the inner fortress. Ironfang took three paces and threw himself on the ground as well. He did not need to ask to know that the mighty dragon had been

with him the whole time, and that he felt the same longing for peace. The longing for a place so much unlike the world they knew.

This world that was so often unkind, but in truth, more often indifferent. This world that could be so abundant if one was careful to follow the course of nature and correctly read the signs the Divine left for men to follow.

But the spirit did not leave him. How much his soul cried out to be in a place where there was no pain!

Almost unwillingly he felt their spirits leave them again, and as he might with the orb, he began to see the world from the eyes of his soul. It was pearlescent white, with rich memories of every other color and hew wafting in and out of presence within it. It was so very beautiful to behold.

Suddenly thunder startled him out of his reverie – the sure warning that the Divine wanted his attention. Ironfang’s spirit spoke his own thoughts, *‘Perfection’ is not made complete in flawlessness, but that the flawless should watch over and care for that which is not yet complete. The mercy of the Divine, in that it seeks out to council that which is broken and lost.*

And the sure way it requires its servants to assist in these projects. Rayn almost joked, but knew there was a job for him to do.

Rayn turned, and welcomed a beckoning vision. It was the bronze thorn again, seen far closer this time. Too close. It was large,

as large as a continent. Without pause or mercy it flew close to the soul of this world. Rayn begged it to change its course.

But it did not. Within moments it impaled itself on the soul of Pearl, wounding her deeply, perhaps to the core. The sky turned dark, and sinister shadowforms sprang up to persecute his people. Rayn prayed for deliverance, for understanding.

Yet the sky grew darker, impossibly dark.

Then the divine spoke, *The salvation against this curse lies in the full submission to the Divine.*

Rayn was used to such revelations, given only so that they would make sense in the perfect moment they were needed. He did not struggle to understand, only remembered to be grateful. Then he felt their souls return to their mortal forms once more. To his grateful surprise there was no lingering need to be somewhere else now; no weariness, no pain. No longing. He was glad to be back, knowing he was somewhere now that they could do a lot of good, and help a lot of people.

But one person in particular seemed to linger on his mind most powerfully. One he longed to see, and share the mysteries and wonders of an amazing day. One whom he was proud to call his bride: Jayd of the Dragonriders.

Dragons

There is, Jayd proclaimed, no place under Divinity quite as beautiful as Pearl.

I think I must agree with you, her dragon laughed. He was Darkwing, Lord of the night and champion of the Plaguewars. Together, they had battled the curse to form the first dragon circle of Pearl. Together they had tamed the tyrants of Argentus, and together they had lived to witness the final defeat of the plague. Together, long before all these victories, they had become the second rider and dragon of Pearl after four thousand years of separation between humans and dragons.

Now, together they rode in the cloudkissed skies of the most beautiful planet of all eight she cared about, and the hundreds of thousands more in their little corner of the galaxy that she didn't. Their home world: Pearl. Its permanent covering of clouds made it take on the appearance of its namesake when viewed from among the stars. Pearl, whom of the all the worlds humanity had prospered on, alone had managed to reunite them all in a glorious alliance to seal the fate of the plague. Pearl, who gave them breath and life each day, and never failed in her beauty and destiny.

Her home.

As was her way when most happy, Jayd threw herself from her dragon's saddle – from so high up the ground could not be seen. Her dragon didn't mind, he was used to it, and the powerful bonding between dragons and riders meant he knew exactly what she was planning to do in the same moment she did. She activated her left bracelet, and it formed into the bronze wings and a tail so that she could catch the air and fly with her dragon. With a second thought she activated her right arm band, the one that Pure had given her, and that would seal in the air around a person and a dragon so that they could breathe in the emptiness of space. But Jayd could also use this bracelet to control the air so that it would carry her wherever her imagination decided.

She looped around her dragon's massive head, and watching her with shared glee he breathed out a massive burst of his impressive black fire. She parted it with the wind, so that the weakening confusion didn't overtake her, and screamed in delight.

This is why we live! she cried in elation.

He smiled inside, but did not reply. He did not need to, for she knew his thoughts. Well over nine hundred years old, Darkwing was the more sensible of their partnership, given to deep thoughts and perceptive reveries. He needed her to be playful, and extroverted. It was a joy he had not known till they had joined, and a joy he did not wish to douse when it burst from her.

But she knew what he was thinking, and his feelings impressed upon her heart as though they were her own. There had been a strange, unnamed distance growing between them. At first, she had thought it was the pregnancy, but now she began to suspect it was something else – the change of nobility was beginning within him. But she respected his need for silence on the matter, even as she respected his insistence that she have her infant tested almost daily for health or spiritual complications. On impulse she folded the wings to land squarely on his strong back.

You think it's time, don't you? she told him.

He nodded.

She sighed. *Oh, you're such a bore! Very well then, take me to him. Take me to the village wiseman, to my husband. Let him peer within my womb once more to greet his unborn son. He's been busy enough bringing children into the world this morning.*

Darkwing found this amusing. *You hide in the clouds, hoping your pregnancy does not stall you.*

It was her turn to smile. The first three months were turmoil. In spite of all the blessings of wisemen or the midwife, Jayd's body had seemed determined to whether this pregnancy in the most difficult way possible. Often, she was nauseous, and never could she ride her dragon for the sudden change in height or speed made her feel immediately ill. The doctors with the wand assured her everything that

could be done, was being done. Still, she missed the clouds. So now that she was about half way through, she was indeed making the most of the clouds. Once the infant became large enough, she knew it would take the better part of her strength just to carry him around within her. That would be the time a warrioress removed her armor, and took on a new battle.

In truth, Jayd was grateful. With all the enormous social and intellectual changes of late, she was undoubtedly feeling much better than a woman of her tribe would have been only two years ago. In only that time, she and Rayn had found a strange vessel, and within it the only remaining heiress to the throne of Pearl. They had rescued her, and in so doing had reawakened the curse. This curse; a disease that had ravaged Pearl for the last four thousand years, and it was driven by a man who had once called the princess his sister.

It had taken all their strength to form the first dragon circle and, thus, defeat the plague. In so doing the Princess, Pure, had reawaken the Oracles, which were teachers in the shape of stone men, who held all the knowledge of humanity in their stone eyes. Any looking within could learn vast secrets. Secrets of wisdom that had changed everything they knew about the world and about what they believed, including the secrets of how to ride with a dragon among the stars.

Jayd looked up, longing for just a moment to ride among those stars. She knew that with her dragon's help they could flee within a

few scant breaths and be on another world. Then they could really avoid responsibility! Maybe Tourmarelle, with its mud huts and black skinned men? Too boring. So perhaps Thiaz, with its gold towers and abundant treachery? No, far too much trouble. Ethphraim was nice, very blue, but full of secrets: the humans there still didn't know dragons lived among them. Perhaps Chalcedonah, full of enthusiastic scholars and dangerous volcanoes? Too hot. Then there was Argentus, which she considered a second home, with its noble warriors – too much responsibility. Or perhaps the ever-green world of Sanmarellis; a world that had almost proven the entire undoing of them all almost two years ago. The worlds were still cautious of each other, their alliances fragile. But every hour dragons and boats would ride between the worlds now, taking travelers and trade.

The glory of the empire of both men and dragons was returning.

And, Darkwing reminded her, it is in large part because of you.

Jayd smiled. *Not only me.*

She thought of her husband. Oh, it had taken him a disappointingly long time to get around to asking her for marriage. There was little to be afraid of; she let him know at every opportunity that she approved of this choice. And surely, he did not fear her father, for since the adoption he was her own.

But Rayn often had his own priorities.

How he had grown in the two years since the war! Eighteen summers old now, and the beard had almost matured upon him. He busied himself with his duties as High Wiseman of the fortress of the princess of Pearl, and the undisputed highest authority on the divine on the entire world.

And her first ever love.

How she enjoyed making him blush! There had never been a day of her life that she did not expect him to marry her. Even when as a young child they'd told her it wasn't possible, she'd assumed they were joking. And in truth, no one else would forgive his forgetfulness and hard-headedness. Or else that other woman would perhaps become so passive as to never let him know his folly, and what little use is a wife who does that?

She saw him and his attendant as they descended, waiting outside the high chambers of the fortress that they shared since the plague had devastated their homeland. He waited as though he already knew she was coming, standing by the side of his resting dragon. She was not surprised. He was as powerfully connected to the divine as any man she'd known, as any man should be. Religion was a man's duty, blessing marriages and weapons. Women dealt in healing and childbirth. Of course, much of that was changing in the wisdom of the ancient order, but she preferred the comfort of traditional ways at important times like these.

And she knew he did too.

She leapt from Darkwing's saddle, and folding her arms by her side shot toward the ground at an ever-increasing pace. The bracelet sped her on. His dragon fretted with concern, and it made her laugh. At the very last instant she folded out her wings and pulled out of her death dive, the flurry of air messing up Rayn and his attendant's hair nicely. Ironfang scowled and might have said something in his heart to Darkwing, who simply ignored the massive red bully.

Yet her heart skipped a beat as she heard Rayn call her name. She hoped he would never have cause again to speak it in anger.

He ran to her and she just looked up at him, running her fingers through his new, sparse beard. The assistant wisemen, older than they both, politely looked away.

Rayn spoke. "My heart fails me every time you take so high as to disappear among the clouds," he told her.

Jayd scowled. He was probably trying to be romantic, but it came off foolish. "Seriously, Rayn. Did you just say that? What, do you really expect Darkwing will let me fall?"

"Oh, no! Not at all, that's not what I mean."

Dear Rayn, never really thinking what he was saying through properly. She laughed away his awkwardness, and held his face.

"How was the birth of the crown princess?" she asked.

He smiled, not really sharing his thoughts. She could tell he looked weary, but he himself did not yet know. It had taxed him. “A miracle beyond wonder,” he confessed.

“Come darling. I suppose you will want to check up on our son.”

He smiled, and taking the staff from his assistant began the communication with little ceremony. Jayd found that just a touch disappointing, but also impressive. A lesser wiseman might have begged an hour to prepare.

He rested his hand on her stomach, pressing his manly form deliberately against her. She snuggled in, hoping the assistant wisemen might give them some privacy soon.

Rayn looked in the staff, and not at her.

“He is well,” he said, “and is aware of your flying. He does not like the falling much, but enjoys your happiness.” Then he sighed. “That is all, for now.”

All?

“For now.”

She knew it was not all. He was hiding something.

She glared at him.

As though he was her dragon, Rayn seemed to read her thoughts. “I see there is no hiding this from you! Yes, the baby is well, but the staff has recorded much information I promised to send on to

the surgeon of Ethphraim for study, as well as the council of healers here on Pearl. They are keen to see this young one is well.”

“So many watch our young man.” Jayd admitted, the frightening premonition of the Onshroom two years ago fleeting past her thoughts, and just as swiftly pushed away.

“They do,” Rayn agreed, “the son of the first Wiseman and the Second dragon rider? There is no doubt great destiny in this young one.”

Jayd held her abdomen, feeling she must be glowing with pride. “Yes, but who would have guessed, when they first held you, that you too were destined to be the greatest Wiseman on all Pearl?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Rayn denied her flattery. “But if you must know, it was the village wiseman who saw it. He had me marked for the position long before he knew he’d have to give me the staff far too early. He told our father he saw me as a spring mist that grew to water the entire world. We wondered what that meant, assuming I might perhaps tell some story that touched many hearts. Yet it all became so much more! I had so many questions ... I am sorry my wiseman passed so soon.”

Jayd fell silent, past tragedies reoccurring in her mind. Yet it was also these past pains that had thrown them into the destiny they enjoyed today.

She held his hands.

He looked down at her, deep brown eyes that she had always loved.

They smiled, and she touched her nose to his.

Now she *knew* the wisemen would be getting uncomfortable.

Suddenly Darkwing interrupted, *Your husband is still not telling you everything.*

What?

Ironfang growled his displeasure, clearly not as deeply resting as might have been hoped.

But Darkwing showed her anyway, the subtle twitch in Rayn's mouth when he spoke that she hadn't even noticed. The way his eyes weren't as wide open as they used to be.

"What!" she demanded.

Rayn's smile died, and he looked around confused.

"What aren't you telling me about our son, Rayn!"

He looked confused, and then saw Darkwing smile. With an indignant cry he shook his fist at her dragon. She knew he meant well.

"I must be more wary than I thought - so many visions in the past hour alone! I should have known I could hide nothing from my wife's dragon!" he complained.

Darkwing laughed.

Rayn smiled down at her, and held her hands.

"It's just..." he struggled for words.

Something suddenly shifted in the air, and an unexpected breeze crossed the balcony. A strange scent arrived on that breeze, like the ironsmith's forge.

She tried to ignore it.

"What is it?" she asked.

He wasn't smiling any more. He was looking up.

The day clouds thundered.

"Something unexpected," Rayn said.

Suddenly bold streaks of bronze lightning crashed across the sky.

Rayn sounded the alarm.

In an instant they both were seated on their dragons, who with a few leaps took to the rapidly darkening sky, the hope of a revealing conversation immediately forgotten with this unexpected thing.

The bronze lightning crackled with increasing frequency, starting to form a shape like the pointed end of a spear in the air.

Jayd felt nervous. This was a new, and ... unexpected thing, even in a world full of miracles.

They took to the sky, two score dragons and their riders soon forming up behind them. Down below, people shrieked and grabbed weapons, or cowered under stones. This was not the strangest thing they had ever seen in their floating fortress, but it was frightening.

The lightning continued until it could cease no more, and it held together. Within a dark cloud gathered.

All waited.

Suddenly a huge vessel, like a boat with no sails, similar to those of Chalcedonah, floated though the portal in the sky. It was narrow at the front, widening within the unseen depths of the clouds. It careened towards them, and they had to take evasive action to avoid being struck. Darkwing breathed out his fire, but it was only a warning blast, none struck the vessel.

It was the size of a very large town, with clear battlements along its entire length where weapons could no doubt be placed, or were already hidden. It was made of burnished bronze, thick and sturdy. It felt, to Rayn, like the long-awaited answer to an unspoken prayer.

And it sat there, high in the air. Well and truly above the fortress of Pearl and all its dragons.

The strange visitors

Jayd watched as, for a good hour, it just stood there hovering in the air.

I conclude, Rayn finally said, that they wish first to talk.

First? Watch yourself, husband.

By now the vessel was surrounded by hundreds of dragonriders, above and below. Jayd watched as the dragons breathed out threatening flames around it. None were pleased it rode so high in the sky.

“What do you see?” she asked him, referring to his wiseman’s staff.

“Precious little,” he admitted, “they are sequestered, somehow. There is much metal inside, I can tell. And rooms both small and great. But their purpose, and the number and nature of the creatures inside, it is impossible to tell.”

Jayd sighed.

At long last, a blinding thunder split the sky.

About time, Darkwing grumbled.

A minute later, through a portal of lightning that led to the other side of the world, the Patron dragon of Pearl, the mighty Farwing arrived. With him, the thousand dragon escort from the ambassadors

to the Northern, and another thousand of their finest warriors. And on his head, not even clinging to his mane for her mastery of matter, was the Iridescent Pure – Queen of Pearl.

Jayd had to smile; she'd only given birth an hour or so ago.

The fire that lit the air from the assembled dragons heralding her arrival turned the sky white. Farwing and the Queen took up a slow circling of the bronze starboat, the assembled army of Pearl between them.

Hmm, Large. Farwing muttered.

Rayn studied the bronze thorn in the sky.

What in Divinities name is that? Pure asked. *Has it done anything? Is it any threat?*

A mother not two hours and this arrives to concern her? Ironfang thought his pity to her.

Rayn agreed, but tried to stall her questions with his own thoughts, broadcast through the wisdom of the dragonrider's helm to any he intended. In this case Norwich the captain of the royal armies, the Queen of Pearl, and their dragons. *We have heard and seen nothing more than this as yet. They do not seem to be a threat. I feel we can greet them.*

You trust them? Pure asked.

He paused before answering, as if gathering his thoughts, or refusing to share his doubts. *I would rather offer them my trust first, if help is better for peace,* he replied.

Go, she ordered.

Ironfang responded immediately, and Darkwing followed with Jayd not a breath later. They flew down towards the skyboat. Several other dragons and their riders drew closer, but none joined them. It was not the Queen's will, and besides, it might be taken as a threat if more than two dragons arrived. Three would have been allowed. More would be just insulting.

They glided above the massive bronze vessel. There were portals, like windows, but they were covered in bronze and Rayn had to wonder if they were similar to one-way mirrors. Then he wondered if more than sight could travel through that metal mirror, like ammunition of some sort. For just a brief instant then, his head hurt, but it was gone in a moment and it left no explanation.

They carried on. It took a good minute, and they placed themselves on what appeared to be a landing platform. Huge pillars of bronze flanked a massive arched opening, filled with metal that had the appearance of tarnished silver.

Tenderly, from the air, Ironfang touched the skyship's metal hull. Satisfied that it was strong enough to bare his weight and safe enough, he set down.

For a moment they waited.

Nothing happened.

The others soon joined him; General Norwich and his mighty dragon Stormbreath, and Jayd, second dragon rider of Pearl.

Jayd was about to say something to encourage Rayn, but fell silent with one look at his face. There was a change in him. She saw the man within, and knew he needed no encouragement.

And yet, his gaze lingered on her a moment longer.

Slipping down to the hull he nodded over, saying nothing.

She sensed real danger here. As, she knew, so did he.

He nodded to Norwich, indicating he should remain.

Rayn walked up, three score paces away from Darkwing. She felt her heart reach out to him, away from the strength of her embrace, or touch of her swords.

But they did this, all this, for Pearl.

He stood at the very edge of the platform in front of the door, but said nothing. Dragons shifted in readiness.

He raised the white staff, and bringing it down on the metal hull with solid force, knocked three times.

Rayn knocked three times.

The appearance of the massive starboat had not startled him, as the others. He had seen it many, many times in the past few days, in visions and in dreams.

He knew what it meant.

War... or abundance.

In almost every vision a single coin spun. Many times, it would land on one side, the sheaves of wheat. This indicated trade, and prosperity.

Other times, it landed at the knife. This was not a welcome thing.

As the law required, he had shared his visions with the Queen, all except the most recent. Telling her and all her wisemen. None had anything to add. But he had said almost nothing to his wife, because deep inside, he hoped this decision was very, very far way – especially not today.

He knew in his heart he had nothing to fear from this enormous vessel, floating unaided in the skies like the airfish of Sanmarellis.

The might of the dragon riders here alone could tare the bronze to scrap in less than an hour. But he did fear what it might herald, and what great power awaited behind the message of the bronze thorn high in the skies of Pearl.

He turned without thinking to face the silver wall just as an individual emerged from it, leaving ripples in its wake. It was a man, or in the form of a man. He wore a cloak so long and dark as to cover his hands and feet, a dark cowl covered his face. What little discomfort existed in Rayn's heart for one so secretly dressed was allayed somewhat in that the creature bore a staff. And not just any staff, it was clearly the staff of a wiseman. It puzzled him, however, as the light was not bright, but shone instead as a feint hew of deep blue and gleaming gold shining in facets from its dimly lit crystal.

He heard Darkwing and Stormbreath shifting their battle readiness, unable to curb the natural inclination of dragons to be wary of the unknown.

He waited.

It did not take long for the lone individual to cross the bronze platform among the pillars to stand face to face with Rayn. He spoke, his voice gravelly and course, "Thank you for not attacking us," the man said, his voice sounded genuinely relieved.

Rayn smiled, and nodded, “We greet you as friends, as future allies and kin. I assure you the pure in heart have nothing to fear from the elite of Pearl.”

“Pearl,” the man said, rolling the word around on his mouth as he spoke it perhaps for the first time.

Rayn listened to his voice. It was strangely animalistic, course, like a dragon’s. That was odd for a man. But within that voice Rayn felt he also heard sincerity, devotion, and a measure of humility. Either he was a man who could be trusted, or the most deceptive being he’d ever met.

The man spoke again from within his hood. “I am Arj, priest in eminence in the presence of the exalted emperor. He has requested I investigate the cause of the golden threads opening up once more, and wonders if those who are counted both human and dragon have survived. I am pleased to see our prayers were answered.”

Rayn smiled, “Indeed, and answered in abundance! This is but one of the seven worlds, and countless other settlements, that newly flourish since the defeat of the plague.”

The man growled, “You know of the plague then?”

“Yes, only recently it was defeated, brought low and subjected back into its natural balance with nature. We need never fear it again.”

The man was silent, seeming lost in his thoughts as his staff scintillated mysteriously. Finally, he spoke, “Well, that does explain

some things... this is good. Very good. We, too, fled the plague eons ago. It is good to know it will not trouble us again.”

“Indeed, it is good,” Rayn said, still curious about this man that would not remove his darkened hood.

“Well!” the man spoke with fervor, “perhaps, then, since we need no longer fear our common enemy that you have vanquished, and since the entire seven worlds still stand with both men and dragons, you would like to accompany me back to my vessel? There I can share with you some of our history and, perhaps, you may share with us some of yours? We lost contact with the others over four thousand years ago, as would be measured on your world.”

Rayn pondered for a moment, feeling there was no threat in accepting this man’s invitation. However, there was one thing he truly felt he should know before he trusted this man. “I will, gladly, and ask that my dragon accompany me. We would know if your people can be trusted, for we have learnt that not all the hearts of men are worthy of trust.”

The man clearly hesitated. “I am... unwilling to show you my face. Being in isolation has... changed us much. We fear you would not understand, at least, not till we got to know each other better.”

Rayn hesitated. He felt wary of one that felt his face should be covered, whose eyes he could not see. “Has the plague cursed you so?”

The man laughed, “Not... directly. Please, I sense you are wise, but many of these others, so armed... I fear our visage so monstrous they would attack without thought.”

Rayn pondered this, but a curiosity drove him, a desire to be open and honest in face, as in trade. All his thoughts had been shared with the others, but now he sent a direct command to the assembled dragons and their riders: *Lock arms.*

Soldiers threw a strap over their swords, or activated the lodestone that made it impossible for the weapon to be drawn without care. This was to make sure all would have to think first, before their warrior instincts could take over. The dragons lowered their heads, and closed their mouths.

“Behold,” Rayn told him, pleased the soldiers had so quickly obeyed. “We have no wish to harm you. You may trust us.”

“Trust?” the man said, thinking out loud, “is not so easily earned. Very well then, Rayn the wiseman. Perhaps it is better now than later. Let us get this over with.”

With a thrust of his staff the wiseman caused a stiff breeze to blow away his cloak, throwing it to the ground at his feet. Before them all stood a strange and unexpected being. He was far taller than he'd first indicated with his stooped stature. His skin was covered with reptilian scales, his head bald, his face elongated into a discolored snout. On his back two pitiful, no doubt un-functioning, bat like wings

hung. Yet he stood upright on two legs, his neck was short as a man's, and his eyes so very human. He was half man, half dragon.

A dragonman.

Rayn did not hide the concern that spread across his face. He had no idea how such a creature, such an abomination, could possibly have been spawned. Around him the soldiers thundered in riot, held in check by the stiff threatening of their leaders. The dragons and men were confused, and that made them dangerous. Fire broke out in the sky.

Rayn knew something had to be done.

He looked into the eyes of the dragonman, a man brave enough alone to face what he knew would be the automatic distrust of his monstrous personage in the presence of true dragons, and unaltered men.

Rayn immediately knew how this man's people had survived the plague. Unlike Tourmarelle where the dragons had taken the plague into their bodies to protect the men, here the dragons must have... it did not bear thinking about. How had it been accomplished, the joining of two beings into one? But then again, the past was full of desperate tales. They had found a way to survive the plague, and that always required a miracle.

This one man, this *dragonman*: He alone had the courage to step in front of the entire elite of Pearl and risk it all, come what may, on behalf of his people. Rayn marveled at his faith and devotion.

So, before any could act with fear and hatred to destroy something they did not understand, Rayn stood forward, standing within arm's reach of the being.

The dragonman Arj did not move, but looked at him with pleading in his eyes. "It wasn't easy," Arj explained. "They were dying ... all of the humans. We did... my ancestors did the only thing they could do to save both our lives."

"I know," Rayn replied, and then in an act that took great faith of his own, he reached out, and placed his hand on the dragonman's shoulder in an act of kindness and acceptance.

The dragons grew silent. A moment later the air seemed to shift, and before Rayn could turn around he realized what was happening; Farwing, the mighty patron of Pearl, was coming down for a closer look. He never approached more than fifty paces, but he gazed deeply into the trembling dragon man's eyes.

Interesting, was all the patron would say, a wry grin on his face. Then he flew away.

Arj visibly relaxed, and sighed as though trying to catch his breath. "Thank you, thank you wiseman!" he said, and held his arm, then placed his own clawed hand on Rayn's shoulder.

“Come,” Rayn offered, “I will gladly meet your people.”

Arj stood back, and bending on one knee bowed his head, “Let our people gladly serve the might and power of the great Pearl. We are glad you greet us in peace.”

Rayn smiled, and helped him up.

At Farwing’s command the people cheered and Rayn and Ironfang went in through the rippling silverwater to meet the dragonmen.

They cheered, but Rayn had heard them cheer before with so much more enthusiasm.



In

I don't trust them! Jayd yelled through the helm. *Where have they taken my husband and his dragon!*

Peace, little one, Farwing told them.

Look at them, they are monsters! How can they be both men and dragons?

Farwing did not answer her. *I can see them now; their people are no longer hidden from my view. Inside their vessel there are many, a great army. They have claws, keen senses, and many have the gifts of dragons. Yet their hearts are as the hearts of men, bold and unafraid, not needing any bonding.*

And they wield the tools of men, Darkwing said in grim realization. *They are always armed, and can match men for wisdom and dragon in power if not in strength.*

Indeed, Farwing replied, *It will be interesting to see how this plays out. Norwich, approach me in person. I have an interesting request to make of you and many others.*

Yes, my liege. He replied.

But what about my husband, will he be all right? Jayd asked.

Oh, he'll be just fine, I am sure of it, Farwing told her.

My infant is not three hours old and already she is out of my arms, Pure complained, then sighed. *What are we going to do about the reception?*

I say we invite the dragonmen as well, Farwing laughed.

Rayn looked about in displeasure; the vessel was not built to accommodate dragons.

But the great hall where they stood, behind the door of silverwater, was built to accommodate starboats.

Hundreds of starboats, perhaps even hundreds of hundreds.

Rayn stood silent at the hall before him. Scores of corridors ran away in an orderly fashion, and they were each lined with hundreds of starboats. And each starboat had dozens of rods and scythes that, Rayn knew, would be weapons. They waited in this hall like wasps in their nest a wasps nest, as though they could swarm out at any moment.

But that which stole the focus of his attention was the army. Ten hundred dragonmen warriors, all armed and armored, lined up in flawless rows as the best military of any world. They may have been the elite, or simply the standard warriors, it was hard for Rayn to tell. They each held a long spear, and on the other arm as it were a spiked

buckler. They did not turn to face him, but looked ahead as warriors on parade. Their helmets gleamed in the pale bronze light, and their energy field an unbroken intensity of sheer power.

Rayn did not pause as he walked beside their wise... dragonman. He was shorter than them all.

But the resolve of the assembled army wavered as the silverwater parted to reveal the form of the mighty Ironfang. Dragons were big, and Ironfang was large even among dragons. Hundreds of eyes flickered to gaze at him, and their breathing quickened. They were in rapt awe, but still refused to move. Rayn was impressed at their military focus; the way they were acting you'd think they had just seen a god.

Ironfang growled, and the floor shook.

Are you enjoying the attention? Rayn said to him.

Ironfang did not reply.

Rayn turned.

He saw it in a glance. Ironfang was horrified, but refused to show it. There was something intensely unsettling about the warriors before him.

"Is... something wrong," the dragon wiseman asked him.

Ironfang replied, "It seems ... the corridors are too narrow for one such as myself to pass."

"Yes, we were concerned about that."

Ironfang glared at him, as though the priest has personally offended his ancestors.

“If you wish,” Arj stated as though he couldn’t really tell Ironfang was under such distress. Rayn was not bothered – this people were a curiosity. Even among such monstrosity goodness could be found, it always has been. “You may remain here?”

“Dismiss your forces,” Ironfang ordered.

The dragon priest held up his hands in apology, “We did not mean to offend!” he begged, “but hoped to impress you! Please do not feel threatened!”

Rayn felt sorry for the old priest. To suggest Ironfang felt threatened would be to suggest he was afraid, and that was never something one should do to a dragon.

There was a terrifying screeching noise as Ironfang dug his claws into the bronze floor, and it began to shred at his touch. At this the decorum of their elite warriors shuddered and the nearest few took an involuntary step back. “It’s not that,” he said, straining somewhat to be polite. “You just haven’t left me enough room to even sit down.”

Arj’s staff glittered with colors, and all the nearby dragonmen stood to attention. One row at a time, in perfect order, they began to leave.

“Please, it is not polite of us to bring but one. Have you not a companion who may join you?” Arj asked.

Rayn wondered why he wasn't counting Ironfang, but was happy to bring along another friend. Without pausing to think he knew who he wanted, "Then I choose Rhoc, one of my oldest friends, and perhaps the greatest warrior among our people."

"Of course!" Raj said, and Rayn sent the message. "Is he... oh my."

An instant later they heard the mighty thud and felt the metal shudder. Rhoc, who had driven up on a chariot, had leapt down from the sky and landed on the platform outside of the ship with as much speed as the air would allow him. The soldiers tensed, and Ironfang chuckled.

When Rhoc walked in the effect was somewhat as what Ironfang had achieved. He was wearing the greater dragon rider's armor; horned and threatening. The ground labored at his weight, and the soldiers struggled to not look at him. One almost bowed.

Keep the helm on, Rayn asked Rhoc, at Ironfang's suggestion.

Rhoc was glancing this way and that, but the helmet barely moved. The glowing light in his chestplate that was his little dragon Fairystone, danced about as she pressed her face up against the glass to gaze out with wonder and amazement, but none of the dragonmen would see that.

Rayn turned to talk to Arj, who was trembling visibly at Rhoc's approach.

“I... he... the stories...Your friend there is in the likeness and image of our god of death, I’m afraid.”

The great warrior stood beside Rayn and folded his arms commandingly.

Arj gulped. “If you will kindly come with me, sirs, I would like to take you to meet the captain of our vessel. He has an invitation for you all.”

“As do we,” Rayn grinned. They were making a pretty good impression on the dragonmen, for a start.

Ironfang rose up. “Be aware, dragonman, that if my rider should come to any harm, if he should at any point be lost from my heart’s sight, I will tare this entire vessel to splinters looking for him.”

Rhoc nodded.

Arj looked speechless.

“Come, gentlemen!” Rayn protested, “Let us give this people the benefit of our kindness.”

Arj nodded, but visibly shrunk. His nearby soldiers still did not move, and Ironfang sat back down with a thundering growl. *Keep your helm vision recorder on at all times*, he told Rhoc, always watching for the tactical advantage.

Rayn sighed. *Hopefully* a good impression.

The wiseman Arj took them through the bronze vessel. It looked busy, but none were so busy that they did not take time to stand at attention and salute the high priest of the dragonmen, and his two guests, as they approached. Rhoc had to duck beneath most doors, scratching several of them. They were shown some kind of armory, and the place where they made and repaired the skyboats. They went through some barracks, and saw one of their massive cannons that they hid inside their vessel. It was an impressive sight, built for attack. But by the wisdom of his staff Rayn was able to tell the metals were not immune to dragon claws or teeth.

They entered a command center of some sort, a voice growling the order, “At attention! High priest on deck!”

All motion ceased, and the dragonmen stood erect – all except the one who would be the captain, who took his time to stand. The room within was large, with curved balustrades in the shape of great swords – it did not seem very practical, but looked very intimidating.

The captain began to speak, “Welcome, humans and dragon allies, to-” yet his voice failed him as Rhoc entered and stood to his full height. Fairystone tried to beam out a cheery yellow, but the effect seemed lost on the dragonman captain. “My... you are big.”

Rhoc said nothing, but crossed his arms. It seemed to Rayn that Rhoc was enjoying this immensely.

The captain cleared his throat, and continued, “Ah, well, welcomed, ambassadors of the human and dragon empire.”

Rayn felt Ironfang scoff at this; they were much more of an alliance of eight worlds than an empire. Pearl was technically a constitutional monarchy.

Rayn nodded, stepping forward to greet the captain, who shook his hand Celtwyld style. Rayn had the distinct impression that he was dealing with a very intelligent being. “We are honored to be here, and witness the might of the dragonmen. Your vessel is very impressive.”

“Thank you,” the captain bowed. “It is a pleasure to speak with you, and we have prepared a small reception for you-”

Rhoc suddenly unfolded his arms.

Rayn knew his thoughts in a moment, “My friend is concerned that by small you indicate that the venue will not be large enough for our dragons to attend.”

“Oh,” the captain said. Clearly, that was what he’d meant.

Rayn smiled, even as Rhoc folded his arms again, looking dangerous. “Perhaps we may offer you an alternative? Not three hours ago the queen apparent to the throne of our world was born – Gayl of house Oordu. The reception has already begun without her. Perhaps you will do us the honor of attending our gathering? You will have the chance to meet delegates from each of the eight worlds of humanity.”

“Oh, I’m not sure-” the captain began.

A voice cut him off, “Go, Greyskull. Take your command crew and attend this little shin dig.”

Rayn looked around, and Rhoc tensed. The voice that spoke was a little more dragon than the other’s had been. And it was a voice riven with power, accustomed to unquestioned obedience.

The captain Greyskull turned to face the center of the room. Of its own volition lights began to coalesce into an image there. It was a dragon man, larger and more muscular than any they’d seen today – more dragon than man. He wore a crown of gold.

Everyone in the room bowed, except for Rayn, Rhoc and Fairystone.

Captain Greyskull indicated they should do the following, but Rayn refused. There had been no introduction, no indication of who this powerful new dragonman was.

The captain indicated. “Ambassadors, may I present the image of our sovereign leader, his high excellence in command, emperor Gorund.”

Now Rayn bowed, but did not put his knee to the ground as all others had. He waited for the emperor to speak; it seemed to be what he expected.

The image spoke, “You’re a little shorter than I expected,” he grinned. “And pale, are you well?”

He heard Rhoc's gauntlets cracking as he clenched his fist at the subtle insult. But Rayn knew this emperor was just testing them. "Mighty Emperor Gorund, we greet you and your mighty people in honor this day and bid you come to the feast provided for the queen's new daughter"

"A party! I do like parties! Thank you! But no; things are a bit busy up here and all, running an empire of 200 billion souls or so. I appreciate the invitation but I think Greyskull might just have to attend in my stead."

"But, mighty em-" the captain tried to say.

"Dry up, scaly," the emperor mocked him. "Why would I send you out with one of my best battle cruisers and not have you bring enough cheese and wine for a baby shower? Go! And honor your oaths."

"I would be my pleasure," Greyskull replied, not looking at all pleased.

The presentation

Pure always knew that the welcome celebration for her crown princess was going to be a big event.

What she did not expect were the unexpected guests. The seven dragonmen entered, politely escorted by a score of dragonriders ready to skewer them at any insult.

She'd heard the emperor's words to the ambassadors, and judged him selfish, pompous, and unwise.

She hoped his messengers would be far less so.

Instruct the greetings to take place no closer than twenty paces, she informed the guardians of her child, guided by Farwing's wisdom – he did not trust the dragonmen either. Every dignitary of all eight worlds, though Amarii never really counted, had expected to hold the child. Now, none would.

The room fell silent as the dragonmen approached. The one in the lead held his head high and proud, but the others looked cautious. There were no females among them. The priest, and the captain, but the others were unfamiliar to her.

Relax, my queen, they are only here to observe, Ironfang assured her. He'd ridden back with Rayn only an hour before.

But Pure, and Farwing, had already decided they would not be proudly displaying the formidable weaponry and armed thousands of the fortress, as the dragonmen had so deliberately done in an attempt to intimidate *them*.

The lead dragonman bowed before her at the bottom of the steps.

She did not hide her disdain, though most of her diplomats did. Caspina, her beloved, was not an arm's length away.

Despite protocol, perhaps having been raised by the Celtwyld, she strode off the throne and approached them in person. The guard stood close; weapons locked.

But Pure did not feel these were any threat. The emperor of dragonmen just wanted to see if humans and dragons would kill them on sight.

But the hearts of men and dragons were never as fickle as that.

She walked right down to arm's reach of the first dragonman, and indicated he should rise. They stood up, taller by their long necks than any man there, with sinuous, muscled forms. If their skin could weather the emptiness of space she did not know, and if it could protect them from dragonclaw or shifting blade of Argentus, she doubted. But the priests and scholars of the room would soon know.

But there was one question she had to find out for herself. Without introduction or apology, she got right to the point – Celtwyld style. “Do your people wish me or any of my people harm?”

He looked surprised, and stuttered at the question. But Greyskull found his voice quickly, however, “We answer, only, to our Exalted Emperor. And he has explicitly told us to offer no offence, no harm, to give our own lives if needed, to greet your people in peace, and safety.”

She pondered this. They certainly could run her through with their sharp claws right now, but did not. “And what will you do, if your emperor changes his mind?”

He looked confused, obeying one’s emperor was the only way one rose to prominence in his military.

His priest had to save him, the most half man among them, Arj, “Emperor Gorund has united our warring people for the first time in our history. For the first time, war is forbidden by his rule. Peace has settled on our fleets, and trade prospers. He is undoubtedly the greatest emperor we have ever known.” He stood proud, as though touched deeply by his emperor’s contribution to planetary peace.

Pure was still doubtful, and shared Farwing’s misgivings. Together, they made a decision that would determine the fate of their entire relationship going forward. “Bring the princess.”

The people were scandalized, but the midwife acted without hesitation. Within a breath her child was in her arms. Her priceless, flawless infant.

Pure stood forward, and offered her child to Greyskull.

Her guards could not unhand their weapons, and she watched the sweat fall from their brows. This was a sacred moment of unmeasured trust.

The dragonman stepped backwards, and put one knee on the floor. His soldiers followed his lead. “Forgive us, beautiful queen of Pearl, but we have brought no gift worthy of the crown to this event. We ... honor. Honor to the future queen of all humans to this world!”

“Give honor” the dragonmen stated, heads bowed.

The lead dragonman indicated to his priest to act.

The priest spoke, “Perhaps, it is a small thing, in no way worthy of the queen. But may I offer this?” He concentrated, his staff lighting up, and a small device began to materialize in his hand. It was a simple transmutation, but he looked hard put to the task – either it was new to him, or he was not as gifted a staff wielder as his title had indicated. But into his hand a small toy for an infant had arisen. “Our children after hatching must often bare the breaking through of the teeth as human children do. We give them something like this, softened for your young one. It is such a small thing.”

“We promise to return with a worthy gift!” their leader almost begged, but they all seemed rather impressed with the priest’s transmutation. It made Pure wonder.

The gift floated in the air, and Pure perceived Farwing had it in his telekinetic grasp.

A priestess of the Venfirth studied it carefully, “I believe it is safe,” she proclaimed.

Pure took the infant’s toy in her hand, and studied it. It looked like a weapon, but was soft enough for a child. She handed it to the midwife, who looked unsure of what to do with it.

“Thank you,” Pure informed them, and turned with the infant in her arms. “Please, enjoy the party.”

Snow looked at the dragonmen. They stood in a tight circle, chatting amongst themselves as the most curious diplomats had had their fill. Windfyrth was at first disgusted, but grew to like their manners, and by now she was very busy studying the human and dragon diplomats and their reaction to the infant. The dragonmen ate little, except for one of them who seemed quite enamored of food, and literally tried everything. They seemed harmless, but they were always armed with their claws and dragon-like teeth.

Mellits were not common at the fortress, but they came whenever she called. But for this task Snow had already chosen a good friend of hers, the old rat from Ethphraim whom the surgeon Jane Jones had been good enough to bring with her recently, for a visit with herself. She called him Brown, and he seemed to like the name. By the gift of the teachers, she'd doubled his fragile lifespan, but age weighed upon him even now.

She brought him out of the hidden space between space within her cloak.

Woah, he thought, as soon as he saw the dragonmen.

They are not from here.

Well, neither am I.

Good point.

He sniffed the air, guessing her heart before she'd even told him. It was an odd sensation now that she'd learnt the brain did almost all the conscious thinking and not the heart, but she was getting used to the idea. Even so, how the clever rat knew what was in her heart was still deeply endearing to her.

Sure, he agreed, and she lowered him to the floor.

He scurried over, his fat belly dragging on the ground, and without fear or pause ran right up to the dragonmen's feet. They didn't appear to notice, so he ran between them. Still, they seemed preoccupied in their discussion, so he ran right over one of their feet.

They either didn't notice, or didn't care.

A female diplomat of Chalcedonah gave a sort of squeal, and the local party turned to give their attention.

One of the dragonmen looked down then, "Is this yours?" he said to the diplomat, pointing to Brown the rat.

The diplomat shook her head fiercely, looking concerned. If anyone else noticed, they already knew better than to be concerned about the appearance of animals when Lady Snow was standing nearby.

The dragonman reached down and gently scooped up Brown with practiced skill. "Check this out guys, it's a mammal!"

Another dragonman studied it now with great curiosity, though the others ignored the conversation as though rats were old news.

Brown looked up at the sharp, pointed teeth from his perch on a scaly, clawed hand.

Snow approached quickly. "He's with me."

"Oh!" the dragonman said, with a shrug and a grin. "Forge, he's warm!"

Snow nodded, and took the rat from his hands, brushing against his scaled skin as she did. It was hard; like a dragon's.

She felt Windfyrth's thoughts near, watching her as she experimented.

The dragonman's breath was rich, strong. He was in good health. His pose was that of a trained warrior, his musculature powerful, but his steady hand and easy movement spoke of many hours of training. Were it to come down to personal combat between them, she would not prevail.

Windfyrth interrupted her, *You only need travel quantum flux, then rip his heart out of his chest.*

Snow smiled at the jest, probably looking like she was blushing as the huge, vaguely manly, half dragon handed her the rat.

Brown was clearly glad to be away from there. *Hunters, like men. But smelling like dragons. I liked them, but would not risk meeting them without you near.*

Snow had to agree.

Fairystone was having enough fun for the both of them, which was good. Rhoc really wanted to start a fight.

The party was quiet. Too quiet. The queen had loved his gift, and the princess lay in the cradle he and Fairystone had made whenever she wasn't being handed around. She was sleeping constantly now, encircled at all times with healers and priests of the Divine.

But in the middle of the room seven abominations were waiting around for their chance to start a fight. And oh! How Rhoc wished they'd start a fight! But they just stood there, talking politely.

Fairystone was out now, chatting to some humans, or dragons. Maybe that shifter friend from Sanmarellis she had. There was something going on there, perhaps a romance in the next century or so. But Rhoc ignored all that.

They barely even looked at him glaring at them, and when one did their priest counselled against it. So Rhoc stood there, arms folded, all 13 lengths of impossilium steel driven by plaguewrought muscle doing nothing while monsters waited for their chance to strike. It was infuriating, and he knew they knew it.

Fairystone danced in front of his vision, and he almost batted her away. She perched on his shoulder, trying to turn into a snake but giving up for her otter instead. He could feel her snuggling him.

You really should get out of your armor and eat some food, she begged him. You're starving!

He was hungry, it was true. But he could eat later. If standing here meant the monsters in the center of the room weren't going to try anything, then all the better.

Fairystone huffed. *Fine, but I'm famished! I'm going outside for some nectar, the danblossoms are just opening up!*

She said it just to mock him. She knew he hated it when she was out of arm's reach. She was so tiny; a stiff breeze could knock her down and dent a wing.

But Rhoc had already thought this through. *Sargent, the shifter Fairystone desires to feed by the northeastern garden. Accompany her.*

Yessir, the sergeant replied, and Rhoc noticed soldiers leaving the venue for the garden Fairystone was headed for. There was no way anyone here was going to slap at a glowing light, for it might indeed be a dragon. But he was not about to take any chances, or in his case, second chances.

Fairystone huffed indignantly at the foiling of her plans, but with a happy giggle she floated away.

He returned instead to his angry vigil of the monsters standing around shyly in the center of the room. They just stood there, like they were doing nothing at all.

Jayd was not at the birthing party. She and Darkwing were busy.

“Mistress,” the commander said, “We’ve tracked their ship to a small planetoid, a planetary fragment really, circling the small black hole at delta segment.”

“Good, send in recon,” Jayd ordered. She checked the information flowing in, Darkwing seeing through her eyes. “200 billion, my foot!” she swore.

“They may have extra population on other colonies,” the commander insisted.

More like 20 billion, Darkwing concluded.

Jayd agreed. But why the lie? That Rayn’s tour was an attempt at intimation was abundantly clear, but what was the real military prowess of their new friends? And what was their honest motives? They certainly were behaving themselves at the party very well.

To trade? They’d made arrangements to meet with all seven worlds, now that – to their claim – no one was going to attack them on site. But if peace was their aim, then why send a battle cruiser as a ‘hello’ card? As a show of force? Or fear?

And what was her husband not telling her.

Jayd felt the young life wriggle inside. She’d only just started noticing the sensation. It was amazing.

But it gave her something else to protect. *They come with weapons; they come with lies and fair promises? They hide their nature then flaunt it?*

Something was very wrong about this whole situation, and with the bronze spaceship that sat like a dark thorn in the atmosphere high above the fortress of Pearl.

Weak

A week had slid by. Pure was again honored to be hosting the interplanetary government council, and there was only one item on the agenda – the dragonmen.

“I, for one, welcome the new species to our system and believe they are owed a seat at this table,” the general of Thiaz spoke up.

Pure stood, and they all waited. “They have sent ambassadors to each of the seven worlds?” she already knew, but wanted to make it official knowledge for everyone there.

The assembled diplomats nodded.

“And the general feeling is that they may be trusted?”

Most nodded.

Ethphraim spoke up, or more precisely, Jane Jones the surgeon and her fiery wyvern from the dominant culture of Ethphraim spoke up. “We have our doubts. They have yet to receive any diplomats into their own lands.”

Of this truth Pure was well aware.

“When we offer them so little trust, it is little wonder they do not lay out a welcoming mat for us all!” high priest Taroz of Chalcedonah offered.

The dark-skinned priest of Tourmarelle huffed, and a brief telepathic conversation passed between them.

Taroz explained, “We agree, however, that a diplomatic envoy needs to be sent to their home world.”

“While their starships and spies scour ours? It is the least they can do,” Legionnaire of Argentus agreed.

“Very well, I will-” Pure began, then stopped as a messenger spoke to her mind. “Oh, it seems they have just invited us each to send ambassadors. How... astonishingly fortuitous.”

All eyes fell on the diplomat from Thiaz, who simply shrugged.

Rayn sat in the seat of honor in the battle arena. To his left stood Rhoc, who still refused to be seated. They’d enlarged the pavilion to accommodate him.

And to his right sat emperor Gorund.

He was not as tall as his hologram would have encouraged one to believe, but he was still a neck taller than most dragonmen, and a hulking warrior. Rayn did not need a wand to tell that this being was more dragon than man.

And to the emperor’s right sat his prime female. She was polite, and gentle, but seemed uncomfortable in her chair, and bored easily

of the entertainments that engaged her emperor so readily. It seemed she was even more dragon in kind than her man.

But she truly did seem unimpressed with the entertainment; blood sports. Rayn had no taste for them either, though he found he did respect them.

Twenty gladiators, dragonmen of skill and fame, took to literal battle with practiced skill. All bled, but none were slain.

All about him the arena shook with the cheering and stomping of the dragonmen. Sleight dragonmen females tried to serve drinks among them, but they were pushed aside or ignored.

And the arena shook again as the final warrior of the blue team fell. Medics ran in to tend to the lives of the fallen.

Rayn watched in pity.

“Oh, does our amusement so disgust you?” the emperor teased.

Rayn tensed, the dragonman emperor had been mocking them in good humor all day, and in the noise Rayn found he was growing tired of it. The day had been interesting enough, filled with tours of their battlements, weaponry, and military. But the day was growing late.

A new battle was preparing. Three armed gladiators, with net, whip and spear, took to encouraging the crowd.

“There is wisdom in this madness,” the emperor said with an apologetic smile. “Fifty of your years ago there was only death on this

world. It was every dragonman for himself, with only small tribes for support. Thieves were everywhere, and food was scarce. We should have died out. But one day as a young dragonman I looked around me and thought this need not be. So, I killed my chieftain and took his title, then drove my soldiers against each and every tribe around us. Soon, we amassed such power that the other tribes simply fell in line. Now, thirty years later, we have peace, and the warriors grow bored. They are made for war; they are bred to fight. Entertainments like these are more than mere diversion, no. They keep our blood lust in check. They keep my people sane.”

Rayn looked at the cheering crowds. They were begging for a fight.

“It’s a pity your dragon could not come,” the emperor teased again with a grin. “I’m sure he would love to make sport of my subjects!” and the emperor laughed.

His woman looked over, her eyes half closed. She didn’t seem impressed. Indeed, she did not seem entertained at all.

The emperor watched his gaze, “Ahh, Firebone Dragonheart, the most beautiful dragonwoman in all my empire.” He caressed her, and she smiled. She was probably a head taller than he, but sat on a lower chair so that it was not obvious. “I had to kill a dozen to win her heart, but it was well worth it.”

She smiled at her emperor, and even Rayn was touched by the apparent sincerity of that smile. It seemed she was, indeed, pleased with the arrangement.

Ironfang was watching the entire event from high up in the air, watching through Rayn's eyes. He was studying their movement, their combat style. They were sitting in an arena well cleared from the nearby cities and factories, on a monolythic ovoid, a planetary fragment blown away millennia ago, and now left to circle towards a black hole, awaiting oblivion in the next million years or so.

“Tell me, noble emperor, how did you people come to be?”

With a wave of his hand, the emperor indicated that his favorite priest should answer the question – Arj, the man hearted. The arena was growing in excitement as the gladiators demonstrated their style. “None of us know the day. Our ancestors fled here, as soon as the Perish had started winning and the threads that allowed for easy interplanetary travel stopped working. We were trapped. Men, and dragons. As you can see, this world never had enough gravity to support an atmosphere. They waited for the threads to return, but they never did, and their craft was damaged beyond repair for them to leave. So, the dragons claimed the fragment, and the humans stayed in their ship. But it was not a lasting solution. The human numbers were growing, and they needed somewhere to live. So together they divined the only solution that they had – mix the DNA sequences of

evolved men and forged dragons. We don't know how many times they failed before the first human females bore dragonmen eggs in their wombs, but we know they did eventually succeed. And now, here we are today – men who can survive without air, for a short time, and dragons who no longer need the bond.”

“Impressive, indeed,” Rayn replied, then asked Ironfang’s next question, phrasing it a little more tactfully. “And you use the staff I see. Can you use all the tools of men?”

Arj huffed. He might have laughed, but was in the presence of his dreaded emperor. “Most... well, not all. We-”

“Only whelps like him are any good at it,” the emperor laughed. “True dragonmen like myself carry our power with, like the dragons. Oh, here is one now.”

The crowd rose to their feet to cheer, and in walked some kind of dragonman champion. He was covered in scars, but his bearing was that of a proud and undefeated warrior. He carried two axes, but they did not shift as the swords of Argentus could. His armor was impractical, covering a few vital areas but allowing him to get wounded all over. He stood facing his three assailants without fear, barely moving as they began to circle around him. A voice was saying something through the air but Rayn could not make sense of the words.

Even the emperor cheered. “Gharmak, the destroyer. Sworn to slay himself if he is ever defeated. Thus, undefeated!”

Rayn sat forward, waiting for the battle to start. At some point the two assailants on his left and right flanks struck forwards, but Gharmak deflected them both with a sweep of his axes. The man with the whip lashed out and the champion caught it around his arm and pulled the gladiator off his own feet. The others moved in, but were knocked to the ground in a flurry of blows that looked, even to Rayn’s eyes, decidedly choreographed.

At the thought, the sudden headache struck once more. It was the reference to dancing, and it brought with it a wild flurry of mathematical equations related to sub atomic particles. But before he could wince, it was gone again.

Rayn? Ironfang asked.

Rayn wasn’t sure what had happened either. *It is nothing*, he reported.

That nothing is happening more often. Ironfang warned him.

He pushed the thoughts aside, and his attention returned to the arena as the dragonmen cheered.

Battle raged on, each taking their turn to be thrown to the ground by the champion. The net wielding dragonman threw his weapon while the champion’s back was turned, yet it was sundered in two by an axe as he apparently predicted the attack perfectly. The

spear man drew close, and the champion grabbed his weapon and head-butted him so fiercely he fell limp, and the crowd roared. The whip dragonman tried to take out an eye, but the champion simply grabbed the weapon in the air and twisted it around his adversary's own neck, pulling him tight into a choke hold. The net dragonman tried to help, but was tackled and pinned to the ground in the tail of the champion. The gagging cries from the enstrangled gladiator could be heard from the emperor's stand, and everyone cheered.

The champion looked up at the emperor, who glanced in Rayn's direction. Then he put his thumb up in the air.

The champion threw his assailant roughly away, and he fell to the ground. The champion then grabbed the net dragonman's frill, and pulled up his head, placing a short knife to the creature's throat. Rayn sorely doubted that the knife could end the other dragonman's life in a single swipe. More like several, painfilled, agonizing swipes.

The emperor paused, while citizens cried for the gladiator's death.

Then the emperor put his thumb up.

Dragonmen cheered, some even complained. But that most considered it their duty to like whatever the emperor decreed, was clear.

"Would your dragon not enjoy a moment in the arena?" the emperor almost begged. "We have not ever had the privilege of seeing

a true ancestor fight for us before. You are like god's returned, you know. We would dearly love to see this."

Rayn knew Ironfang's thoughts, *And let them judge the strength and combat advantages of a dragon? Absolutely not.*

Rayn shook his head.

He was about to say more when the emperor, again, interrupted. "We could have him battle some slaves? Or the criminals again? He could eat all he liked, and would find them no trouble for his true dragon might, no?"

Rayn, and Ironfang, could tell it was a veiled insult. To suggest the mighty dragon was too intimidated to face true battle was a tempting jeer indeed. "No." Then he had a thought, a thought that had impressed itself on his mind ever since they'd arrived here and Rhoc had stood silently behind him. "But, perhaps, you might ask my friend here?"

The emperor turned, and looked at Rhoc – equal in height. For once, the emperor did not mock or tempt. "As they say, your image is truly that of Punishment... Do you think you might enjoy a battle –"

Rhoc did not wait for the emperor to finish, but instead ran from the pavilion and leapt off it, splitting stones under his feet as he jumped right into the arena. The crowd fell silent.

Then they roared.

The gladiator seemed unsure, then raised his axes in challenge.

But the emperor held up his hand. “We do not risk our champion in battle without a proper rest.”

The champion roared, and held up his axes. But the emperor insisted, and the champion threw the axes into the soil and stalked off. Rhoc looked up at him, confused.

Suffer it to be, Rayn consoled him.

He knew Rhoc really wanted to fight the champion, too.

“So, who do you think might make him a first challenge?” The emperor asked Rayn. “A slave, or a criminal, perhaps?”

“Let him fight the cobbler,” the empress stated.

They looked over at her. She had said nothing all day.

The emperor looked puzzled. “Very well, the fool who insulted my wife then.”

The guards ran, and in seconds a poor looking dragonman was brought out. He was a prisoner, emaciated, and weak.

Rhoc was not impressed.

They pushed a strange, short, thick curved blade into the dragonman’s hands, and he held it like he didn’t know what to do with it.

“What was his crime?” Rayn asked.

Arj was about to reply, when the emperor spoke, “Lies, thefts. And calling my wife a liar and a fool. He murdered his own mother as well.”

Rayn put no confidence in those words. He looked at the poor shoemaker in the arena, and truly felt this man could not have committed any of the crimes of which he was accused. For not the first time today, his heart felt a prickling of indignity at the emperor and his indulgence.

The horn sounded the beginning of combat.

The shoemaker just stood there; weapon held out in front of him.

Rhoc walked up on him, and the dragonman ran. He ran to the far end of the arena where he could run no more.

Rhoc walked up to him, and just stood there. For a moment, there was silence in the arena. Then his gauntleted hand shot out, and grabbed the dragonman by his very large throat. The crowd roared.

Rayn wasn't sure what his friend was planning. Fairystone was still hidden in his breastplate, so he didn't really think Rhoc would kill a dragonman outright.

The weapon slipped from the cobbler's hands.

The crowd cheered for almost three minutes, and Rhoc just stood there with a struggling and piteous prisoner in his hand. The crowd grew silent as the moments passed, and soon the cobbler stopped struggling and just held on, saying something Rayn could not hear in the distance.

The emperor looked like he wanted to intervene, to put down his thumb. But Rhoc never looked for his approval.

Then Rhoc dropped the struggling cobbler to the ground. He retreated as far away as the wall would let him, and cowered there.

Slowly, Rhoc bent down, and grabbed the steel weapon from the ground. The crowd cheered.

Then Rhoc crushed the weapon in one hand. With a slow and deliberate gesture, he tipped it out of his hand and onto the ground. He did not look impressed.

The emperor got the hint. With a wave of his hand two of the trained and heavily armed arena guards took to the field.

If Rhoc could smile through the helmet, he did.

He leapt at least 20 meters in the air and battled them fiercely with his clawed hands. They barely lasted a dozen breaths. One of them cut him against the back of his right knee, but the sword did not pierce the greater dragon rider's armor. And Rayn could tell – Rhoc was still holding back. With a sudden jump he grabbed their heads and bashed their skulls together. They both fell to the earth.

The arena cheered, and Rhoc held up his hands in victory.

They were shouting, shouting something at their emperor.

The empresses seemed to become even more sad, if it were possible.

He raised two fingers, and nodded.

The cheering in the arena raised to fever pitch.

A grating sound echoed from a giant portcullis at the far end of the battlefield. The crowd began to chant the name of some hero. But the ground shook as an enormous being began to slide towards the open gate.

Rayn felt a dismal feeling settle on his heart. Something was very wrong about all this.

From the shadows a creature emerged. It was slug-like in appearance, with a circle mouth of a hundred serrated teeth. Its skin had the appearance of stone, and cruelly glowing tentacles sprouted from its face. It had no visible eyes.

Rayn, and Ironfang through him, immediately felt a deep and vile revulsion at the sight of this enormous being. Even as it raised its throat to the sky and roared a baleful moan towards the black sun, he scanned it with his staff. It did not have the processing capacity of a wand, but the staff was always a generalist implement, and it could tell him many things. Including that the monstrosity before them was a chimera, a hybrid of both human and dragon life ribbons, and several others. It was a forged being, designed only as entertainment in this battlefield.

But what was far worse was that this being was in pain. It was not built with any other purpose than the entertainment of battle. Its deeply intelligent mind was a confusion of ignorance, and its hunger

knew no sating. It lived in constant agony, and it knew no release from it suffering but the bitter price of victory. Its hunger never diminished.

What have they done! Ironfang roared in disgust.

Even Rayn could not bear his own indignity any longer. Involuntarily, his heart crying out in sympathy to this tortured creature.

And in that very moment, it turned, and focused its full attention right at him.

Without bothering with Rhoc, the creature gave a piteous, mournful wail, and surged toward him.

Rocks splintered as the monster rose over the arena edges and crushed the unfortunate spectators sitting there. Guards rushed to stop it, striking it with lightning spears, but it was clearly oblivious to the pain.

Rayn felt a strange tugging on his heart, and a deep and piteous sympathy he'd known only once before.

Look inside its heart, Ironfang told him, and Rayn did. There, within what he saw perfected his disgust at the dragonmen and cemented his eternal distrust of all they had become. No mighty city, no daring salvation from their ancestors, could justify what they had created today. Its heart was completely dragon, and it desperately, entirely, sought to be bonded.

But it had never met a human until today.

Again, the beast lurched toward the emperor's stand, citizens fleeing from its path. Guards were scurrying to assist, but it seemed no one was prepared for the vile wyrm to run amok.

Rhoc grabbed it by the tail, and almost burying himself in the dirt temporarily stopped its progress.

Then, incredibly, the being allowed its own tail to be torn clean off, so desperate was it for the company of humans.

Tears filled Rayn's eyes, for what torture could be so exquisite as to make dismemberment preferable? Again, the monster gave a piteous whine, and lunged toward the emperor's pavilion.

The empress was already gone, but the emperor simply sat there, weapon drawn, looking comparatively calm and mostly just curious.

A moment later Ironfang struck down from the sky, ploughing into the cranial cavity of the wyrm. The monster struck at him several times with its tentacles, but by the craft of the wiseman none of them could paralyze the enraged dragon, though they would have surely killed a man a thousand times over.

The monster roared again and looked, it seemed, right into Rayn. It was so confused, and in so much pain.

A moment later it crashed to the ground as Ironfang ripped out a chunk of its upper spinal cord. They had finally gotten see a real dragon fight after all.

The monster lay there, whining piteously.

With tears streaming down his face, Rayn approached. He patted the tortured monster on its face. It watched him with its tentacle eyes, not daring to touch him. Rayn wept. For the first time, this being felt no pain because it could no longer feel its own body. And for the first time, understanding filled its mind as it sensed the presence of a true human being.

Praying only for understanding, Rayn released its soul from its body, and it died at his touch.

Reckoning

Rayn sat in the royal guest bedchamber, Rhoc by his side. Ironfang was nowhere to be seen – he had returned to Pearl as the slaughter of the Wyrms had been completed. He, too, was disgusted at what the dragonmen had created simply for their own entertainment.

It was like the plague – a being made to be a slave, an entertainment. A careless addition to the natural balance of the universe.

At least it was dead now.

Such a thing should have never been created, Ironfang had said. He did not mourn, but simmered instead.

But that such a thing can be made again is unimaginable, Rayn confessed his fear.

Rayn knew Arj was arriving before the door even opened.

So, he opened it himself, using the telekinesis of the staff.

Arj looked puzzled, but walked in anyway. His voice was soft, he knew Rayn was upset. “They’re... Well, the emperor’s impressed! ... I’m sorry, Rayn. Our ways are... well... not everyone likes our ways.”

Rayn was inclined to shout at the other priest, but simply didn’t know what to say.

He wished Jayd was here, but she'd all but gone into hiding in the week since the dragonmen had arrived. He knew why, she'd been foremost to spy out their forces and military the entire time.

And what she saw had concerned him, but he'd still told her to have faith and hold out for peace.

What he'd seen today might truly shatter that confidence.

Arj said nothing, but pondered. Then, with the wisdom of a true wiseman, simply said, "Will you come with me? There's something I'd like to you see."

Rayn and Rhoc went with the old priest out through the cavernous wilderness of their fragile home. All the dragonmen paused and saluted as they passed. The fins of the massive skyship that had once brought their ancestors to this fragment were still visible in the skyline of the great palace. They entered through one of the many stone corridors, to a steel and glass door which opened at their presence.

Within was a wonder to behold. It was an enormous garden. Simply massive, and more especially for a city with limited space. And it was expertly and constantly maintained. Millions of plant species, most entirely unique, presented themselves to Rayn's wondering mind. The flowers and scents were simply amazing. Climbing liana's all but covered over the path of towering eucalypts, swaying epiphytes clinging to humid bows completing the illusion of

a giant cavern of pure plant life. The air was fresh and sweet, and it was, in a phrase; simply beautiful.

Rayn walked around, Rhoc refusing to remove his armor even for this – though Fairystone wasted no time flying out, turned into an otter, and scurried excitedly away into the underbrush.

The garden was amazing; a singular majesty of undeniable beauty, skill, and care. It almost paid him in full for the folly he had witnessed this afternoon.

“Wonderful,” Rayn admitted.

Arj sat on one of the many welcoming stone seats. “The emperor, after the last war that won him the empress’s hand in marriage, had this place built as a dowry to her for the people. She may admit whomever she will to this place. It is sweet, is it not? Of course, there is the poisonous and flesh-eating section, but let us forego these this day.”

Rhoc grunted.

Rayn agreed, “Indeed: nice.”

Arj smiled. “I did not want you to think we all embrace our emperor’s entertainments. His strong hand of leadership is necessary to keep the warring factions at peace! But among us there is still so much good, and not just the plants. We have mathematicians that study the tools of men, and hope we can trade with you humans for

the developments of the past 4000 years! And artists, and sculptures. Oh, here, let me take you to one of my favorite pieces.”

Rhoc grunted.

Rayn translated, “Yes, we were wondering where you raise the hatchlings as well.”

Arj coughed uncomfortably as he walked, “Well, the young are most sacred. Protected. I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to take you to see them. But I will certainly ask! Look, here we are.”

Rayn looked through the concealing foliage to a small clearing in the perpetual greenery where a massive, twisting, granite sculpture stood. It looked like a stylized form of a humanoid, of which kind it was difficult to tell. But it was a clear work of artistic genius which even he could admire.

So busy was he admiring the image, Arj trying to clear the branches behind him to allow Rhoc passage, that he was momentarily surprised by the arrival of another creature. The empress entered through to the clearing, dismissing two of her devoted attendants. No sooner were their backs turned then she threw herself to the ground in a very dragon-like manner.

Rayn gave a start as Arj coughed audibly behind him.

The empress turned her uncontrolled plummet toward the ground into a sensuous half roll and gazed out them with those half

closed, tired eyes. It almost looked like she's simply lied down the hard way.

Arj was speaking, "My mistress, please forgive our intrusion!"

She laughed, a very human sound, "Not at all, Arj, you know you're welcomed here any time, and yet I never see you until you bring company! So, the ambassadors, wonderful! How do you like my garden?"

Rayn was inexplicably uncomfortable near the empress. Her energies... they were twisted in ways he did not yet understand. She was dangerous and vulnerable all at once. "Forgive the intrusion," he begged, turning.

She sat up, "No, no! Come here now, please. Arj, won't you bring the ambassadors? Arj, the man hearted, finally in the company of his fellow humans."

Rayn wondered what that meant, but stood aside as Arj approached the empress. His aura visibly shrunk and hardened. Arj was hiding his feelings; from them, and the empress.

She sat up on a nearby stone chair, just the right size for her.

Arj entered, and she caressed his jaw with an almost possessive gesture.

Then she looked up at Rhoc, speaking to Rayn. "Your man at arms is formidable, ambassador." Then she turned to Rhoc, "What you

did in that arena put our greatest warriors to shame. They're calling you the Ambassador of Death."

Rhoc was pleased at that.

Rayn apologized, "Oh, no, he's no threat –"

The empress simply laughed. "Come now, it's a title of the highest respect among our people!"

Rayn was silent.

She looked out at the endless garden. Her seat was set out at a vantage point, dark sky lit with frail pinpoints of light in the distance. She sighed, seeming tired. Again, she spoke to Rayn, "I am sorry if we offended you, priest. Our sports are, well, not everyone is as engaged by the emperor's diversions."

Rayn was still angry. To blend human and dragon to save lives was one thing, but to use that knowledge to build monsters whose only purpose was to know pain so that they were more entertaining diversions for a blood lusting people? This was deeply immoral.

The empress grew even more sadder. "I was not there 4000 of your years ago, when our ancestors fled here. But I am... I ... can I tell them, Arj?"

The dragonman priest looked out of place, "It is not my place to say, my queen."

She sighed. "I was not there, but my memories are. It is my gift, a mind like a dragon's. It means I cannot use a single tool of men, but

I don't mind. Instead, I can see and feel and remember everything my ancestors did as though it was my own life – very much as I suppose any dragon can. And I remember what it was like. An entire century of cramped, isolated living. They were lucky to find this planetary shard in the first place. There was nowhere else to go. Then the fighting broke out, the humans were killing each other. Oh! I can still see it. We are losing them... they're dying out... and my ancestors... we needed... oh!"

And the Empress wept, but composed herself shortly. "I do not bare the weight of my husband's crown. I do not have to keep thirty warring houses from tearing each other apart. I only have to look pretty-"

"My empress!" Arj protested.

She shut him off, "Be wise, Arj, you know it's true! No one harkens to a female in the council. Oh, they listen, but they will never feel threatened enough to take my advice or any female's seriously!"

"My queen," he mourned.

"What," she seemed to be reading his thoughts, "You think I tell these diplomats things they should not know! Pah, I've seen this one in action," she motioned to Rayn, "he will know of his own soon enough."

Rayn smiled to himself. Indeed, he would soon know. He would soon, also, know why she acted the way she did, and why her eyes looked so tired all the time.

“Sit,” she ordered Arj.

He tried to protest, but gave up. This was undoubtedly not the first time he’d lost this argument with his queen.

He sat by his empress, barely half her size. Her tail swished in his direction, but they did not touch. Both sat there, in silence, for a moment.

The moment was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

“There is a stream down in that direction,” the empress told them, pointing. “You should go check it out.”

Rayn could take a hint.

Ambassadors

Pure summoned the inner circle of dragonriders for a meeting. This was important.

Three months had gone by.

Windfyrth spoke. “The parliament will be aware that we have met.”

Pure nodded. It was just the ten of them – the original inner five dragon riders and their dragons. Farwing had never fit in the council room, so Pure had chosen the conclave as the site of this meeting. It was still perhaps the most beautiful room she knew of – a spiral pattern of polished stones punctuated by glorious crystals that the previous Matron had grown there herself over the 4000 years that she had been waiting. “I don’t want to face them yet, and I need your honest opinions.”

Ironfang spoke, as he was doing so more often these days, rather than letting Rayn share the thoughts he agreed with. “We cannot trust the dragonmen. They are treacherous.”

“Agreed!” Jayd shouted, like she’d been holding in a great truth. Darkwing growled with her. “They’re shifting large amounts of resources and workers to the military industry. They’re arming on the large scale.”

Rhoc nodded, in perfect synchronization with Fairystone.

Pure sighed, “It’s not all that easy. Love them, hate them – they are here to stay. They are willing to fight to protect themselves, they have every right to do so, and they certainly are capable of doing so. And yet, for every danger they present, they have conducted themselves with discretion and wisdom under every condition. With every provocation, they are stern, but as yet unprovoked! I foresee the council will accept their invitation for trade by tomorrow evening.”

“Well,” Snow almost whispered, “I like them.”

Rhoc growled at her, or to her, it was hard to tell. Fairystone translated, “He believes they are just displaying the hunter’s patience.” She flew up to the table, all straining to hear her tinkling voice. “They are arming for war against the humans and dragons.”

Now it was Rayn’s turn to sigh, “While every hope my heart prays for peace, I fear we must be prepared.”

Pure clenched her jaw, barely keeping the fire in. “I know. But what can I do at this point? Without seeming bigoted and prejudiced?”

They looked at each other.

Windfyrth disagreed, derailing the conversation with a simple shake of her head. “They work hard, twice as strong as men for their weight. They contribute excellent manufacturing sense with a dependable work ethic. They have so much to give to our alliance!”

No one argued this truth with her.

“Snow, can you get onto their world via the shadow dimension?” Pure asked.

Snow turned pale, “I am... still unwelcomed there; all living beings are. I can get there, yes, it’s very easy. And the denizens don’t mind a brief visit, especially with Windfyrth with me. But to use the dimension for constant surveillance? I fear they will not allow it.”

“At least most dragonmen can’t use the tools,” Jayd muttered.

“It seems their sacrifice to survive had several unforeseen results,” Pure explained. “They have built machines that access, or at least, imitate the tools, however incompletely. Yet they’re still begging to get a teacher stone to help them repair their own teachers.”

Rhoc looked puzzled.

“They broke theirs, crushed them all in some past revolution. They’ve rebuilt them as best they could, but lost much of the ancient wisdom of humans.”

“And,” Jayd grinned, “they deleted most of the rest of it in the rise to power of their current emperor! What did not directly support his claims for power was deemed without value. They destroyed most of the data regarding their arrival on their world.”

“And,” Pure said in dark admission, “any information regarding how the dragons managed to successfully combine their life with those of humans!”

“I am told,” Rayn explained, “that there is indeed a harmonic resonate point between the two species that they finally figured out how to exploit.”

Pure look puzzled. “Your random gems of wisdom often surprise me, wiseman. It is as if you, also, know a little bit about everything.”

Rayn shrugged with a grin.

Ironfang continued his thoughts, “They are human on the inside – with men’s hearts and ambition, and with men’s minds and love of knowledge and science. But they are more dragon on the outside, with skin that can survive the emptiness of space, fast healing muscles, and bones of iron. They are formidable combatants, and humanity cannot stand against them in individual combat unless they have their tools. In a protracted war, I fear the dragonmen will prevail.”

“It will not come to that!” Snow insisted, Windfyrth agreeing.

The table was silent for a moment.

“I would be willing to try,” Darkwing said, and Pure wondered for a moment what he meant. But she noticed the now obviously pregnant Jayd clinging to his forearm. That arm, along with the rest of Darkwing, had grown noticeably in size recently. If she had been trying to deny it was his time to ascend into nobility, there would be no denying it now. He had been absent from their councils very often

of late, yet even Farwing was silent on what the ascension process involved. It was honored dragon business.

Darkwing continued, “I have been studying Snow’s method. The sciences of humanity have been pressing themselves against my mind this past century, I am almost a thousand years old now, yet I do not feel age upon me in any way. I would be willing to try, if you will help us, Lady Snow? I think I can get us into the shadow dimension. At the very least I would like to answer one question – how do they raise their young?”

All nodded.

“Is it really so important?” Snow asked. “They want to keep this knowledge sacred, as do we all.”

“Do you expect to find more monsters?” Windfyrth teased Rayn. She was not pleased with his handling of the incident with the Wyrn, claiming the emperor had simply wanted to upset him and he’d played right into that game. He would have seemed much more competent if he’d simply sat down and let Ironfang finish the monster off.

Rayn ignored, or didn’t notice, the teasing. “I think it is important to know how they do it. The males outnumber the females ten to one, possibly more. It’s rare that a female is seen above the surface.”

“I would not make that your first priority,” Windfyrth countered.

“Agreed,” Ironfang growled. “We have to make sure we know how much ordinance they carry in storage for any war effort. They keep insisting they are only moderately armed, but if they have in store enough for several years then we may be assured they are gearing up for war.”

Even Windfyrth had to agree to that, then turned to Darkwing. “We will teach you.”

Jayd almost glowed with delight.

Pure smiled to herself with amusement. “Well. Tomorrow the council of the five continents meet to sign a trade treaty with the official ‘ninth world’ of the dragonmen. It will give us as much chance to spy out the dragonmen military force as they have already taken to study our own.”

“Let us hope for peace,” Rayn said, and Ironfang scowled. “We could achieve much, you know, men and dragons and dragonmen. They have shown us that isolated colonies can be far more successful than we’d ever imagined. Which makes me wonder, what about the other empires? Have the dragonmen been contacted by any of the other races of the galaxy yet?”

Intersystem diplomacy was one of Pure’s favorite topics. “The scouts report nothing new from the devastation of the Illosian Empire,

and the Prill fields still prove treacherous for building our relationship with the northern Tauí, but they said to say ‘hi’. Nothing else is new from our quiet corner of the galaxy I’m afraid – but the Perish seems to have been isolated to this region, which is fortunate.”

All agreed.

Pure’s heart hurt. “I don’t want to sign this agreement,” she confessed.

“You could simply pull rank on them,” Farwing muttered.

Pure sighed. “No, I’d still need more proof.”

“We’ll get you your proof,” Jayd promised.

Pure smiled. Good people, still willing to risk so much to learn about an untested ally. There had to be a better way, why had the council of the wise been so undecided! It was ... inconvenient.

“It will be good for trade,” Windfyrth promised. She knew the queen had no real power to stop the vote from going the way it was headed. And the only power she had at the table of dragonriders was because she rode with the Patron.

But Pure knew she could still be decisively influential if she wanted. “At least Thiaz is excited by the prospect. They’ve already signed on.”

Merchants

The Thiazian diplomat watched as the first shipment of iron ore arrived from the mining colonies of Thiaz. The dragonmen had done every bit as well as they'd promised; a double load in an equal time as human hands had achieved, even with their primitive tools. Either they worked their employees like slaves, or they truly were dedicated to the task as no other species could be – though some genetic and social programming clearly never went astray in managing an empire of 20 billion souls, despite the emperor's idle boast designed to intimidate them into not attacking them on sight. It had been completely unnecessary. If the dragonmen had come first to Thiaz they would have had their trade agreement signed a month ago.

Iron. It would be reforged into something more useful, like copper, and the best of it into gold. It was well worth the saving the merchant had made.

“This is going to double production without adding to the expenses!” the experienced merchant confessed to the diplomat. “We'll have to hire these scaly boys more often!”

But the diplomat was made for his job. He heard the merchant's kind words and knew them for the fawning pleading they were. He saw the man's revulsion at the dragonmen's appearance. It would take

a long time for his people to get used to such chimera after battling a disease produced from a similar hybrid not two years ago.

The dragonman envoy walked up to him, a confident grin on his scaly face. “Sorry we were 4 turns late,” he repeated. “It won’t happen again, I am assured.”

The merchant waved his hand, “Pish! Most shipments out here on Lrobros are more than an hour late! Quality, over quantity and all that. But all your stock meets specifications, so I’m happy to pay.”

“Well, there is one thing,” the envoy said, “the miners told me they found this.” And he held out a small nugget of pure gold.

“How?” the merchant pondered, leaping forward. He snatched out an eyeglass to examine the spectral print of the nugget more closely.

“We suspect at least one of the comets was a planetary fragment, I don’t know how this could have happened without the presence of liquid water somewhere.”

The merchant stared at it with covetous eyes. It was not much gold, but it was naturally starforged; and that made its wealth far greater. “I don’t suppose,” he began, probably hoping the dragonman would let him keep it.

“We have no use for it,” the dragonman grinned.

“One moment,” the diplomat of Thiaz interrupted, and snatched the small nugget from the merchant’s hand. “This surely makes a better gift to all the people of Thiaz, wouldn’t you agree?”

The merchant let his disappointment show. There was no way that nugget, claimed from HIS mining rites, paid for at his expense by dragonmen works was ever going to find its way back into his hands. “Yes... of course!” he frowned.

“Good then,” and the human diplomat pocketed the gold.

The merchant stared like he knew it would be the last he ever saw of it. But the diplomat also knew he would instruct any future finds among the dragonmen to be reported to him directly – off record.

“Or course!” the dragonman envoy agreed. “Well, shall we avail ourselves of somewhere cleaner to sign out the final arrangements?”

The human diplomat grinned, and putting his arm on the dragoman’s scaled forearm, led him away.

In the shadows

Darkwing mastered the shadow dimension in mere hours, and at his presence very few denizens were willing to confront them. It had given Jayd the chance to explore the depths and heights of the entire planetesimal of the dragonmen, or the important parts of it anyway. And, to her dismay, she'd found nothing.

The dragonmen were probably more boring than she'd ever imagined. They worked, they ate, they slept. Hundreds of millions of them.

But she did find the children. And her own son, pressing against the confines of her womb, seemed particularly active at the time. It was a small comfort in the silence of Darkwing's thoughts; he'd said almost nothing, and nothing of comfort or friendship or advice. The distance seemed abysmal, yet for it all she still did not feel afraid. Darkwing would return, and be a thousand times more powerful than he'd ever been before. She just needed time. And he just needed... space.

Spying out the hatchlings for a good hour she and Darkwing grabbed the golden threads, which worked adequately well even in this place, and went home to Pearl.

Rayn and Ironfang were waiting for them when they arrived, deep within the fortress where it was hoped the dragonmen would find it hard to see them. Few of them used the tools of men, it was true. But their machines were all fairly impressive.

“What news?” he asked.

“More disappointments!” Darkwing complained as they shuddered from the shadow dimension.

“What do you mean?” Ironfang demanded.

Jayd answered; humans often found it easier to speak quickly with their tiny mouths, at least compared to dragons. “They conceive their infants in glass bottles, and place them inside the females to incubate. As we suspected, the females have no other task given them but birthing and raising the dragonmen young. In almost all but the natural births the dragonmen are genetically programmed for their tasks from the very beginning.”

“With, it might be added, a portion of the emperor’s life ribbon inside each and every one!” Darkwing shook his huge head, and laughed.

But Ironfang did not. No doubt to the emperor, it made the dragonmen expendable drones.

“We took images,” Jayd promised. “But I don’t want them uploaded to the teachers.”

Rayn nodded.

She knew he was well aware of her paranoia regarding the information the dragonmen could access. But she repeated it anyway, “They don’t have teachers Rayn. They do it all the old way with books and reading. Gotta say I got a lot of respect for that, but they want to get their hands on our teachers. If Thiaz hasn’t sold them one yet I guarantee they’ll steal one.”

Rayn smiled at her.

It made her annoyed, but it was very hard to feel it. She was four months pregnant with his son, after all.

“Trade is going well!” he promised her. “Perhaps, after all my misgivings, maybe we can count the dragonmen as a ninth world? They have the population for it. And did you hear; their application for recognition was presented this afternoon at the council of worlds.”

Jayd hardly cared. “Rayn, I’ve told you what I’ve seen. Almost none of them live in families; they live in barracks. And each and every barracks I’ve seen is armed and armored, and has at least two fighter jets. Their military is massive!”

Rayn laughed, and nodded. There was something infuriatingly condescending about that laugh, but Darkwing’s faith stopped her from shouting at her beloved.

Rayn pulled her close, and put his hand on her abdomen. “Rest, Jayd! You’ve not long till the birth. You need to take it easy now. We still have to get his spirit.”

Jayd said nothing. She didn't want him to know that his spirit was already here. It had been from before she'd finally married Rayn. But how did he not already know that?

Ironfang was watching her, closely.

"What?" Rayn asked her, knowing his dragon's thoughts. "What is it that you're not telling me, Jayd?"

She stumbled in her words. Why would she appear to have more vision in this matter than her wiseman did? Their son's spirit crossed over into this dimension more than two years ago, how was it possible that Rayn still did not know that? For the first time in the entire pregnancy the niggling fear that drove her to hate the dragonmen welled up and burned in her heart. And what truth was he hiding from her since that night under the clouds? And why could she not bring herself to ask about it?

Rayn was about to speak, when a private message arrived in his mind. He looked down at her, aware of her anxiousness but not afraid for it. "Arj has returned. The princess has asked me to welcome him. Do you mind?"

She shook her head. "No, no. Not at all. You get to work."

"You sure?"

She shoved him, "Mother's must rest and walk!" She shouted the old saying at him. "Go, and be back in time to make me dinner tonight!"

“OK!” he uttered his favorite saying from Ethphraim, and teleported away.

Jayd placed her hand on her back. It *was* sore. Being driven with dedication and surrounded by the prayers of her wiseman and tribe, she hadn't even noticed how pregnant she was feeling.

Your mother delivered the crib a month ago, Darkwing smiled at her. He was opposed to every mission in all that time, but Jayd could not rest. *Perhaps now you will heed my council?*

Jayd felt very tired, and wondered if it wasn't something Darkwing was doing. Probably just removing his enormous support so that she could feel her body like a normal woman would. It was as if someone had stuck an enormous Venmellon in her abdomen. A softly twitching and deeply loved Venmellon.

Jayd sighed, and throwing herself backwards allowed Darkwing to catch her on his leathery wing. But she gasped in terror as Darkwing caught her just half a breath too late.

She looked up at his face. He seemed sorry. In that moment the gnawing concern she felt at his growing distance welled up inside. There was no denying it now; he was very distant.

He knew her thoughts instantly, “I'm sorry, my rider. I just... its...”

She sighed, she knew it had been growing inside him all this past year, from before the time before she finally fell pregnant. There

was something, and it wasn't a bad thing, but it was a thing that made him grow away from her. It was time for him to become a noble, or to embrace old age and death.

Suddenly, without warning, he took to the air, and rocketed away on his wings of the night without her.

To preserve

Rayn sat on the bench at the small park near the diplomatic offices. There had been some misunderstanding between some men of Pearl and the dragonmen miners regarding the usual shipment of asteroid iron to Thiaz, and he felt to intervene before things got out of hand. Ironfang sat on the roof of a nearby building, watching him constantly, keeping the dragonmen in the park quiet and shy. He'd tried to be patient; he'd tried to be forgiving. But the dragonmen were very proud, and took even the slightest offence very personally, as if one who had trouble with the emperor held a criticism against their god. The coin, in his dream, did not often fall on sheathes very often these days.

He thought about Jayd, six months pregnant and still refusing to slow down in the slightest. He had not told her all he knew – that their son's life must of necessity be difficult. That he would bring a powerful genius into this universe, and he would be an orb wielder without equal in his time. But his life would be difficult. Rayn knew this, and he knew it would not be easy to tell her.

Ironfang grinned. He thought Rayn should tell her already. But Rayn was not sure how to bring it up, and was secretly glad she seemed to have forgotten his misgivings the day the thorn arrived.

Rayn was so lost in his thought that he did not notice the old food vendor till she was directly in his view. She was bent over with time, and didn't look at all like the vibrant young male soldiers that patrolled every corner. Her scales were a tint of blue, and he had the impression her ancestor had been a lightning dragon, perhaps. She was handing out phile, a strange protein drink the dragonmen seemed to prefer, though to himself and Ironfang, it was odd to the pallet.

Still, he was thirsty enough, "M'lady, if you will?" and he held out his hand.

She was startled, and looked immediately as if she'd only just realized he was there. For just an instant, her soul was terrified. But impressively she composed herself just as quickly. She trundled over to him. "I suppose, human priest, that if you seek our drink you must already know if it is to your taste."

He smiled, "I do know from experience that it does quench one's thirst," he spoke honestly.

She smiled at him, in a grandmotherly way. She handed him a steel cup, and he held it up for her to fill from her metal jug. "I trust, human, that you are well today?" she seemed to be making small talk as she poured.

He nodded, "Yes, indeed, thank you."

She finished pouring, and he was about to drink when she stopped him. "You humen have many more glucose receptors than we,

here, let me sweeten this up for you,” and with that she added a heaped spoon of sugar. She stirred it.

“That is very kind of you, good lady.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

He drank it all, and it was indeed to his taste. This was an addition the drink sorely needed. He was impressed. “You must take great pride in your work,” he told her a compliment he knew the dragonmen liked.

She stared in his face before replying, then moved to refill his drink. “I do, by the grace of the emperor, I do.”

He knew by the unhidden tone in her voice that she did not say all she felt. There was something else in there, something she wanted to tell him, and that he wanted to know. As he’d learnt long ago – creatures only needed silence to talk. She replaced her jug, and got out the sugar. “I used to sell flowers, before the all-mighty decided money was the root of all our evils.”

He’d heard all that much, about the emperor abolishing money and making all property his own only a few decades ago. Now, they worked for the people, or they died brutal deaths. Ethphraim hated it, Thiaz called it ‘bold’, and ‘courageous’.

“Flowers! How delightful.” He sipped his satiating drink. “May I ask, where did you get them from?”

She smiled with pride, “I grew them myself.” She took a red bloom from her tabard, and gave it to him. “They won’t let you take this off this world, I know, but I’d still like you to have it today, young manling. You have such a handsome face!” and she patted his cheek.

Her hand was cold, as they all were. But her face bore a uniqueness and kindness he did not often see on this world. She acted like a mother, and a servant, and a kind hearted soul. He was glad they’d met. “And you, good lady, have the finest drink in all the fragment!”

If she could blush, she did, “No one told me the humen were gifted with such kind words!”

Then she glanced away, and seeing some approaching soldiers, gave him a little smile, “Well, beautiful manling. We all have work to do,” she stated an old dragonmen aphorism, and with a grin began to push her cart away.

Rayn watched her as she left, leaving the two guards sent to accompany him waiting.

Their world has its problems, and a troubling history. But there is still kindness here. Ironfang observed.

The merchant watched the diplomat from Thiaz confer with the envoy of dragonmen. This time, the two nuggets of gold and small vial of flecks lay properly sequestered in his pocket. He'd found they never checked on his person, which was the oldest and most foolish hiding place. But the two empires were trading very well now, and they were learning more and more each day. But today the dragonmen miners had found a small, anomalous metal in an asteroid, and wisely decided to bring it to him. And he, perhaps unwisely, had decided to trouble the powerful diplomat with the curiosity.

“So do you know what it is?” he asked them again.

The diplomat scowled, taking the small, strange piece of metal in his hand. It was light, and colored like an opal – more than a little transparent. “It’s ductile, and conductive,” he informed them. “But it carries a resonance similar to the altered matter within the staff... strange indeed. I will have to take this to the metallurgists.”

The dragonman envoy agreed. “Matter such as this existed theoretically, but we are very surprised to find one in a Thiuzian Kuyper belt asteroid. It is sure to be an exo-system capture.”

The merchant was also inclined to agree, but he still wanted the treasure for himself. Work between the humans and dragonmen was going along very, very well now. There had never been any fights, and they'd learned how to avoid most of the misunderstandings, for now.

If the find proved valuable, and the dragonmen failed to provide him with their finds, well, there could well be... misunderstandings again.

The diplomat seemed to sense his concern, “Goodman merchant, do not be concerned. A find such as this does not hint at further findings, it is just an anomaly.”

He nodded complyingly. “Such a curious find!”

The dragonman envoy was watching him carefully. “If you want, I could have them bring in a scanner unit, and extra machinery so we could double-process the materials we find?”

The merchant was ecstatic, “Oh, yes!”

The diplomat seemed unimpressed. “More mining equipment, then?”

The envoy looked unflustered, “It was just a suggestion.”

The merchant knew when a free lunch was on offer, “Oh, please, good diplomat? I would not mind, and the benefits of the research can be freely shared with all people.”

The diplomat sighed, and allowed it with a wave of his hand. But then he condemned him with a grin, “Much like the gold in your pockets there?”

The merchant was silent.

The envoy chuckled, “You do know how to do business on Thiaz!” he teased the diplomat.

The human man smiled, and with a wave of his hand dismissed the quailing merchant.

He was off the hook, this time. But he knew he'd better watch himself now; for he was in the diplomat's debt. Best he be far, far quieter at their meetings from now on. Why, if there was anything out of the ordinary, he should probably not say another word at all. "Best not trouble them, unless it is something truly extraordinary," he promised himself.

Snow ignored Windfyrth, it was very easy for her to do. The older dragon was still diplomatizing all the humans, and now really enjoying herself sorting out trade between Pearl and their fragment world. They were on the fragment now, and the conversation so boring Windfyrth had allowed her sixteen-year-old rider away to the Queen's Garden to pass the time. And for that, Snow was greatly thankful.

She heard a shuffling, or felt it, under the rocks along the stones of the street where she walked. It would be one of those fat cockroaches that once lived in the dirtiest of star ships, now living rampant upon their world. But their minds were too small for her to communicate with. Thankfully, the younger dragon kin took to them like some sort of scurrying treat, and would hunt them from among

the stones when they wanted a challenge. It was a wonder to her the creatures still lived.

She approached the gate, the armed dragon men guards not impeding her in any way. If they'd known she had taught Darkwing to enter the shadowrealm to spy put their hatchlings, they had done or said nothing in all the time since. Were they so unaware of the shadow realm? That was Windfyrth's theory. Or were they so treacherous they expected a little back-and-forth spying on occasion? That was also Windfyrth's theory.

Snow liked the garden. It was impossible not to. It had countless flowers and birds and climbing vines, some taken from far away worlds, or recreated by staves, or invented from scratch. But many, perhaps all, were animated into life by the only materials they had available to them; the life ribbons of humans and dragons. And that made the plants unique, and more than a little *weird*.

And that, she could not help it, reminded her of herself.

Windfyrth scoffed at the analogy, which made Snow smile. Even in the midst of diplomacy, her dragon was always there. Her soul.

She walked to the main grove, and was surprised and disappointed to see the empress here right now. She didn't want to see worded creatures right now. The empress was seated on her chair,

gazing out at the garden, as though she had no other job to do in all the empire but admire the garden and be the wife of a powerful male.

It seemed a fairly easy life to Snow, but sloth was not her people's way.

Neither is failing to have children before one turned 18. Windfyrth mocked her in her heart. It was supposed to be a caution to take other people's cultures with deference and respect. Instead, it just reminded her of how different she was to all her older sisters and brother. They had large families, each of them. Big families... ran in the family.

She spied a small, multipedal, owl-like creature hiding in the trunk of the tree nearby. *Excuse me*, she pried.

Oh! The owl-thing replied; a fairly common response for the wiser creatures to her unique gift.

What are you? she asked.

I am what I am, the owl said. Then it seemed to ponder a moment. *And what are you? You smell like worms and daisies, though I don't think I'd like to bite you.*

I do appreciate that thought, Snow agreed. It had popped out to look at her, and its beak was every part the danger that face-knives could be. *I am human*, she told it.

You are not like the others here. It confessed, peering out to sniff at her further. *You bring memories... I trust you.* It concluded.

She was grateful for that trust. *The others here are the dragonmen. Some of them I like, some of them, I do not.* She looked at the dragon empress, wondering if she liked her enough to greet her. Which, given even her dragon's heart to overcome her natural shyness, was still not enough.

That one, the owl said, is not like the others either.

Snow wondered what it meant.

The owl-esque entity hopped out to look over. *She we fear. She is master of all here, the true apex predator.*

That thought made her, and Windfyrth, ponder. Truly, the queen was huge, and powerful. But she stood somewhat painfully, and lacked energy.

Do you know why she is always tired? she asked the owl.

It seemed to think about that. *They give her to drink a poison. Perhaps she is too powerful and must sleep in the day walk? I care not, it keeps her from being hungry enough to eat me, and for that, I am thankful.* And with that, as if the topic of conversation made it nervous, it flew away.

But Snow knew it was very important information, and sent it to Jayd immediately.

Snow walked towards the empress, knowing now it was her dragon that made her feet walk.

The empress heard her approach. “Lady Snow, I had a feeling you would find your way here today, eventually.”

She bowed politely, perhaps too politely. But then again, the empress really did remind her of a dragon. “Great Empress of all under the black sun, long life and well-earned conquest to you this day.”

The empress smiled, but looked at her with half closed eyes, as if she was trying to keep herself mostly awake on a fair day in a warm garden. “I think, of all the riders of Pearl, you are my favorite.”

Snow wasn't sure what to make of the compliment, though Windfyrth told her it was time to blush, she did not. “I really like your garden,” she replied.

The empress smiled again, and sat up straighter so that her arm was draped over the back of Snow's chair. “There is a scent about you, young human maid. Are you considering breeding soon?”

The question surprised her, but not as much as she thought it might, which was surprising in and of itself. “At my age, just two years ago, women were expected to get married and start a family. Almost no one lived over 40, so children were expected soon. We do not have to do that now, so I think most of us are delaying a family. But... I suppose you are not wrong. Now that I think about it, I have begun to wonder what it might be like to have a child.”

The empresses seemed to become very interested. “You humans take so much better care of your young than we do. Than the dragons

ever did. A few hours, at most, and then the little hatchlings are expected to take care of themselves. But I think I would very much like my own hatchling to care for, for many years at least. Perhaps it is the human in me.”

“Perhaps,” Snow agreed, fascinated that Windfyrth was listening very closely but not telling her to say anything in particular. “You a wedded being, are you not? Have you no children then?”

The empress sighed sadly, and looked away. But it was not a normal sigh, it was a bit of a hiss, like a dragon. “My mate has no use for children, at least not for many years. I think if they could extend his life forever, he would risk no heir... you mustn’t tell anyone I said that,” she seemed genuinely worried, and Snow fully intended to keep her secret. She nodded.

“I do like you,” the empress confessed, patting her hair like she was the pet. Snow didn’t mind, she even quite liked it. But Windfyrth was fuming – on the inside. “How large a clutch would you like?”

Snow pondered, only wondering though Windfyrth’s thoughts why the empress was so curious about such things. “I think that will be a course for my eventual husband and I to decide together,” Snow said, citing tradition.

“Oh, how romantic!” the empress replied. “To decide together, what a treat! Not to be treated like a trophy, but to actually have a say!

Ahh, but I complain. My emperor has stopped at nothing for my pleasure. You do like my garden, don't you?"

Snow did not reply. She had already answered that question. She intended to tell her about the owl, and perhaps what it had told her, but Windfyrth forbade it. "It is very green," she observed instead.

The empress squirmed with delight. "There is no better place in all the fragment, I believe."

"Then ... I guess he does love you?" Snow ventured to surmise.

The empress withdrew her arm, and seemed bothered. But perhaps because she could read animals so well, she recognized it hid a powerful anger in the dragonmen queen. "My husband did not make this place." Her pause to think here was long, and Snow just waited. Then empress' half-closed eyes belied the happiness in her smile. "It was the high priest, Arj, who made this garden."

It really is a very pretty garden, snow thought.

But apparently the empress had more to say. "He created the life forms here himself, and he got better and better at it every time. So creative! And the whole design, and the art. Those were his ideas. He is a very clever man, I think. So very clever."

Snow said nothing, but that was only because the passion in the empress' words almost choked her. What was she feeling exactly? Snow could not tell. Anger? Love? Tired?

The empress continued, “And he was so careful not to take any time from his duties, no. This man managed all the important work after hours, long into the night. I am deeply indebted to him. Deeply.”

Again, the feelings, but then a sudden silence.

“Your priest has a very pure soul,” Snow thought out loud.

“He does.”

Then, without any warning, words fell into her mouth from her dragon Windfyrth. Unkind words, though she knew why she spoke them, “You called him a man, however. I thought he was a dragonman.”

The empress almost froze, but seemed relaxed enough to not be bothered. Almost too relaxed. She paused only a moment before replying. “Your dragon made you say that, didn’t she? I recognize the harmonics from the great diplomat Windfyrth. That is something she would say.”

Snow did not reply, but Windfyrth was scandalized. No normal human would have known. No common creature could have possibly determined from the mere timber of her voice such subtleties, not unless they had a dragon gift themselves, or a very pure soul.

The empress again filled the silence. “Yes, I did say that, didn’t I? Oh, well. They call him the man-hearted, after all.” Her voice seemed to harden. “He’s so human, you all look alike to me.”

Snow felt sad. Here her dragon was, yet again, teasing and testing others for her own benefit.

The empress stood unsteadily to her feet. “Thank you, both, for this lovely conversation. I’d best be going now.”

But Snow did not need a dragon heart to know the empress was in pain. *She really does have a thing for this man-hearted priest*, Snow observed.

Yes, Windfyrth agreed. And he does seem willing to put in a lot of work just for her comfort...

That, Snow decided, is a joining that will get them both killed.

Not the empress, Windfyrth concluded. A beating, perhaps. She considers her voice without power, but if you have seen all I have seen among the soldiers that serve her emperor, and heard the whispers among the people who serve the military on this fragment – her voice is powerful, and it will never be silenced easily.

Dead man's fingers

He had not joined her for dinner, he was not present all the following day. He had not seen or spoken to her in three months. And now, the hour of the birth was approaching. There was less than three days.

So, General Jayd went to find Darkwing.

She found him, moments later, at his old unclaimed roost at Dead Man's fingers by the seaside.

It was not difficult; she knew in her heart where he would be. The other nobles of their world had been suspiciously close to his roost the entire time of his gathering ascension. Her fears of the gathering might of the Dragonmen had been allayed somewhat of late – they behaved themselves wisely, and did not appear to be overly preparing for any large-scale war. She was grateful, for now she could commit to her most important task.

A part of her felt sorry, she had not told Rayn about the portents of suffering surrounding her son, nor that his spirit was already with her, which begged the question of why her husband still didn't seem to know. But neither had he spoken of what secret concerns burdened him, though admittedly she had avoided the whole uncomfortable conversation behind the dragonmen situation.

But that time had come, and it was no longer wise to avoid such truths. But, first, she had to check on Darkwing.

She rode down from the sky on her dragon wings, the dragon who accompanied her staying well away, out of respect. Stormclouds had made the journey take only a few breaths, so she was grateful. But he'd been no gentler on her though nine months pregnant, which was fairly typical of the proud rebel.

She landed at Darkwing's feet. He was enormous now, looking to surpass even the normal size of the nobles. But his mind was a bastion of secrecy to her. Still, she had to look him in the eyes, and know where he stood in her situation.

I'm sorry, Darkwing apologized.

Whatever do you mean? Jayd asked. Something really was wrong. Was there no turning him away from what he was about to do?

He sighed. *It is not you. It could never be you.* He walked out, looking at the endlessly crashing waves of the Death Man's Fingers. *The change is coming upon me, sooner than is usual.*

The change? she asked, knowing that she already knew.

He nodded. *The change, the time when a dragon finds a cause compelling enough to drive their existence forever more, or the time to choose to die of old age in less than a decade.*

And Jayd knew her dragon well enough already to tell he was not going to give up on life any millennia soon.



And, thus, neither would she.

Something is coming. Something big. He explained. *I cannot see it yet, but it is near... and I think...*

You need some space, she finished before he could say it.

He laughed. *I would never have phrased it like that! But yes, that's a good phrase for it. Because it means I will be back.*

Sudden vulnerability welled up inside her. “My child is about to be born, and you’re talking about needing space! What about us!” She regretted the words even as they came out of her mouth.

He turned, and smiled at her. They both knew she would be all right. She had the best healers and the best midwives of all seven worlds. Little harm could befall the son of the general of Pearl.

But her tears fell anyway. Already she could feel his soul pulling away from her. It was already so far away! But he was not leaving. He was... he just... needed some space for whatever dragon thing he was going through. They did this all the time, giving each other some privacy – when she wanted to surprise him, or when she mated her husband.

But this still felt different; it felt like an abandoning, at her most vulnerable time.

She held him close, and he her.

Then she sighed. She needed to be brave. Dragon riders of millennia had been though such and far worse before her. And Divinity would have a plan, for sure. It always did.

You will not be able to hear me, nor feel my strength, he explained. *And I cannot tell you why it is necessary to be this way, but it is. I will return. You will not be alone.*

“I love you, always, my Darkwing.” She did not doubt him, but it still hurt her as she flew away from him into the night.

The merchant was very surprised this time to see the meeting had somehow called for quite a few more persons than was usual. He

was careful to not keep the nugget in his pocket, or even in the room this time, one of the only ones since the previous meeting.

But the room was busy. The diplomat of Thiaz had brought two others, no four. And the envoy of the Fragment had brought three of his own. One was one who had been at the presentation of the new princess of Pearl. But he did not look at all friendly at this time.

“Merchant,” the diplomat said with a sever look. “Our meeting is brief this time, but you must take the long way back, you understand?”

He knew well enough his own people to know this was not a request. This had likely come from the council itself. He nodded quickly.

The diplomat handed him the tile that contained the details of the latest merchant work, and he traded it for the knowledge granted to the sphere the diplomat carried – all the maps and analysis of the asteroids. A little gold had been found, but they needn’t know about that. Sadly, no strange pearlesque metal was found either, and he would have told them about that – if it was something they’d brought up. But this was, clearly, not the time for that.

No one was speaking. This was not the time to dally.

The diplomat nodded him out, and probably tried to say something light hearted and, perhaps, a little too nonchalant. “Be sure

to bring us any extra nuggets you find, merchant. Our queen is keen to convince our people of the dragonmen's work ethic!"

At those words, he broke into a sweat. Did they know? Did they already know, again? He tried to read it from the diplomat's face, but there were no clues there. He turned to leave, and took quick steps to the door. He wanted to turn around, but didn't dare. But he'd only made it two steps out of the door before he realized this was not a risk he could take. If the queen wanted the nugget, she could have it. If not for his loyalty to her beautiful wisdom, then for the risk of his life to offend her.

He turned back to step into the doorway, gold nugget materialled in his hand, and froze. There, unexpectedly stepping from the shadows, was the military prince Greyskull. The highest-ranking warrior in all the dragonmen lands behind the emperor himself.

Greyskull saw him in an instant.

"Oh, *stupid* merchant," the diplomat mourned. "How I wish you had *not* seen that."

A blast from the diplomat's weapon was all it took to render him entirely unconscious, his final, failing thought the beginning of the words, *I hope my family...*

The prophet Arj

Rayn was worried about Jayd. She had bid her Darkwing farewell one last time before his ascent. Again, she was the bravest, most courageous person he knew. I am glad you have at least seven hundred years in you, Rayn told Ironfang.

You should have been there for her, now, Ironfang protested.

Rayn did not argue, but he also knew it was simply not true. He was not welcomed at this farewell. It was not for him. But, perhaps, they could have flown her home again? No. She would not have been comfortable for him to see those tears. Those were for her dragon, and not him.

Ironfang did not argue, because he knew it would be true. And, above all, they knew Darkwing needed to do what dragons needed to do when they became nobles. And that meant they needed space, or their rider's soul might be torn apart in the meteoric changes that took place at that time. And that would kill them both.

So, Rayn and Ironfang had spent the day in diplomacy with Pure, and Caspina, and the council. Rayn thought it prosperous times. But, soon, a small alert sounded. Arj wanted to speak to them, urgently.

Rayn took his leave of the princess and went to the observatory above the conclave to speak to his friend and fellow priest.

As soon as he saw the Arj, Rayn and Ironfang agreed – he looked nervous. Outwardly, no change. Behavior? Mannerisms? Almost unperceivable differences. But his aura? Hard. Shallow.

“What’s the matter, Arj?” Rayn asked him.

The man stuttered to reply. “Oh! A trifling thing. Some misunderstanding between the workers and Thiaz, again.”

“And how does this involve us?” Ironfang spoke.

Arj barely glanced at him. “A worker from Pearl. A reporter or surveyor, as I recall? Seems to have been caught up in it all. Perhaps it would be better if you came along.”

Rayn had to agree, better to get their people out of there before the treachery of Thiaz found a way to profit by it.

“We’re on our way,” Rayn said, well aware of the warning tingle in his staff.

The diplomat of Thiaz laughed. The dragonman envoy was being very comical.

“You do realize that this one event cements our alliance and determines the course of action for the next millennia?” he told the dragonman.

The scaly envoy smiled. “And well worth it, I say! Who would have thought we could have seen eye to eye on such a matter, yet here we stand, on the eve of the most glorious war this sector has ever seen!”

The human diplomat scoffed. “You were spared the privations of the Perish! And, besides, I think you’ll find most of the upcoming battle will be over before it begins.”

The dragonman nodded. “Pearl has already sent its high priest into our trap.”

“The queen of Thiaz is most anxious to see him punished for his crimes.”

“You really want that fortress back, don’t you,” the dragonman grinned.

“And you will find that once Pearl is out of the way, that Sanmarellis is an easy conquest,” the diplomat nodded.

The dragonman grinned. He seemed to be finding much more sport in all this than the Thiaz military were. This was work. This was just another day. But the endless hordes of dragonmen meant that they had blood to spare in pointless battle. Let them have Sanmarellis, let them have Tourmarelle and Ethphraim. No position would do them

any good once Thiaz claimed the fortress, vaporized their home world, and summarily slaughtered every dragonman abomination from under the stars.

But the warmongering dragonmen could not see beyond the glory of their next battle. Pearl would suffer, as would Chalcedonah who would no doubt attempt to intervene. But if diplomacy failed to stop them the blockade of a million-battle craft of Thiaz surely would. It was only a matter of an hour till the elite cleared the fortress and began the purge of the foolish dragonmen too caught up in their lust for war on Sanmarellis.

It was unfortunate, but deceiving the dragonmen was what had to be done. Pearl should have seen to this itself; but it was too timid and covered by the green skinned monsters and their megalomaniacal emperor. So, once again, it would be Thiaz's job to clean up after everyone else.

But the foolish dragonman would know nothing of that. "You'll find the dragons of Sanmarellis poor sport, I fear. They are not warriors."

"Ahh, but the prebeasts! Their scent alone gets my salivary glands watering! Come, let us see if the fleet is in position."

They looked again at the holograph of lights, the dim ring of military waiting to take up position in the blockade of Pearl all set to

go. But one trio of dim lights did confuse him, pulling up alongside the largest moon of Thiaz, Lrobros. “Envoy, what is this?”

The dragonman looked confused, and pulled up a detailed schedule. “Looks like a newer supply of iron for the merchants of Thiaz. Since the incident last week, they’re using a gravity cruiser to ship the supply.”

“Hmm,”

“Well, at least they’ll be on time!” the dragonman grinned.

The human diplomat had already lost interest. More than a million vessels awaited the message from high command and Pearl would be severed from the threads it so coveted. What would become of their citizens and dragons from the unabated wrath of the dragonmen was an unwelcomed thought, but it was what had to be done.

Battle cruiser

Ironfang roared as soon as they materialized on the deck of the battle cruiser.

Rayn immediately knew they were not where they were supposed to be, but he did not fear, as though destiny was unfolding in the inevitable judgment of the choices of others.

A hundred, hundred guns pointed in their direction.

Arj threw himself on the floor, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! My emperor, I could not disobey my emperor!”

Rayn looked down at him in pity.

Ironfang scanned the area. It was not a good place for a battle. His claws gripped the silver floor but it barely dented.

They have learned how to temporarily overcome the strength of dragon claws, Ironfang growled in grim acknowledgment.

“Ironfang, Rayn!” the emperor’s voice called out.

For one frightening moment Rayn realized he could not sense the emperor’s spirit. He reached into his staff – there was a regional sequester. It was a new one, very ... mechanical. Gently he pierced its veil before replying. “Emperor, we’re honored to be here, and impressed that you managed to weave the threads so that we are not

where we expected to be. I take it, therefore, that you are considering doing us harm?”

The emperor laughed. A moment later a bright light shot down from a cannon and penetrated right through Ironfang’s wing.

The mighty dragon grimaced in pain.

“There are a hundred such lasers, all programmed with the specific resonance of your mighty dragon there, and all capable of targeting and firing over a thousand times a second.”

Rayn had heard the emperor’s idle boasts before, but he was not sure this was not one of those boasts.

The emperor continued, this time his voice serious, and threatening. “Deliver the white staff to us, and you live. Deny us, and we take it from you evaporated corpses.”

Rayn stood tall. He was not afraid, but knew some very unpleasant things awaited him. “You are free to choose,” he told the emperor. “The war has not started. Call off your forces; call off the thorn of bronze. Stop this before it begins – the power is in your mighty claw.”

The emperor merely laughed. “What, and deny my people their right of governing the lesser humans? You exiled us to a dying world. Then hid from us hoping we would die. But we did not. We fought on, and we survived. And now we will rule you humans as slaves, and the dragons, they will be our sport.”

Ironfang growled threateningly, the guns tracing his every movement. It was a mighty demonstration of his newfound self-control since finding Rayn – he wanted to start smashing things right away.

Rayn found the emperor's words amusing. "Turn back now, while there is still time."

"While I live, the dragonmen serve only to concur the universe for me. We are perfection, and our civilization the only worthy and wise one. Come, would you like to see the folly of Thiaz? They taught us how to hide our deeds from you. Now give me the staff."

Rayn felt sick. So, Thiaz was behind this as well?

He looked down, allowing his hand to fall from the staff even as it continued to stand there on the floor. He knew he could stop them; its power was great. He could switch off the cannons; he could reawaken the threads with its authority. How they'd managed to switch them he did not know, but he soon would.

But he also knew that no man, no being, was guilty of a crime until it had actually committed that crime. Until the deed was done, judgement had no claim on the creature.

Though what that meant for him, and his unborn son, he dared not think. "I perceive you would have driven your people to endless war without us. I perceive that the very pit Thiaz dug for you will be

filled with their own corpses. I perceive the fire you start today cannot be quenched except by my civilization's extinction, or your own."

"Take his staff!" the emperor roared.

Rayn allowed Arj to grab the white staff. "I'm sorry, he's just... my emperor."

Rayn nodded, but it was a poor excuse.

Chains shot up from the ground and encircled Ironfang, pinning him to the floor painfully. There was some demonry in the chains; they would not break until a wiseman cast such out.

"You really are a fool," the emperor muttered. "With no staff to protect you, what can you do to stop us? If you deny us, your dragon dies, and if your dragon causes any trouble, you die. Take him."

Two heavily armored dragonmen soldiers, the elite from the emperor's personal bodyguard, entered in and bound him.

Rayn spoke one last curse before he left, "I perceive you will cause the wound that destroys your own soul."

The Treachery

Jayd knew something was wrong immediately.

It was not the constant chatter over the orbs, or the confusion that was breaking out among the military. Thiaz was moving over two million starships to where they were not needed. Lines of communication were falling silent. There was a trembling through the golden threads that only the dragons could feel.

No, she felt this in her *soul*; Something was wrong with her husband.

She would have taken Darkwing with her, then she could at least bring her guards with her. But the shadow dimension was a place no one else could go.

Except Snow.

Jayd raced out of the fortress in a chariot as fast as the night. They found Snow and Windfyrth in some council, already harnessed and armored.

“Something’s happening,” Snow’s voice trembled voice.

Jayd spoke directly to Windfyrth, “You need to get me into their lands immediately. They have Rayn.”

Snow nodded for them both, while Windfyrth began making orders for war.

Jayd didn't need an orb to see the chaos growing around them.

Pure!

She broke through the Queen's distractions easily. She was talking to some dragonmen diplomats. They were winging about something.

Something's happening! Pure said. *Caspina said-*

Jayd almost swore, *This is it, princess! The dragonmen are going to attack!*

What are you saying! Pure demanded evidence.

Where is my husband!

No one could find him, not over the helms, not through the staffs.

"Arrest those two!" Pure demanded, voice dripping with hate at the distracting diplomats.

Jayd did not waste another breath, her voice shouting out to all seven worlds. *All forces, to arms! The dragonmen are attacking, the dragonmen are attacking!*

The human diplomat smiled. It was working just as anticipated. As the prejudice of Jayd of the Celtwyld sponsored a disorganized military across all seven worlds to fall apart over themselves in

confusion, a gentle yet unbreakable blockade settled over her little white planet.

It would mean nothing when twenty million fully armed dragonmen descended on her world, giving Thiaz the chance to finally claim the fortress that was their right of power and conquest.

But those millions of soldiers seemed to be taking their time.

“What is the delay?” he asked the dragonman.

The scaled envoy grinned, “Nothing, just waiting for the right moment. We want them to think they have a chance to stand against us so as to draw out all their forces. It will make the conquest of their world much simpler in the long run.”

The diplomat from Thiaz nodded. He expected as much.

What he did not expect was the alarm from Lrobros.

“Sir, we have a situation,” his assistant called.

It had already been twenty minutes since the war began. Small dragonmen forces were making their way down to Pearl’s surface now, torn to shreds in seconds by incensed dragon riders. Pearl’s diplomats were screaming at Thiaz to end the blockade, but that was never going to happen.

“What do you mean?” the diplomat asked, confused.

The assistant tried to turn the conversation away from the dragonman envoy. “It’s Lrobros, we just lost contact with main

command. There are reports of explosions, and the orbs are going silent all over Thiaz.”

The blood drained from the diplomat’s face. So, this was the play of the dragonmen, this was their gambit. It was a ruse all along.

Smiling, he walked up to the dragonman envoy. Then, all decorum lost, the diplomat struck an angry fist into the scaled face of his interlocutor. Wiser words failed him that moment, bitter words of the hate he had planted were all he had, “The attack on Lrobros is completely unjustified!”

The dragonman turned, rubbing his wounded jaw, dark thoughts rolling from a malicious grin, “The attack on Lrobros,” he replied, “was simply the beginning.”

The battle was joined.

Arj found himself fidgeting. He was watching as they strapped the human man onto the medical bench. “I’m sorry,” he called again, for what it was worth.

“This is not going to go the way your emperor thinks it will.”

Arj cast down his gaze. “You are probably right. I was one of many who counselled him against it. But seated in his bronze throne,

he does not feel any death or danger can come to him, and feels if it does, he would welcome it. I fear he seeks only glory, or death.”

“He will have both, before this is done.”

Arj could not but agree.

“Then why all this,” Rayn asked, looking around at the invasive machinery around him.

“I’m sorry-”

But here the lead surgeon cut Arj off. “You’re a unique being, Rayn. Did you know? It took us months to figure out your achievement once we got the data download from Arj’s staff here. It would have been easier if Thiaz had let us *buy* a teacher, but no, they wanted us destroyed right from the start. Kidnapping you at the beginning of this war was just the opportunity we needed to scan your human brain.” He adjusted several dials, moving the lights nearer. “You’re from a primitive culture, human, so I’m keen to let you know – did you understand about infinite complexity of the human mind? Did you know its fractal makeup really does allow for an unlimited amount of knowledge to be stored in there? I mean, did you know?”

Rayn had heard as much from the teachers, but did not want to honor this heartless being with his words.

The dragonmen surgeon continued, unfazed. That he already no longer considered Rayn anything other than a curiosity and a resource was abundantly clear. “But I’m left to wonder if you knew that your

mind currently possesses ALL human knowledge? Did you know that, Rayn of the Celtwyld?"

He did not. How was this possible? But it felt true. It felt very, very true. But how?

His eyes lit up with sudden understanding – the Southern Oracle! At the Venfirth. Before Pure had repaired it, it was uncalibrated, sending out all knowledge at once. And he, like the handful of priestesses remaining from that time, had looked into the eyes of that oracle while it was damaged. While it was still pouring out all it knew to anyone who looked in its damaged eyes.

All human knowledge, up to the fall of the plague.

All the information that the dragonmen had lost, or never gained.

All of that pressing up against the edges of his mind. It explained everything; the way he knew things he did not know he knew, such as the arc of fire, or how to make functional liver from a labcoat. It explained the headaches, and the random and confusing thoughts that had plagued his mind for the past two years. It was everything humans knew.

A far cry from infinite, but still more than one mortal man should have to continuously process.

And now, all that knowledge was about to become harvested by the dragonmen.

The surgeon knew what he was pondering. “We deleted too much; I always knew. We had to reinvent forcefields from scratch. Just think; the secrets of the thread from before humans arrived in this sector of space! The mysteries of genomes from species outside this galaxy! It will be ... wonderful!”

Rayn was torn, had they not kept this knowledge from the dragonmen would he not be in this predicament? Unlikely, they needed to remove him from the war – he might already be dead. For now, he had something they needed, and he needed to find a way to fight them.

They stabbed him in the arm and he felt it going numb.

The dragonman surgeon gave him a mocking pity. “Oh, human. We don’t need your conscious mind to harvest the data. In fact, it is unlikely that you will survive the process at all!”

As his consciousness slipped Rayn felt the bronze battleship rock as an enraged dragon pulled against his chains far away.

Day 1

Pure was angry. They brought the disheveled man right into her presence.

They had already executed the dragonmen who had distracted her, and imprisoned every other one they could find. Thousands had died raining death down on her world, the poisons they brought being fought off by sage and priest worldwide.

Even Farwing was livid with himself for not preempting the attack.

Her first thought when she saw the struggling man was to burn his face off, but her husband was from his world, and in pity to him for what had happened, she did not.

The soldier of Thiaz looked up at her.

“Your world is covered in blood and fire,” she told him, and he openly wept.

A thundering grating noise announced Farwing pressing against the castle of the fortress. “Tell us all you know,” he said.

A sage stood by the prisoner, reading his mind, allowing certain images to flood into the air around them.

But the soldier spoke willingly anyway, “I was only told to attend the blockade. We didn’t even know why. No one said a thing,

we just knew we were blockading Pearl, and we knew some mischief was afoot. My wingman, he guessed it. Said we were stopping anyone from preventing the dragonmen from concurring Pearl so that we could claim your fortress...” he wept again. “None of us guessed it was simply to distract *us!* We stood our ground, it was more than six hours till we were called off the blockade to protect Thiaz, but by then it was already too late!”

Caspina looked angry, “They knew Thiaz had the strongest and had the most centralized government of all the worlds. Now they are fallen, the other worlds will be a relatively easy matter!”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Pure said with venom.

“My lady,” Haggardbreath spoke, a gifted military dragon. “The dragonmen have military forces in the systems of all the six remaining colonies of men and dragons. The threat is clear – if anyone attacks, they will suffer immediate repercussions to their –”

He stopped short as the tyrant emperor of the dragonmen made a public announcement, “Men, dragons, servants of the empire. Today we announce the righteous annexation of Thiaz by the dragonmen. They were planning to rise up against you all, using us as their battle fodder. We have turned their own scheme against them, and now have brought them into the glorious unification with the Empire! To the rest of the great civilizations of dragons and men, we bid peace. We never intended any of you harm in any way. We wish to live in peace. We

offer you our claw of brotherhood and fellowship. We offer you this chance to live in peace with us, or you, as Thiaz, will suffer the rage of the dragonmen.”

Then all was silent.

“He intends to play on our sympathies and fear, paralyze us with doubt, separate us from our allies, and concur us one by one.” Haggardbreath proclaimed.

“Never,” Pure promised.

Dragons all over the fortress roared.

“My queen,” Rhoc interrupted. No one wanted battle more than he. “They have Rayn.”

“I know,” Pure relied. “But Jayd and Snow are seeking him.”

Rhoc moved up to her, looking down on her. His face was twisted in the helpless fear they all felt right now. “He’s in trouble... he’s in very big trouble.”

“My queen,” Haggardbreath spoke. “What are your orders?”

“Launch the fortress.”

Pleading

Somehow, in the surgery, Rayn found a moment of consciousness. He was surprised to find the surgeon standing over him, some kind of light in his eyes.

A high ranking soldier was on him next. “You, human! Your queen is attacking our forces at the six colonies of humanity. Tell her to give it up, this instant, or you and her entire world dies.”

Rayn wondered if they knew, the moment he awoke, so did Ironfang. He was still trapped in the steel room, chained to the floor. They’d shot him a few more times, but only to wound. But what the dragonmen did not know was how their combined strength surged into each other in that moment. Rayn’s faith, and Ironfang’s cunning.

“What, I don’t...” Rayn muttered.

A rough and scaly hand grabbed his throat.

“I told you,” the surgeon pled. “The damage is too severe, he will never recover-”

“No, no, I can do this,” Rayn muttered.

“Impossible,” the surgeon mused in wonder.

They pushed some kind of recording device up to his face.

Rayn spoke, not having to try very hard to look wounded. “Please, Pure, give this up! The dragonmen are too powerful; they

have lights that cut dragon skin, they have chains that master dragon strength. If you don't leave, I'll die here on this operating table. Don't let the men die for me, save yourselves!"

The soldier snickered, pushing buttons on the device.

A moment later Arj could be heard shouting, "No, stop! Don't you realize what he just did!"

The dragonmen looked at him.

Arj moved into his field of view. "They will know he wants them to do only the opposite of what he says, and don't you realize they can find him through his own eyes!"

"I'd like to see them try," the soldier muttered. "This is the most secure battleship in the entire fleet. There's no way they're making it in here alive."

They looked at him and he at them, just enough to give Arj the wicked grin he deserved.

Then Rayn passed out.

After the surgery

Rayn woke up on a hard metal floor. His head hurt. His eyes were in pain.

“I did what I could,” he heard Arj state.

Rayn gave a start; he didn’t know anyone was in his cell.

Arj continued, “Put your eyeballs back together, resealed the skin to the back of your skull.” He sighed, “But even that cannot explain how you survived. I can only assume your dragon had something to do with it.”

At the mention of his dragon Rayn tried to sit up, but it was impossible. He had to feel his way back into his body. “Did ... they get what they wanted?” he asked.

Arj may have been surprised at the question. But then he huffed, and seemed to answer honestly, “Most of it. Plenty had already faded; some never seems to have arrived. But the bulk of it was still there, inside your mind. It will give all our best scientists the next generation to figure it out, and will likely bring you some peace of mind as well, now that the excess energy is drawn away.”

“Jayd saw the birthing rooms,” Rayn replied.

“I... was not aware.”

“You surprised us,” Rayn answered. “You adapt quickly, and you master technology with all the speed and passion of any human.”

“And, thanks to you, we will have access to the teachers in a generation or so.”

“I’m surprised Thiaz didn’t help you.”

“They stopped us; we knew they would. From before we even set foot on their world their teachers were silent to us. Even after we concurred it all, we cannot get anything from them. You think they could have forced it out of the prisoners, but apparently not.”

Rayn laughed, perhaps at the brutality of the dragonmen to the traitors of Thiaz, perhaps at his own predicament.

But Ironfang was safe now, and alive. Of that much he was certain. Better still, they were no longer expecting anything from him, now that Rayn was barely conscious.

Even so, Rayn made sure Ironfang could see through his eyes.

Rayn rolled over to his side, but lay back down. It seemed Arj had done a very sincere job of putting him back together, though it lacked the finesse Rayn himself would have managed.

“Why?” he asked, regarding why Arj had help save him.

“I owed it to you.”

Rayn laughed again, the sound hurting his ribs. “You’re a good man, Arj. You have kept every law your emperor has given you,

despite your personal protests and the fact that you knew it was completely, immorally, wrong.”

Arj did not argue.

“Every law,” Rayn grinned, “except one.”

Arj raised his brow in curiosity.

“You’re in love with his female.”

Arj’s mouth flew open in surprise, and he likely suppressed a desire to incinerate Rayn right there and then. Then he composed himself. “No, I keep that law perfectly well. The empress is dragonhearted, as we say. She enjoys the company of those that are more... human-like. Such as myself. But to say I fancy the female is a poor jest.”

Now Rayn laughed, though it still hurt. “I think, you will find, the whole joke is upon you. All this, this war. Let it be on the both of you.”

Arj stood. “You show poor gratitude.”

“And how many died today on Pearl? Among the seven worlds? Millions if not thousands of millions of Thiaz, I’ll guess.”

Arj turned. “Maybe more.”

“This war will not end with Thiaz. Your emperor intends to claim every human life, every strand of DNA he can gather, as his own property. If you do not stop him, Arj, death will overtake both our people.”

Arj sighed, leaning against the wall. “The war will be long. I know. I... I don’t hold out any hope for peace. Your queen is already using the threads to take her fortress to all seven human worlds, he doesn’t seem to count Argentus. By the end of the day, she will have flushed out the remaining militia, and then she will come here.”

Rayn sensed a deep sorrow in the man... but not for himself, for the humans. “... its’ a trap, isn’t it?”

Arj sighed, looking away.

Rayn wondered what he meant. How could the might of all the seven worlds, fortress included, be put at defiance by all he knew of the forces of the dragonmen?

Perhaps there was, indeed, something he didn’t know about.

He looked then, using his dragon’s wisdom and the power of the white staff. They had underestimated the technological prowess of the dragonmen once today... perhaps they did have some unseen advantage they did not know about? Something similar to the sequester they were under today that he’d already broken...

Yes... indeed. Then he saw them. Six great, dark ... ships. Massive vessels, like thorns made of bronze. Hidden inside the planetoid as though making it up, or at least a third of it. They had turned their world into a weapon!

“How!” Arj marveled. “How did you manage to find the dreadnaughts?! How could you piece the sequester like that!”

Rayn sighed, and lay back down. It had not been easy.

“We still don’t know enough about our human ancestors.” Arj admitted, sealing the room. Perhaps as a defense from Rayn, perhaps as a defense for him, it was uncertain.

“And I doubt you ever will, now that we know we cannot trust any of you.” But he felt a strange pity he knew came from the Divine. Arj’s people did not want a war, though their military were all expendable drones. He had seen such art and beauty, and even kindness among them. They deserved to live. The... Divine insisted the Dragonmen should live.

But his bold claim seemed to hurt Arj. The priest did not want a war, now in his heart. “It is not as if you have the power to do anything about it now, human. You don’t even have your staff!”

Rayn laughed, again a tug of sorrow on his heart for Arj. “Oh, my fellow priest; What makes you think I ever needed to touch the white staff to use it?”

Rayn knew the dragonman priest was about to act, so he gave him no time. There was a trick all priests had, the ability to transmute normal matter into its antimatter form. The resulting explosion could be used to create a random chaos of an electromagnetic maelstrom, which the priests could shape to suit their needs.

None of the dragonmen were prepared for the atomic detonation of a matter/antimatter reaction in the middle of their bronze battleship.

The resulting sphere of plasma devoured their entire central section. Rayn only had a moment to redirect a splinter of that energy out towards the cannons threatening Ironfang, evaporating a meter wide hole in the center of each of them. Ironfang had less than a second to grab hold of the gold threads, his iron chains still clasped around him. Dragging them with him he snatched Rayn from the prison cell and away into the safety of space even as the white staff rematerialized in his hand.

He never even saw the look of horror on Arj's face as they disappeared.

Hidden in a secret weapon deep within their world, the emperor scanned the information quickly.

"Thiaz capitulated even sooner than we'd hoped," Greyskull mused. "And their military is in disarray. The conquest was easy."

"Even so, war is never won without sacrifice," the emperor stated, studying the profiles of those recommended for execution, because they were motivated individuals. Not all, just a few; a politician here, an athlete there. Those who tended to inspire individuality in others. And it needed to look a little like an accident, in most cases. Just enough to frighten the populace – for there was

nothing more inconvenient than an uprising. But this world of dragons and humans had fallen easily, and capitulated quickly.

“And what of the matron of Thiaz?”

Greyskull looked uncomfortable. “Nothing.”

Gorund glared at his brother to show his displeasure.

Greyskull cleared his throat. “Ethphraim is most noted for its secrets, but Thiaz holds this one truly well. Even the inner most circle of royalty amongst humans and dragons do not appear to know who she even is, or where she has gotten to. We suspect she is off world, if she exists at all.”

“Continue the hunt, but it is not a priority for now. So, tell me, how fairs my cousin, the envoy?”

Greyskull shifted uncomfortably. “All dead, I’m afraid.”

“Really? But they were the elite!” The envoy was highly capable, and his cousin’s death boded poorly for the impending, decades long war with humans and dragons.

Greyskull nodded.

“Hmm,” the emperor pondered, and focused on his research.

Council of war

“Stand down!” Pure screamed, saving their lives with the might of her dragon power. Ironfang and Rayn teleported into the chamber and crash landed against the far wall. Solders were on them in moments, and healers a moment later.

They were attended, healed in seconds by some of the best priests and scholars of the seven worlds.

High wiseman Rayn took a moment to reorient himself. “Where is my wife, and unborn son?”

Norvich, captain of the fortress, replied, “They’re still under dark in the dragonkin territories, but we believe they are safe. She was looking for you.”

Rayn paused, white staff glowing in his own serene rage. He paused only a moment before breathing a heavy sigh of relief. “They are well, are returning soon.”

Soldiers applauded his announcement, and his return.

“Study these chains,” Ironfang ordered the orbweilders.

Rayn looked the cacophony of glowing lights.

Pure spoke to him, more for comfort than information. “We have purged the dragonmen from four systems, Chalcedonah and Sanmarellis will be ours before the evening.”

“How fairs Thiaz?” he turned to ask a gold clad scholar.

Ko answered, crestfallen and exhausted. He had torn his own insignia away as soon as he'd learned about his people's betrayal, followed by their immediate fall. But his tears had long dried. He spoke roughly, as a man willing to die for revenge. “We've never seen a battle tactic like theirs. Usually when you wage a war, you must take it one step at a time – leaving nothing unconquered as you go or the past may rise up against you. You must build lines of supply to your front lines. But not the dragonmen. Not these *beasts*. They attack an entire planet at once, burning everything, killing every man or dragon of any military capability, capturing every tool they can get their hands on. They had Thiaz beaten in less than two hours. All of us, all of it. They just... *swarmed* over our forces. Great bombers lead their advance, taking out our major military installations days before we ever thought they'd attempt it.”

The giant, Legionnaire, was there too. “They run bodily on our weapons, seeming immune to pain. You have to cut off their heads. But there are so many, they just swarmed on, taking any prisoner that did not resist.”

“And those that did?” Rayn wondered.

“Are treated to added brutality. The more determined the resistance, the fiercer the punishment. There is no depth to their willingness to inflict pain.”

Rayn shook his head, and Pure had to wonder what he thought.
“What is our plan for retaking Thiaz?”

“My queen!” a voice called. Together they turned to the highlighted battle matrix.

“It looks like their planetoid is breaking up?” Pure wondered out loud.

“Oh, no,” Caspina muttered.

“What are they?” Ko asked.

“They’re almost the length of the fortress,” Pure muttered.

“Not half her mass combined,” Ko replied. “Colony ships?”

“No. Battleships.” Caspina explained. “Enormous, giant battleships.”

“They call them the dreadnaughts,” Rayn replied. “I suppose Arj somehow survived then. It was a trap, but now we know, so they threaten us instead.”

“That’s impressive weaponry, but we still need an internal reading.” Ko admitted.

Rayn nodded, trying. “They have a new sequester, it’s difficult to pierce.”

“They have quite a few secrets,” Legionnaire admitted. “I’m glad we never let them on our world.”

“Your world was never considered close enough to be bothered trading with. I guess they plan to conquer you at their own leisure.” Ko admitted.

Pure replied, “We control the local threads from the fortress, and they have the hold of the treads in their own system. Our advantage is here.”

“Queen!” another solider announced, though she knew the message already. “Their forces are retreating from Chalcedonah and Sanmarellis!”

People cheered.

“Hunt them down, let none live,” she replied.

Rayn gave her a quizzical, judgmental look.

“They’re dangerous, Rayn. And smart. Look what they did to Thiaz? They intend to do that to us all.”

Rayn pondered a moment. “Not them all, just their emperor.”

She almost shouted at him; it had been a tense day. And she had not seen her six-month-old child in all that time. Her breasts hurt. “Each and every infertile male solider carries the life ribbon of their emperor. They are his *drones*. And he cares not for their lives. But they will carry out his will for they have nothing else to live or die for!”

He nodded.

She knew he knew it was true. “So how do we reclaim Thiaz.”

Ko held down his sobs. “Oh, queen of the Pearl! We are not worthy; I am not worthy! How can you risk your lives to save us!”

She let him wait on her reply. “Your people’s arrogance showed us the true nature of the dragonmen; they are monsters. Treacherous, misbred, monsters. They will return to their dying world and never leave again.”

Ko nodded, still in tears. But they soon dried and he resumed his work on the orbs.

“Find us the resistance of Thiaz, and locate the population groupings.”

“We will need to be quick,” Legionnaire stated. “Once their emperor knows we are coming for Thiaz, he will begin executing prisoners.”

If Ko heard, he gave no indication.

Pure nodded. “But what do we do about Thiaz?”

Guards aimed weapons before Pure knew something was arriving. They only just held back.

Dark shadow shuddered into existence in the battle chamber. Pure knew it by sight, and did not have to tell the others to wait: Snow had returned.

From Windfyth’s back slid a truly too pregnant Lady Jayd, and Pure ran to embrace her.

Rayn burst into tears when he saw his wife, and she stood to greet him. She did not look pleased to see his fears, but dried his tears anyway. He knelt on the floor to embrace her abdomen, and talk to his unborn son's physical form.

Pure gave them a moment.

"They have giant battle cruisers," Jayd said.

"We know," Pure replied.

"We managed to get a brief internal reading," she said, downloading the data to the obelisk.

Again, people cheered.

Scholars were on it immediately, their thoughts projected to the minds of others. The dreadnaughts were built for one purpose – to bring death. They were full of arms and armament, and could metabolize their own superstructure to provide energy or ammunition for war. They could travel by thread, and more conventional means, which meant they could plough right into the center of a world and kill it entirely.

"World slayers," Pure muttered in horror.

Dragons growled.

"We have to win this," Jayd promised.

"How?" Pure asked them all. A million ideas and promises from all within the control chamber flashed by her mind in a moment.

People mumbled and fussed in a rabble of confusion and research, but only Rayn looked like he was praying. “You need to take the fortress to the dragonmen’s world.”

Generals looked confused.

Rayn explained. “The emperor does not expect us to take the fight to him, but he’s ready for it. Once the fortress crosses their territory and loses hold on the golden threads he will send in his dreadnaughts. Once he thinks we’re committed, we free Thiaz. Then, we leave.”

Everyone considered the idea. Millions of items of data; the position of countless individuals, the terrain of seven worlds, the powers of every surviving dragon. The consensus arrived in only a few breaths. They liked the idea.

Pure nodded. “Then let us resist, and send those demons back to the black abyss they crawled from. For the right to be free, for the right of our children to grow without fear,” she turned to her husband, “For the imprisoned of Thiaz. We fight!”

Everyone cheered.

Death

Death sewed quickly in the blackness around the all-consuming star. Men and dragons, indignant and enraged, slew every dragonman they could touch.

“The ruse is working,” Ko told her.

Pure looked at the battle map. Indeed, the ruse was working. All six dreadnaughts were moving into position in only a breath. Within seconds a devastating deluge of superheated plasma rained down on the fortress and its almost impenetrable skyshield.

“We have four minutes,” Ko told her.

Pure huffed. It was not enough time. The kilometer hull of the fortress should have survived hours longer. It was as if they had some demonry, or science within their weapons that made them strong. Against a single dreadnaught it was no contest, against two, a fair fight.

Against six they would not prevail.

The dreadnaughts had spread out, encircling the fortress.

“Full retreat!” Pure roared.

Everyone rocked sideways as the enormous vessel lurched away from the fight.

“Two minutes till we reach the threads!” a commander called.

“Ko, make that one,” she ordered. He was already working frantically.

Space outside the ship twisted unnaturally as two mighty empires battled for control of the golden threads. If the fortress could get far enough away from the interdiction field the dragonmen generated from their world, they would escape. Until then, only the six dragonmen dreadnaughts, hundreds of battleships and cruisers, and countless two-pilot vessels, could use the threads here. And they’d brought all their forces. Lightning blasted from the fortress cannons, and soldiers bravely battled every suicidal dragonman that managed to set foot on her stone. But it was the dragons and their riders that made the most decisive difference. Dragonmen weren’t landing in sufficient numbers to swarm effectively, so all which tried, died.

Ironically, it seemed there was only one weapon that could deal with the swarming appropriately – the random, indiscriminate, noisy guns of Ethphraim. Cutting limbs from torsos they were the perfect weapon for a savage enemy who ran haphazardly against them.

“We’ll have to get some more of those,” Pure grinned.

Pure felt the fortress cry out in distress. A dreadnaught had taken hold of the threads and moved to cut off her retreat, throwing all her weaponry against the hull it was prepared to ram the fortress.

Pure already knew what she had to do, “Jayd, all wings, to me. Norwich, full speed to the exit. Ko, get us those threads. Farwing, let us pay that dreadnaught a visit.”

Legionnaire only had a moment to register what was happening. “All forces, the Queen has left the fortress! Converge on her position, intensify covering fire! Do NOT let them harm her, repeat, the Queen has left the fortress!”

The giant growled his disapproval, but it was barely audible against the myriad of blasts that rocked the fortress. The priests were healing the dead, the elementalists of the diadem cooling and mending the fortress. Unless the dragonmen possessed some other new demonry, the day would belong to Pearl.

A vortex of light and death surrounded her and Farwing as they rode out to meet the dreadnaught. Pure was momentarily stunned by the sheer size of it. “Take out the port cannons,” she informed Norwich, who relaying her wishes, unleashed the full firepower of the fortress against the side of the dreadnaught.

Still, it ploughed along.

Farwing and the other dragons managed to get a tenuous hold of some of the threads now, and using them stall the death charge of the bronze behemoth. She turned, spiraling around its planet piercing thorn. A thorn made entirely of ultra-hardened bronze.

The dragonmen were smart, but they were also monsters. It made them arrogant. They had forgotten the honor of dragons, and lost what it meant to be human. Science, they had. But souls?

Riding under the spaceship at impossible speeds, shielded by a million warriors desperate to protect only them, Farwing and Pure reached out, and touched that bronze.

Bronze. Simply metal. And metal was just another element.

And Pure was very good at elemental manipulation. Especially fire.

The burning heat of her touch raced along the dreadnaught, spurred along by the prayers and powers of a million other elementalists in her army, and the might and power of the Patron Farwing. The gem at her brow glowed with almost solar intensity.

The dreadnaught never stood a chance. Its planet killing thorn bent, then tore away. The entire hull buckled near the front.

And then it hit the fortress.

The resulting collision could have slain every dragonman within, so fierce and violent. Yet somehow the dreadnaught survived. Before the shockwave of the initial collision could shatter the command center, they took hold of the interplanetary threads and fled back into their own lands.

The fortress had so much mass it was barely slowed down. An entire section of the wall was crumbling away like a shattered meteorite, but it would be healed in a day by the art of the faithful.

Pure wanted to scream in victory, but Farwing's caution held her back. *We need to get back inside the fortress*, he told her.

They raced back in, all forces retreating. Several dragonriders and spaceships found the golden threads first, and left as soon as they could. But the fortress was truly huge.

Three of the other dreadnaughts continued to pour their plasma onto the hull of the fortress, which was slowly rotating in an attempt to spread the damage out rather than let them evaporate their way right into the center. They might have achieved it in under a minute as well, but for the human's tools.

They landed roughly, chaos all around them as the human / dragon alliance scrambled in a desperate retreat. Thousands had been caught outside the walls, and thousands more slain.

Norvich's mind pressed against her thoughts.

"No," she insisted. "The fortress needs to be the last to go. Get as many people in as you can."

He nodded.

Then there was a piercing scream. A section of the wall, damaged from plasma and the collision, fell away to reveal open

space. And a dreadnaught was already in position to take advantage of it.

Farwing threw his body in the way to protect them, and Pure threw her arms out to redirect the fire. But even she knew it would not be enough. Farwing was about to get a permanent scar... even with all the help of the others; one from which he would not heal.

Pure marveled as the entire mezzanine they stood glowed red. A priest that tried to extinguish the plasma fainted from the effort. A stone guardian that tried to interpose itself was instantly vaporized.

And just as she feared for her dragon's life, Darkwing arrived, no Jayd in sight. He took in a deep breath, and spread his black fire around the area. The light darkened to pitch black, and then further.

The blast of plasma struck, disappearing into the hidden dimension of shadows. It was a secret science, known only to lady Snow and Darkwing himself.

The darkness within swallows the fire, Darkwing gloated, then sped away.

A moment later the fortress was standing in Thiaz skies.

"Thank you, Darkwing," Pure and Farwing said at the same moment.

He looked down at her, almost as if he didn't recognize them. His form had grown till he equaled every noble on their world, and

she was left to wonder how Jayd survived his sudden change. Darkwing was silent, and then, without words, sped away.

My Queen, Norwich stated. *They are in retreat from Thiaz!*

She almost wanted to destroy any she could, but knew Rayn would disapprove. Besides, the dragonmen had prisoners of their own. “Destroy their ships, but take as many prisoners as you can!” she ordered.

They only had two minutes before the bulk of the dragonmen forces were gone from the system. But with a fortress that could effectively teleport anywhere in the solar system, they still inflicted enormous damage on the retreating forces.

Conquest

Pure, Rayn, Jayd, and all the commanders from the war made a triumphal entry to the palace at Thiaz not an hour later.

In all, she thought, the world had survived quite well. All the buildings still stood. Even most of the military ones were overrun rather than destroyed. The dragonmen had intended to stay.

The surviving nobility of the once proud world knelt on the floor, the golden noble dragons of Thiaz them. Mendelain, Caspina's younger sister and proud queen of Thiaz, among them. "Thank you, alliance of men and dragons. You cannot understand... we thank you."

"Get up," Pure told her. She doubted the machiavellian queen was actually put out very much during the conquest of her world. But she did look tired.

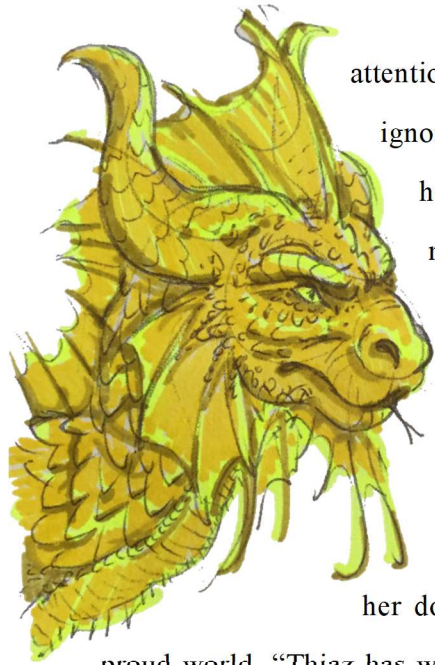
Mendelain rose. "I was not made privy to my people's plan, but had I known, it would have died in the bud."

Pure glared at her, but held her tongue. Millions of Thiazian's had died to prove the brutality of the dragonmen. They had paid a terrible price.

"Now, queen of Pearl," the old minister of Thiaz began – probably the man who had authorized the failed extinction of the dragonmen in the first place. "We are free to assist you. Will you be

taking the alliance to the dragonmen world, where we can put out their light from this galaxy forever?”

Pure grit her teeth.



An infant’s cry broke her attention. They’d brought Gayl. Pure ignored the event and hurried to gather her child. She cradled the six-month-old in her arms. She was safe, that was good.

That was, in a sense, all that mattered.

She began to nurse the infant immediately, ignoring the stares at her doubtless impropriety amongst this

proud world. “Thiaz has wrought upon themselves a terrible curse this day. Millions of your own people have died, millions more have suffered because of your treachery... and now, you ask billions more to risk their lives to see that you can live on to lie to us all once more.”

Her words were deeply offensive to the royalty of Thiaz, that was clear. But she didn’t care. This world, having stretched her trust when they attempted for force her to turn over the fortress to them, had now lost it forever. She would never trust Thiaz again.

Even if her daughter's father was from this world.

"We-" Pure began. Then, incredibly, someone cut her off.

"Don't," it was Rayn.

She was curious at why he'd interrupted, and glared at him.

Ironfang stood by him, glaring at Farwing. Rayn stood with the white staff in his hand, his very pregnant wife by his side. "Don't," he whispered.

Right in front of the entire broken nobility of Thiaz.

"Excuse me!" she demanded. He had never challenged her in public before. He'd been honest, but never directly confrontational.

He sighed, clearly aware that he'd troubled her. His staff stood in the ground, and he let his wife's hand go. "Please, don't. We had the high ground today. We had the right of freedom and of truth on our side. But their lands are their own. Their cities and their people are their own. We cannot expect to prevail if we turn the fight against them."

No one spoke.

Pure strained to find the right words to put to silence her rebellious wiseman. "You saw what they did here, what they will continue to do? They are armed with enough firepower to destroy any one of our worlds in the silence of a single night. I will not live with that fear. I will not live with that threat!"

Rayn nodded, but Ironfang spoke as if to Farwing. “They have the high ground. They hold the threads of their own world.”

Farwing replied, “I, for one, do not wish to see them make their injured dreadnaught serviceable.”

“They let us make it our terms of peace!” Rayn shouted. “Demand they disassemble their dreadnaughts or they will not have our trust, or trade.”

“They will find a way,” Jayd disagreed with her husband. “They are cunning beyond compare. They will find a way.”

Rayn’s face flushed with anger, but he let it pass. “Attacking their home world is the wrong thing to do.”

“Stand down, high priest,” Pure told him in no uncertain terms. “Your council is heard.”

Then Mendelain continued, “And rejected.”

Pure glared at the woman, who shrugged innocently. How dare she declare her policy for her? Was her world not broken? It would take decades to recover.

Suddenly a very Ironfang-rage seemed to fuel Rayn’s words. “Did you not hear what I just said? We will not prevail! If you go to the dragonmen world, you will die!”

Pure screamed back, the child twisting in her arms. “What choice do we have, Rayn! Await death here? NO!”

Rayn threw up his hands. Then rubbed them down his face with frustration. Right in front of the royals of Thiaz.

“Get out,” she ordered him.

His dragon snatched him up, and they were gone.

Again, the insufferable queen of Thiaz refused to stay silent, but her words comforted Pure somewhat. “If Pearl does go to war against the Dragonmen, they will have every warrior of Thiaz at their command. We will enthrall the draft. You will have a billion soldiers before the end of the day.”

Pure nodded in acknowledgement even as she watched her retreating friend and wiseman. They would need Thiaz’ proffered help. But she could not deny the thoughts of her heart; Rayn was, at times, worth all that help, and much more.

Home

Rayn felt like the royal chambers of the high priest were a home to him, and to Jayd.

He did not need to turn to look, he knew it was her as soon as she approached the door from the other side.

But when she opened it, he could almost feel the anger and indignity flowing from her.

He had been as hurt as any by the rage of the dragonmen. But he knew they had to play the long game if the coin was to turn, once more, to sheathes. “They all needed to know,” Rayn justified his actions. “I had to tell everyone. It could not wait until the Queen had ordered us all to arms.”

Jayd entered, the intangible presence of Darkwing somehow following with her – though he was nowhere to be found at such an important time! Yet in a moment, Rayn was struck by his young wife’s enormous dignity, intelligence, and power. She had stopped being a normal human two years ago. “You humiliated our queen,” she told him.

He huffed. He knew it was true. Had he really made such a mistake? He’d still been right. He knew it, and the tactical genius of Ironfang knew it.

But the queen wanted only the complete defeat of the dragonmen. To strip them of all power and dignity, and potentially life and the ability to defend themselves ever again; war against their home world was, to her, the only option.

“They will have new surprises,” Rayn promised.

“Then let us bring some of own.” Jayd begged, kneeling in front of him. “The tools of men. They can hardly use them, and when they do, they do not use them well.”

Rayn felt a movement of hope within him. “The archetypes.”

Jayd nodded. “You saw what she did with just a normal headband. And you already have the archetype of the staff. We have some time to prepare. Let us recover the other archetypes. It’s something we should have done months ago.

Rayn had felt in the past that it was not time, but this felt different.

But, no, it was still wrong. They’d need all nine archetypes to take on the dragonmen, and win.

She touched his face as if to push away his doubts, her distended abdomen pressing convincingly against him. “We have to do this Rayn. This is just a setback. They know we are coming. We have to get in there before they can fix up their broken dreadnaught.”

Rayn nodded. He knew they were going to do it even without him. Whatever he could do to save life and shorten the war. “Have the dragons prepare the hidden places.”

She grinned, “You think we will need to retreat?”

He smiled back, and told her but a little lie, “No, so that the dragonmen think we are busy, or that we fear them. Let them put their guard down, even if it is such a little.”

Jayd nodded, and kissed him on the mouth. “You will not regret this.”

Rayn looked at her stomach. “I already do – you are late.”

“Our son can wait a week; it will be fine. I will keep deep in the fortress, away from any battle. But I cannot deny them our militaries skill, or our dragon’s need to fight!”

Rayn nodded, but he was still worried, “Darkwing. It’s the change, isn’t it?”

Rayn could almost feel the sorrow flow from Jayd. “He’s becoming a noble dragon. They said they saw him at the battle, but his soul is closed to me at this time. I’m not sure what he’s up to actually. The change could take years.”

Rayn nodded, but it seemed to be all she felt the need to say at this time. “Then let us pay Ethphraim a visit. Our Queen prefers their weapons, though it seems ironic. They are preparing a huge shipment for this very hour.”

“All this is nothing before the nine tools of men to fight these
perverted beasts. Come, let us make things right, together!”

The Shield

Rhoc had to admit. He was nervous. Fairystone was so nervous she wasn't even talking any more, just letting her light shine out from his chest plate. Even the greater dragon armor was beginning to feel tested at these depths, and he finally knew what it meant when others found it difficult to breathe in the ocean deep.

It was dark, but he knew he had to be at the right place. It was a gentle tug on his conscious mind, the pull of the Patron's invitation. Two years ago, the largest dragon ever recorded had surrendered her life at the defeat of the plague and the end of her long quest to protect her world from every threat. Now, her ancient mate and risen patron of the dragons of Sanmarellis had invited him into the deep waters of their world.

And Rhoc knew – he was going to claim the shield.

There were others there, above him, watching all he did. He felt the patron sliding around in the deep waters, pushing aside oceans in his wake. He had ascended to his role and become the largest dragon alive now too, though the dragons had not given up their secrets on how that was possible. But he had the gentle humor that hid a serious, philosophical side that all Sanmarellians were famous for.

And he was a dragon that Rhoc and Fairystone deeply respected.

The patron started talking then, as though they'd been having a conversation all the way down. *I don't like the deep waters either – but not for the oppressive press of water. No, it's too cold. I like it higher up, where the nutrients from the continents edge find their way to me, but not the light of our burning sun. Where it is cool, and silent.*

Rhoc nodded, here it was a little too cold, and dark.

Are we going in the right direction? Fairystone asked, more just to keep up the conversation than to learn anything.

The patron just laughed.

Suddenly bright lights flooded the sea below them, and they could make out the ruins of a devastated civilization. Deep sea beings and lichen glowed with their own light, a million hues of blue and purple Rhoc didn't even know existed. Massive aquatic dragons, carved in stone, stood watch over a central platform in the spiral pattern of a giant seashell of some kind, as if it had been a conclave. And in the very center of those forgotten ruins, a bright shield sat.

Even from this distance, it gleamed like an archetype. It was untarnished, brilliant steel. It was rectangular, curved, and large. Large enough so that only he in his greater dragonrider armor could hope to carry it.

He heard soldiers above cheering.

Rhoc floated toward it.

We kept it safe, the patron explained. When men first lost their way. It was placed here to keep the Perish at bay, and it did just that. But now, I suspect it has a greater calling. Claim it, dragon rider, if you believe it's yours to keep.

Rhoc approached the shield carefully. It was resting on some kind of stone platform, encrusted with the life of the deep. But Fairystone warned him in his heart to be cautious. This was a treasure above treasures, sought for generations. It was likely to be trapped, or guarded. And didn't dragons always test those who coveted what they considered of greatest worth?

Rhoc steadied himself as a massive wavefront pushed him away. The patron was charging the dais from the other side. Rhoc activated his gravitation motors and crashed down onto the stone where he could get a good grip. But it was no use against the irresistible tide that pushed against him. The stone crumbled in his hands even as the patron clamped his city-wide jaws on the shield.

Let only the worthy wield the great shield of Archetukus! The patron calmly informed him.

The collective breath of a million soldiers above him lay baited.

Rhoc looked at the enormous maw, a hundred, hundred times larger than Fairystone's. What was the patron thinking?

Fairystone was silent; perhaps she and the patron already had some understanding.

“Let only the worthy...” Rhoc wondered what it meant. A few hearts tried to guide his thoughts from above, but he silenced them all with a thought. This was his test. Another test, from a dragon.

The teeth were so large, the shield a mere kernel amongst them. These were pillars of dragon bone; stronger than steel they could rend a space ship’s hull. He could try carving them? He could try ripping the shield from their grip? But he did not want to harm a dragon.

He felt a dark thought rise within him. Perhaps ... this was how he wanted to die? Perhaps it was his way of ensuring an honorable death? Perhaps he could only remove the shield by swimming within, and sewing death until the patron died?

His heart pieced. How, how in his last test he had harmed his little Fairystone, and she’d immediately forgiven him. He was resolved: No, no matter how powerful he became, he must not harm anyone who was his ally.

Rhoc swam up to the wall of teeth. The patron took a breath, and it almost swallowed him. But he looked at the shield clamped in his massive jaw. Perhaps, if he could not pull it out without harming him, he could open those mountain jaws, and simply kick the shield out.

He maneuvered, and the patron waited. Rhoc tried three times and found no easy footing.

So, it had to be the hard way. He pressed his back in, wedged his feet against the bone of the patron's lower teeth, and pushed.

Rhoc felt it budge, which was hopeful.

He pushed again, but no sooner did he get it a hand width open then the dragon shifted his grip, and slammed that jaw shut again.

It seemed the patron was enjoying this.

Rhoc was angry. They did not have time for dragon tests while savage hunters awaited their chance to attack.

He stabbed his hands into the largest gaps he could find, and pushed. The patron fought him, he twisted and struggled, but Rhoc did not let go. He could not; not for her, for he did this for all of humanity. If they did not claim the shield, they were forever in danger. Roaring, he pulled with all his might.

He felt the mountain jaws tremble, and begin to give way. The patron thrust his head out in the water, trying to jar him loose. But he was very securely wedged there. He tried to pry the shield loose with a foot, hoping the swelling water might do the trick, but it did not.

Risking his life, he reached his whole arm in to hold the jaw agape. He adjusted his footing in between rapid thrusts of the patron's head. Dirt swelled around his body, and he felt a momentarily faint. It was hard to get air enough to fuel his muscles down here. They burnt, they burnt like flame.

Roaring once more, Rhoc pushed again. Harder, with all his might. It seemed the patron of Sanmarellis lost interest in throwing him away, and concentrated instead on crushing the life out of him. It was all he could do simply to hold the jaws apart.

But Rhoc was not about to let the whimsy of dragons threaten the future of their lives together. He pictured Rayn, his oldest, trusted friend. He saw him translating Rhoc's own speechless words time and time again. He saw Jayd, making them all laugh. He saw his queen, beautiful beyond compare, rocking a child to sleep in the stone cradle his own hands had made. He saw beautiful Snow, surrounded by animals that listened and talked to her every chance she had.

And he saw Fairystone, turned into an otter, dash out from his chest plate and grab the shield. The jaw tensed, but Rhoc tripled his efforts to keep them agape. Only dragon ribs could survive down here, otter though they now appeared to be. The blinding white fire seared his muscles till they hurt no more, and with a monstrous roar Rhoc pulled the jaws above his head and stood to his full height.

Only then could Fairystone dash away, loosening the shield just enough so that it fell away to the stones below.

Rhoc roared in triumph. He felt the patron's jaw slacken, then let him go.

The patron swam about till his eye, as tall as a tree and whose pupil alone was wide as dragon wings, faced him and his little dragon as she help up the shield for him to claim.

The patron seemed to be smiling at him, *You could have killed me, Rhoc.*

Rhoc smiled back. *No. You are my friend.*

You showed great restraint here, man, friend of dragons. Let us hope such may serve you until the end of your days. And then the oceans surged as the mighty patron swam away.

Scholars were very busy studying Rhoc's shield.

"I think only Thiaz made use of the shield as a tool of men; it has fallen out of use amongst most other people." Ko, Rayn's friend, explained.

They stood outside the gate of the fortress.

Rhoc laughed. "Does no one protect their people?"

Rayn explained, "The council of community, their protection from threats within, is the art of the shield. All the communities of the seven worlds are now blessed by your quest today, Rhoc. You are *Shield Barer*, first of the new line of those worthy and chosen by the

archetype. Its influence is being felt all over the systems. New bearers are rising up even as we speak.”

Rhoc felt Rayn did not need to explain that. He could feel it. In a strange way, somehow, he could see it. He was born deaf, until Rayn had healed him. And now it seemed he had also been born blind. Rhoc could... ‘see’... every shield bearer. He ... knew... them. He could see out of their eyes if he wanted to. It was, surreal. And supernal.

And he felt that power surging back into him.

Raising the shield, he plunged in into the earth. In less than a breath it had formed a glistening white forcefield completely around him. Its strength was greater than ten paces of stone, unbreakable by humanity or dragon might.

Everyone leapt back.

“Impressive,” Rayn muttered.

Rhoc grinned, this was a small thing. Extending the claws of the greater dragon rider armor he began to claw his way up the fortress wall one handed, faster upwards than most men could run along the ground. In a few breaths he stood atop the mighty wall of the beloved fortress – already fully repaired.

With a roar that could be heard from one end of it to the other, Rhoc stabbed the shield into the pinnacle of the wall. The glowing white mist surrounded the fortress in breaths, enveloping it in a clear

forcefield that would quite possibly withstand all but the dreadnaught's plasma cannon indefinitely.

He heard Rayn grin, *Oh, yes, this will do.*

"I wish we'd thought of it last week," Jayd admitted.

Snow said nothing. She just seemed really impressed that Rhoc had clawed his way up a kilometer high wall in several seconds. *He's very strong*, he heard her mutter to her dragon.

Snow and the Shoes

Snow waited at Amarii with her dragon Windfyrth, the sky a gentle haze of purple even at midday. She clutched her hand within the metal gauntlet, empowered by their dragon bond to protect her from the dead air of this world so devastated by a plague 4000 years ago no life was thought to survive. Since then, a few hardy microbes had been located hidden in crevices or deep within the wine dark seas, that somehow seemed to have survived. They were now being augmented by species brought back from Argentus and Chalcedonah. But it might be a thousand years before the young world would be reliably safe for breathing creatures yet again.

Snow looked up at the enormous pillars once more. *Would that we might have just floated in on the golden threads!*

And risk revealing the dragons to their frighten human population? Windfyrth sarcastically replied. *We dare not risk it!*

Ethphraim, always keeping their secrets.

Besides, Windfyrth thought within her mind, *With all the pollution in orbit, it's still not safe.*

Snow nodded her agreement, knowing her dragon would feel the moment of muscles in her human neck, and sense the change in weight on her dragon back. Windfyrth always knew what she meant.

Jane Jones waited. The diplomat and her dragon would be paused on a world impossibly far away. But they would be here in a second as soon as she allowed it.

She did not like being late. She hated everything about it. But the great noble dragon, new risen matron of her world; “Horsie” and her rider, were always so cautious to see each conversation through and to end things on a good note. They were late for *everything*.

Patience, my soul, an unimaginably powerful voice spoke inside her mind. She would never get used to that. But being the bonded soul of the third most authoritative dragon on this world was a privilege she could not comprehend, or imagine. He was as demanding as she was precise. They were a good pair. But he was far away on another continent now trying to judge a bloody conflict between dragons who sought prestige and power on their world. His raw strength would be needed there.

The general approached. He was the new man at the job, since the mysterious disappearance of the last incompetent two years ago. The one who’d made her a monster, forced her to cut up an innocent teenager to get at the telepathy that bonded her to her dragon. The thought cut at her heart still, leaving her wondering how and why

she'd managed to get to that point. But the young, black-haired woman never looked at her with any fear in her eyes now. It was humiliating, and terrifying all at once. Again, her wyvern laughed at her, and it made her remember that ambassador Snow, like all the dragons on her world, had forgiven her.

The general, a man about her age, looked about the room. He, unlike the one in every 100,000 humans on this world, did not have a dragon to bond with. Thus, he did not have two hearts and two minds to help him experience reality. "I suppose we are waiting for the Matron?" he said with a casual voice that barely hid his ambition, and nervousness.

Jane Jones scorned his words a moment, because her dragon heart warned her against giving this man too much leverage against them both. "Indeed."

She knew he was bothered by her brief and elusive reply, but did nothing to indicate it.

"Well," he continued. "I have heard much about this young ambassador, and I've seen this 'black gate' work more times than I can count. But tell me, how will we know when she is about to arrive?"

With that, Jane Jones sensed the arrival of the matron of their world. This matter was too important to be seen by any but the queen of dragons herself. "Oh, you will know."

With the prescience only lesser creatures seemed to have in the waxing presence of a speaker of animals, they began to arrive. First the birds around the mountain drew near, making no secret of their presence. Then the rats, scuttling along and around their feet, making the soldiers nervous. Then, though it happened rarely it was happening more often, the local family of deer and even a cougar simply walked in to the conclave, filled with three thousand elite soldiers.

Then the black gate opened.

Materializing in front of it, or perhaps appearing from some near dimension the ambassador was so fond and adept at using, the mighty Windfyrth and her rider, Snow of the Celtwyld, appeared.

Soldiers saluted, all three thousand of them.

The ambassadors set down on the ground, facing towards the mystically floating lake water held aloft by the impressive prowess of the most powerful dragon she knew, a noble aquatic standardform; the matron of all dragons on their world. Upon her head, fearlessly, the Scottish barkeep lass who now, effectively, ruled the world. And upon her feet sat the apparent archetype of trade and science in all human worlds – the ‘boots’.

It never did seem a particular noble form of archetype, but boots were, on the whole, very useful.

The matron spoke directly to the ambassador, “You do realize what you are asking for, don’t you?”

Windfyrth, the diplomat, lowered ambassador Snow to the ground to converse with her true friends there. The animals seemed content to touch her hands with their noses, and then most of them left. Except for one or two of the rats, which she rubbed fiercely against her face repeatedly. They would stay with her the whole visit, as was their way.

“Matron of Ethphraim, we are honored!” Windfyrth said with an elegant bow with bamboo hat and rods that would put to shame most humanoid diplomats of any world. “What you have done, what you offer us... it is beyond the power of words to convey our gratitude.”

To Jane, it seemed a bit overdone. But the dragons would love that kind of language.

“Indeed,” the matron replied. “And that is why I will be going myself.”

No one there was surprised, except ambassador Snow. “You needn’t risk yourself,” she began.

The colossal flood of waters drew near, and Windfyrth moved reflexively to protect her rider.

“While these monsters, these *abominations*, betray our allies and enslave us both? You, of Pearl, have indulged their cruel emperor too long. And now, judgement must come. I will take my archetype to

the battle, and we will give them the war upon their world that they so bitterly seek!”

The dragons, as one cheered.

Windfyrth nodded, and looked to say more, but it was only ambassador Snow’s voice that somehow cut through the din to be clearly audible in the vast, crowded chamber. “And if they beg for peace?”

The matron glared at her, “They will have it, once we are sure they can never threaten us again.”

With that, the vast powers of the black gate reversed, allowing the world beyond to appear. It was Pearl itself, casting a huge veil of light from the base of the Fortress from Beyond the clouds.

“The battle is joined!” the matron screamed. “Proud Ethphramites, proud dragons and men of the world of blue! Go, go to war and bring us victory!”

And at the general’s command, the first three thousand of what would eventually be two hundred thousand made their way onto another world, led by seven noble dragons of a world that still hid them from their own people. With them, all the ordinance and weaponry they currently had on world to prepare against the dragonmen horde, an adversary that numbered in the *billions*. And normal bullets would not do against an enemy with skin that could survive the vacuum of space, and blood that could seal a wound in

seconds. They needed the heavy guns against this foe, for true sword wielders were rare upon their world.

Jane Jones walked to check on the young diplomat and her dragon, standing away as an impressive array of military gear and equipment passed by them. How she must have wished they'd put up such a display the last time Pearl had tried to organize the seven worlds for defense! Ambassador Windfyrth away, was conferring with one of the seven nobles going to join the war today.

Ambassador Snow stared carefully at her face. "Jane Jones?" she asked, as though they'd only just met.

"Hello Ambassador Snow. I trust you are well?"

She looked confused, as though she was thinking, 'Well, if I wasn't well, I would not have come here.' Her world had been fighting a disease that turned people into zombies for 4000 years, social isolation was not a new thing to them. But her brief pause was just about the right amount of time a dragon rider usually took when conferring with their other mind – the dragons. "Yes, I am well, thank you. And you?"

"Couldn't be better," she replied, glad the young diplomat was doing so well at the art of conversation today.

Snow held the conversation in pause for just another moment before speaking, "You were at the birth of the princess Gayl, six months ago, is that not correct?"

“Yes, indeed, the privilege was ... otherworldly,” Jane replied, still grateful. To be trusted by a world they had shown a willingness to destroy? It was honor indeed. But it did make her curious as to why ambassador Snow might say something like that.

Snow answered before she could reply, “Would you like to assist with my births as well?”

Thoughts staggered together in her mind. In her eyes, this... child. This fragile child she had hurt so badly. And now... she was asking her to hold her children before she had that chance in this world? It was staggering, beyond belief!

But an even more pressing thought crowded out the dignity before it could manifest (which was a strange way to think, and it reminded her of the way her dragon thought), “But... you are so young!”

Ambassador Snow did not seem offended, or put off in the least. “Yes, this is for a ‘down the track’ sort of thing.”

The question had still thrown her. “And, you have a, I mean, your mother can be there?”

“Yes, she will be there. With a cloak, I imagine. My people, we value it. And our skill is great, it would seem.” She pondered her words while patting a young fawn as though this sort of thing happened every day, the crowd-sourced zoo that she’d spontaneously manifested didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

But why was she asking about birth? Had she a husband they did not know of? Or a betrothal? An arranged marriage perhaps? Their culture was rather weird at times. But she was only 16?!

Still, Jane Jones realized, the Perlans were notably different. Living with the plague had accelerated their evolutionary path. They were vastly more fertile because their lives were so short, 40 at best! And the females had that weird, unclippable hip thing at the front that was, well, a masterstroke of human evolution to be sure. But... 16?

Her dragon spoke, though still far away, *She is just a young woman, asking an older woman who she trusts, about childbirth.* And the thought put her at rest.

“Still, Snow,” she said, not meaning to sound too familiar, but this had brought the mother out in her. “You’re still very young, by any standard. Motherhood is... well... it is sacred. You know I have two sons, and I would do anything to protect them. Anything... when you are ready, we should have this talk.”

Snow looked out at the soldiers. “It seems we are going to war,” she thought out loud. “Some of these good men will be gone soon. They will never have any children.”

The surgeon could not but feel sad at that, but also honor at their sacrifice. “They will not be forgotten. At every sunset, we will remember them.”

Snow nodded thoughtfully. “It seems a shame, to be a male. The first to be sacrificed to the enemy, and yet they seem to do so willingly, even enthusiastically.”

“Nature has prepared them to protect the tribe, even at the expense of their own lives. But if their children, and their family live on... the cost may be great, but the value of what they protect is far greater.”

Snow just stared. “I feel sorry for them.”

“You have often put yourself in great danger, ambassador Snow. Why this sudden contemplation on life, and children?”

She looked down. “I do not know.”

“Have you a man you consider a worthy mate?”

Her face bore no indication on her hidden thoughts, and the quiet animals at her feet shared no indication of any stress. “No. Perhaps,” she sighed. “My mother always thought I would have many children. I have dreamed as much myself, when I became a woman. But now I am, and have taken the rituals. Now that it comes to it, I do not know where to begin.”

Jane Jones smiled. “Don’t rush, young ambassador. Love will find you, when the time is ready.”

The young ambassador scoffed. “I would rather claim a child of Blayd, or Norwich, than risk the trouble of love. It was a luxury my forbearers never had. You learned to love those who survived, and

bore children to them. And your village just made it work because we had to, or we'd become dust."

She felt sad, hearing that. What an admirably practical way of dealing with a terrifying disease in what was essentially an iron age civilization. Yes, love was, at times, a luxury life could not afford.

But even that thought seemed artificial, and harsh.

Jane continued, "You are only sixteen, young ambassador. You have, I think, the luxury of finding love and marriage over many of your good years, as yet. You will find love one day."

"I have never seen myself in the arms of a man, not in all my wonders or dreams," Lady Snow confessed. "Or a woman, in case you were wondering. No, that romantic attraction is... a foreign language to me. I do not, yet, understand it. But I think I would like to have children. Yes, I can see myself with children to love."

"Oh," said Jane Jones.

And nothing more was said.

The Blade

Jayd rode high in the sky of her beloved Argentus, a dozen wings behind her in truly royal escort. She sat on a special bier they had prepared for her, behind Norwich, the commander of the armies of Pearl and on his beloved Stormbreath, who had thus far only honored her with six limericks on their hour-long journey since they'd left the giant portal that connected this world to Amarii. Yet she was excited, beyond words, to be here. Diplomacy had stalled, so they had called in 'the goddess'. The honorary title still made her smile, just a little.

Norwich, however, shuffled uneasily in his seat.

"Oh, shut it," she informed him. "You know you need me."

He shook his head, and perhaps chuckled to himself. *You are correct, General*, he replied though his dragon rider's helm. *But you are, also nine months and several days pregnant.* And then, in the fleeting images as he tried to break away from their conversation, she knew he thought, *And your dragon is not with you.*

"He'll be fine," she replied. Hoping, hoping beyond all hope that it was true. He, and all the dragons, were oddly silent about the process. She felt his soul near, but his mind was entirely absent. If she didn't have his dragon fearlessness thrumming through her system, she did not know how she would handle the strange and arguably

inexcusable distance between them. And why, in Divinities name, did it all have to happen now, at the dawn of a war that should have started three months ago?

“I mean,” the much more mature dragon rider seemed to be deliberately disrupting her thoughts. “Nine months! Women were required to rest the entire last six months of their passage back in the Venfirth! In fact,” but he stopped speaking as an unexpected view came into their sights.

There were at least two dozen dragons rising up to meet them. Usually that would not have been such a sight. But this was Argentus, and the last time that many dragons had been seen in the sky, there was war.

“They come to join our cause!” Stormbreath tried to cheer them up.

But she did not reply. This was not the standard greeting of Argentus. And the other dragon’s rode, purposefully, high in the sky. It was a less than subtle threat.

They rode carefully on, till the larger wing of dragons flanked them and joined in their path. None spoke, and there was no doubt that this was a show of strength by the Glacial Matron of this world.

They rode down to the enormous structure just out at the swirling sea. It had been augmented by the matron herself till the

conclave there was truly enormous. It was coated in miraculous, unmelting ice. And it was cold all year around.

And at its center, the matron herself waited, and at her feet, her soul – the mighty priestess Lelleth, who had awakened the teachers on their world and helped save them all. And at her feet, on a satin sheet of exquisite beauty, lay the Blade of all blades – the archetype of the sword, tool of the warrior class and all that came with that.

They landed, Stormbreath bowing low. Norvich dismounted and, after a formal bow, offered his hands to help Jayd off as well.

Jayd looked at their powerful, threatening audience. Those who were already dragging their feet to participate in the greatest, most worthy battle their galaxy had ever seen. And she immediately recognized even without her dragon's sight – they had already made up their minds.

Commanding the air about her she leapt up from the saddle and flew through the air to the united gasp of all that were there assembled. Somehow, she managed a gracious landing. Nine months pregnant and aching from head to foot, she bowed before the empress, and then the dragon riders nearby bowed before her.

She tried to ignore it, but Darkwing's wisdom was not inside her right now.

Lelleth was impressed, and the empress looked amused.

She waited for the matron dragon to give her leave to speak, but the empress already knew what she wanted, and what her response would be. In the way Jayd loved and admired about her, the matron skipped all pleasantries and diplomacy, and got right to the point. “This is not our war, little one. We are not coming.”

Jayd simmered, and knew it must have shown. And by the handful of orb bearers in their midst, it would be seen all over their world for generations to come. But she had no kind words for this level of stupidity and cowardice. “Have you no honor to win for the endless battles of Enguardium?” she cited their legends of heaven and hell. “Then the glory of this war will be mine, and Pearl’s to claim. And you will have no seat at the table of victory.”

As she expected, that got through to them. Murmurs arose in the dragon rider’s ranks. And the dragons, only two years released from their tyranny over the humans, fairly simmered with rage at the insult.

But the matron paused, as if conferring with her rider in thoughts she might have never once had herself. Then, she gave an exasperated sigh. “So be it. If you can find some foolish volunteers for your petty bickering with the dragonmen, they have my leave.”

There was a murmur of approval amongst her kin.

Legionnaire, the greatest human warrior on their world, ran to bow before the matron.

She permitted him to speak.

“I will go with the goddess Jayd,” he seemed to be almost begging. “But this foe is different, and they are many. We will need the archetype of the blade, for it belongs nowhere else but at the front of such a battle!”

“If you lose it, you will die.” Lelleth informed him of the matron’s thoughts, perhaps simply because she was closer, “and our foes may gain our greatest advantage.”

Legionnaire trembled as he looked up. “I will run it through the monstrous heart of their emperor myself, fate willing.”

The matron scowled. “You’ll not be given that privilege. They are a *warlike* people. We are better to simply wait it out. They will begin to fight amongst themselves soon enough. The sacrifice of patience is all that is required to change the worlds today. You will not have the strength of Argentus to aid you at this time.”

Jayd was furious, but she knew it was the best she would do today. And besides, her back hurt.

“Please, Lady Jayd,” Lelleth used a more correct title for her. “You must be exhausted after your ride. Rest this night in the conclave-”

That really was her cue to leave. “Nope,” she stated forcefully. Maybe too forcefully. “I’ve got better things to do than rest while my warriors die at the hands of bestial monsters. I leave with all who are willing *now*.” And with that, she flew up, and landed on Stormbreath’s

back. He tried to soften the blow, but she still landed too heavily. Controlling air was never easy.

The matron seemed to take pity on her. “At least let me get you back to the portal in a moment,” she said in a voice which might have been Lelleth’s, and forming one of her legendary portals of ice in the air, took several hours off Jayd’s disappointed journey home.

The Orb

Rayn watched in wonder as the sinuous, translucent patron dragon of Chalcedonah rose high above the boiling magma, a giant sphere of glowing red clamped in his massive jaws.

The people of Chalcedonah were cheering.

“We actually located it not six of your months ago,” Wenthis, the scholar of the orb, boasted. “But saw no need to retrieve it from the planet’s core. I imagine it was a most amazing journey!”

“I agree,” Rayn replied. “To have swum down through the fire underneath the crust of a world, guided only by your human’s insight, and to find such a comparatively small trinket amidst endless fields of fire and stone – this is a great achievement.”

“Perhaps it can explain our constant curiosity,” Wenthis offered.

“Perhaps it does.”

“And the timing is most fortuitous.”

“Indeed. Are you certain it will be secure in your battleship?”

Wenthis scoffed. “Against this foe, little is certain. But there’s been a 7% rise in efficacy since the orb was located, so I’m guaranteeing it will make *some* form of difference.”

Rayn nodded. “Good. A good start. We are almost ready.”

Rayn raised his staff, watching it to glow a hallowed light in the presence of its brother archetype. The dragonmen would learn to fear the tools of men.

The Cloak

Rhoc breathed in deeply. How he loved the scent and sights of Tourmarelle! The natives ran up to him, surrounding him with soft hands and excited words. They called him, ‘the Pale Man’, which was in honor of those who spoke from the spirit world, aside from the fact that his skin was far whiter than theirs. It was a name he liked.

He’d landed as close to the conclave as he could. Spirit-of-Mud-and-Flame was there to meet him, whom he’d once called Twisted, along with his human rider of black skin; Dwindiwai.

Rhoc smiled, it was good to see how the dragons of Tourmarelle had healed by now. There were no welting wounds or puss filled boils. Now, just silent scars and stretched scales where once plague tormented their every waking hour. How had they survived thousands of years in that state! They were a power beyond reckoning, these mighty ones of Tourmarelle. Everyone underestimated them.

“Spirit-of-Mud-and-Flame.” He bowed.

The telepathic dragon smiled.

“Come, ride with me, Pale Man” Dwindiwai offered his hand.

“We will take you to the conclave, they are already meeting there.”

They swam calmly through the mud, the other dragons in the air visible as they gathered. Rhoc could feel the enormous swell of power in the world at this portentous event.

“Portentous!” Fairystone mocked him, flittering about in her dragon form. “Where did you find a word like that!”

He grinned at her. “You know, I’ve been studying from the teachers. It’s my word for the day!”

She flitted about his head. *You’d do much better studying Snow of the Celtwyld.*

He huffed. He knew they did not see eye to eye on this matter. Yes, he liked Snow. He liked her a lot. Enough to think about her every day. But she did not like him back. She did not seem to like anyone, at least not in any romantic way. *Give her space*, he told his impatient, eager dragon.

You’re going to miss our only chance with her, she replied.

He knew it was true. But what was he to do? There had to be another maid out there for him. But he always found himself comparing their virtues to hers. And Fairystone was right about one thing – that meant she was the one. *We’re busy*, he informed her, and knew that would be the end of that conversation, for today.

“Are you well?” Dwindiwai asked him, not looking at him respectfully.

Rhoc smiled, “I am. And your people?”

“Happy, without words now. We have new allies, and a wide world to explore. I had never dreamed to see these days, now the old ways are being restored. I was on Thiaz just last week. What a terribly cold and bright place!”

They laughed.

“But they are a mighty people. And I am sad to see them diminish.”

Rhoc agreed.

“The beasts will come to our world.” Dwindiwai said with concern.

They will die in the mists, Spirit-of-Mud-and-Flame informed them, quoting the old saying which was both an adage, and a military tactic.

Rhoc knew what he meant, but he was still worried. He had learnt powerful enemies such as the Dragonmen were, had learnt how to drop stones of great explosive power from above the air, from even unseen among the stars.

Spirit-of-Mud-and-Flame mocked him, *Do not worry, Pale Man. We have our ways.*

They had almost arrived. The endless foliage of mushrooms began to give way to the enormous conclave of dragons, newly renewed after the plague was defeated two years ago.

Rhoc was speechless; it was beautiful. There were browns and yellows and white, but also blue, pink and green. It seemed almost as large as the Celtwyld itself. He had not seen the day the ancient glory was restored, but he'd heard the stories. And they were not, in any way, hyperbole.

Yesterday's word? Fairystone giggled.

He smiled at her thoughts.

But it was the shifting entity within the center that grabbed his attention the most. Words had not been invented to describe what he saw; a shifting of the veils between realities ... floated and conversed within the moment of now there. It was... unimaginably beautiful, and yet also immeasurably threatening. Creatures from realities moved about on worlds without names from across nows never before witnessed.

Yeah, Fairystone agreed. *I don't have words for that either.*

Soon the visions began to gather, and folded together to form the cloak on a pair of human men, standing at the foot of the healed matron of their world, the five headed dragon ten times the size of any other dragons gathered here.

Fairystone was far more amazed at witnessing her long rumored humans. *Bonding to two humans? What a lucky Matron!*

They must be very synchronized, Rhoc admitted.

Twin bondings are rare, but not impossible, she mused.

Rhoc thought the men looked shy, uncertain. The exact opposite of their fearless dragon.

Both men wore the same cloak, or somehow it encompassed them both from different spaces. It was difficult to describe. Light seemed to pass between them. But there had to be only one archetype, there only ever was one.

There may be more than one, Fairystone reminded him, if there is another sentient species to define them. We have met them, or we dragons have, long ago. This, I think is the one cloak in two places.

Spirit-of-Mud-and-Flame chose to explain, *The cloak is the device men use to move between the infinite number of realities in Creation. We dragons use our blood. For the archetype of the cloak to exist, it must move between all realities. I am not surprised we see two manifestations of it here, in our now.*

Rhoc nodded. The explanation was enough for him, for now.

The matron glanced in his direction. Her five heads spoke, each to a different diplomat or confidant. But one voice cried out clearly to him “Pale Man of Pearl! We will not be ready to fight, not until tonight. We are conversing with the ancestors, and the children. We will join the war by then, and you will have the strength of Tourmarelle with you!”

Rhoc bowed on the floor. He was so grateful, and deeply touched. They’d known he was coming. They’d known what he’d

come to ask. He hadn't even needed to say a word, but they had promised to help. How he loved this strange, different people!

Their clubs and sling staves would do little against the monsters that warred against them now. But they would find other ways to help in this fight – hampering, confusing, and defending them from beyond the mists. The might of Tourmarelle would be justifiably feared by these monsters, soon enough!

The tools of men

The fortress thrummed with immeasurable power. Rayn stood in the command room, the elite of seven worlds with him. Each patron that could be there had brought their archetype. Chalcedona's fiery patron held the orb in his plasmic maw, and none could stand by him but the servant Taroz. The patron of Sanmarellis had sent the noble Many Visions, but Rhoc stood with the shield, ever imposing in his greater dragonrider's armor. Thiaz had brought the wand, coddling it on a silk sheet behind a dozen of their greatest surviving warriors. The five headed matron of Tourmarelle carried the cloak on her riders' backs, their form semi-translucent as they accompanied a near dimension that allowed her to swim always. The boots of Ethphraim stood on the feet of she who rode the matron, ever surrounded by dancing waters. Legionnaire of Argentus carried the blade, accompanied by the risen noble Irealia and her very young rider, their matron painfully absent. The harp glowed brightest, perhaps as it had always been celebrated on Sanmarellis, or perhaps as it had always been the first and best of tools, ever able to manage the skills and calm the enthusiasms of the other tools, helping them to work together at their best.

And Rayn held the staff of humanity. Brightly it shone in its brother archetypes, beaming with promise and wisdom beyond one mere mortal man's prowess could ever know, indeed, with the wisdom of every wiseman who had ever lived, or perhaps ever would.

People cheered. They looked to him to speak, and Farwing took his cue.

“Denizens of the empires of men and dragons, today we go to war! Today we put to silence the arrogance of the abominable dragonmen. Yesterday, we freed Thiaz, and today we free all our people from eternal slavery, and inevitable death. Today, we stand as one, and tomorrow, we go to war!”

People cheered, and began making hasty preparations.

But the brave words did not shake a misgiving in his heart. Nine tools. Nine tools for men. Eight they had claimed, eight stood here in one room for the first time in four millennia.

But where was the ninth?

The night before war

Rayn awoke as Jayd moved once more.

She sighed in the cool night air. The room was dark, high above in the fortress, the innumerable guards below silent with respect for the sleeping warriors.

“Are you all right?” he asked, knowing the answers, but wanting to show his support.

She held her back.

“Do the anti-momentum stones not help?”

She smiled in her voice, “Yes, it is not that.”

He sat up. He did not think it was that either. It would be the war they were planning to join in a few short hours.

“Have we left it too late?” she asked.

“You have three days to go, till your birth. But we could do it tonight. We could start right now.”

She did not answer, and he already knew the answer. But he wanted to give her the option once more. There was never any guarantee this war would be won in a day. But she was the leading dragon rider on their world, the one who had called the other's and been the hand of the princess in securing the entire existing might of the human and dragon alliance. This was stressful for her, more

stressful than it should have ever been to any woman about to give birth. How she made the super human seem so effortless! But how her humanity must have burdened her tonight.

“What will we do, if things go bad,” she asked the question she’d had to answer a thousand times in the past few hours.

He stroked her back. “We die with honor, and rejoin our ancestors. What more can we ask for?”

She rubbed her belly, “I did not expect this... I knew, you know, from my dreams at the dawn of womanhood. I know this is going to be hard. And I know you are going to be with me. But ... I just want to get one thing done at a time, you know? I don’t want to bring my son into a world where monsters dwell at every door.”

He stroked her hair. He knew what she’d meant. They’d fought against a plague that turned men and dragons, even the dead, into monsters to fight. They’d spared no expense to battle that foe. And eventually, they’d won. To awaken this week alone to find new monsters beating down the door? It was a moral injustice to her. And she was never one to let injustice just pass by.

“It is their emperor,” she observed. “If he dies, their war lust dies with him. We could have a conversation then.”

He nodded. It was very wise council. “I met a flower seller,” he confessed.

She glared at him, and cocked her head at the riddle.

“I hope she will be all right,” he explained. There were things worth saving, that he wished could be saved. Not the least of which were their impressive dreadnaughts, the kind of weapon every ally would be greatly relieved to see! But not this night. Not right now. Now they waited on their far away planetary shard, waiting for an attack they knew would be coming, with battle lines as wide as their dead sun’s light could reach.

But he waited in the silence. She would be thinking about Darkwing. None of the dragons would tell him what was going on either, but he trusted them, and the profound sense of respect and fear he felt whenever he asked the Divine on the matter. This was a matter for their ancient species. And in three days’ time, the rider that was his soul would be prepared to stand at the door that led beyond this world to bring a life through, but first she had to win a war.

Jayd watched the clouds. “She will stop at nothing, you realize.”

His heart hurt at the words, but he knew Jayd knew the Pure well enough. Either they prevailed, or they left the dragonmen civilization too broken to ever be a threat again. It was a terrible admission. But it would be no surprise to any who were taking part in this war. Either the humans or dragons won, or they never lived long enough to become slaves once more. Yet, even so, he could not bring himself to believe that those were their own real options, not even

after all that had happened to him. There had to be a better way! But he did not know what that was, and Divinity gave no definitive clue.

At least, not yet. “I would give my life, and all I am, to see peace,” he said.

She did not argue, not like she would in public. “So would I,” she admitted. She rubbed her tummy again, and lay back down. “This is not very convenient timing,” she muttered, and he would have replied, but she was asleep again upon his arm in a single breath.

Battle of the Thorns

Rayn held tight as the fortress rocked with yet another deadly blast.

Their progress was painstakingly slow.

Three days of war surrounded him. Three days, and no rest. No one wanted to admit it, but the dragonmen were putting up an excellent defense. Too much had needed to be sacrificed to gain ground. And the dreadnaughts were taken only at a terrible cost. In three days, they had only managed to take out two of the six.

“They hold their damaged one back still,” Rayn noted.

Jayd could not reply. For three days she had not stopped to command Pearl’s forces under Pure’s unyielding hand. The queen wanted death. She demanded it. At her command cities wilted, but the dragonmen had prepared for such a battle just as this.

“As I feared, they are still not drawn out after our feint,” Rayn informed her.

A man spoke up, “Our forces are nearing sector eight. We will be in place for a strike against their capital city within the hour.”

People cheered, but Rayn and his wife did not reply.

Suddenly alarms sounded. The success at sector eight had been a ruse; triple their forces were moving into that area, and there was

nothing they could do about it. They were about to lose all their forces, again.

Jayd screamed in frustration. “We cannot take them on their high ground, my Queen.”

Pure looked over at her, and paused, doubtless thinking dread thoughts. She looked out, no doubt seeing the lives and faces off all that now died under another military mistake. “If we cannot take them at their high ground, then we will henceforth level the ground. Fortress, prepare for imminent collision.”

For a moment a stunned fear spread through their troops, then a dread agreement. This had to be done.

Jayd nodded, pushing away the tears that rimmed her eyes, “All forces, defend the fortress of Pearl. All nonessential military personal are to evacuate immediately.”

Then Pure added, softly, “Concentrate all efforts at taking out their military capability – now, and forever.”

Humanities largest colonization vessel suddenly lurched as the momentum compensators were hard tasked at moderating her attack. She flew from out of the ranks of protecting vessels and dragons, and right into the heart of the enemies’ lines. Those that did not were crushed immediately.

A moment later a dreadnaught appeared in their way. A shield of light sprung up all over the walls as Rhoc stood on the parapets,

bolstered by Sanmarellis' prayers. The enormous vessel could not turn its deadly thorn its time, and was torn clean in half by the juggernaut flight of the fortress. Almost all other military might fled its path, or tried to evacuate the people from the world of the dragonmen. Long range weapons threatened to evaporate the walls, but little could be done against the archetypes of men.

Jayd then told Pure what she must already have known. "My queen, the collision will destroy the world of the dragonmen, and this fortress. Not even she can withstand such an impact. You have to prepare to leave now."

Few military stood back to flee.

"No," Pure replied. "I will see this through to the end. Concentrate all fire power at the surface of their world; destroy any military capability you can find."

Jayd looked about, gritting her teeth. She clearly wanted to talk Pure out of this. "The opening the fortress has created is allowing us to target the remaining dreadnaughts, they will not survive the day, my Queen."

Pure nodded, "Then it is worth it... Jayd, may I ask one favor?"

Jayd nodded, and Rayn's breath caught in his throat.

"Take care of my daughter, and watch over her and her father."

Jayd glared at her, "And leave you here to die alone! Never!"

"I demand it," Pure stated, with a face hard and porcelain.

“As you wish, oh!” Jayd suddenly clutched her abdomen.

Rayn felt it even as she cried out. The universe has waited long enough for her to give birth to their son. This was not the ideal time, nor place.

Pure turned, and hugged them both. “You two are my best friends in the whole world. In all nine of them. Go. I always knew I would never get to raise my daughter.”

Jayd gasped at her, but Rayn knew she spoke the truth.

He looked at Pure, and intended to say, ‘We will take your leave now,’ but found his voice choked. He could say nothing.

Another mighty explosion rocked the fortress. A voice spoke in their minds, *One minute till impact.*

Rayn and his young wife fled the control room as hundreds of soldiers tried to keep the fortress on course.

They ran, taking the tunnels. Again, the fortress shook, and another contraction caught hold of his young wife. They were far too close already.

But before they could run again a dread sentiment filled his heart. Another archetype was about to be used... but this one was different... this was...

... the headband.

“No,” Jayd begged, knowing it too.

“Take her!” Rayn ordered the nurse who had been seeking them.

Ironfang landed on the ground just paces in front of them. He did not bow, but ran to face him.

The enormous shove that was the might of the headband archetype almost threw them all off their feet.

“Rayn!” Jayd pled. A dozen soldiers surrounded her.

“Go!” he shouted, then placed his staff on the ground. His dragon placed his brow on the staff in their timeless gesture of submission, and of power.

The fought. They fought back against the archetype that was gently pulling on each and every molecule of the fortress. They drew on the faith and power of every priest of all seven worlds. They drew on the power of the shield. But the other archetypes had already fled, but the strength of the headband, forged from spirit immemorial for the manipulation of matter, warred against them.

Seventeen breathes was all they had before the collision.

He sensed, rather than felt, the enormous explosion that was the fortress striking the home world of the dragonmen. But it was only a glancing blow. He knew it would still destroy their world – destabilize it, choke out all their air. But the hundreds of millions of dragonmen there would survive.

And the fortress had not. It was now plummeting towards the dying star of their world.

They had hours, probably minutes, to flee the death of the Fortress from above the Clouds.

But they did not even have that long. He saw them coming, swarming in their millions. The dragonmen would be angry this time, they would spare none but the leaders from their surging wrath, and those others would suffer a longer death. But he would fight them. Ironfang would give them a battle to be remembered. They would scorch them with the arc of fire, then they would detonate the staff and vaporize themselves with several thousand others.

But in that thought Rayn knew it could not be; they had to live, if not to give the emperor something to boast about... then because Jayd would still need them, both.

Thus, they would surrender.

The bitter birth

Jayd screamed as another contraction took hold of her, a trembling hand pressed against familiar stones. So fierce was the contraction that she hardly had time to notice how they made her bleed this time. The alarms were thundering in the air, the sounds of battle coming from every direction.

It was not supposed to be like this. Why had she waited so long, just for the glory of battling her hated foe?

As she caught her gasping breath, she realized the predicament now. If the fortress failed, or if it succeeded, the enemies would be upon them in only a breath. She drew her knife, then threw it away. She could not end her life like this, and her child's life before it had even begun. He kicked in her womb. He knew her distress. She would bring him into life, if not for her, but because her husband would need him. He would need them both one day.

The wall exploded, cutting off the midwife's frantic lies. The outline of their hated enemy appeared before them.

She did not scream. They would never hear her scream.

The dragonman seemed to be conferring with his superiors, using a device in his helmet. Then, with surprisingly gentle gestures, he picked her up.

She knew she could not harm him with her weak, human hands. Her weapons were all thrown away. Her guards and army were dead, or dying. But she struck out at him anyway.

Rayn, where are you?

She was carried and placed in some kind of metal vessel, strapped by one arm to the wall but otherwise left to herself. They took her helmet, and her boots. But she was glad to see the armor gone; it was only impeding the process that was now taking place. The vessel took hold of the golden threads.

For four hours, or so, she was made to endure the birthing pains with no assistance. No one even came to open the vessel's doors. She took up some rags as best she could to weather the process, and fashioned a sharp implement to cut the baby from its afterbirth.

Suddenly the door opened. They ignored her indignity as though clothing were the greater offensive to their naked, scaled forms. She would have stabbed the creature standing there with her pretended knife, knowing it would do no harm, for it was Arj.

He looked exhausted, but sympathetic. No, it was not sympathy, it was regret.

Bending space he teleported her to a prison cell. There was no opening in the metal walls, nothing but a steel bench for a bed. She screamed in rage at him. He had taken her knife, he had taken her rags.

Again, another contraction took hold, and she bent all her will to the task.

Pled

Rayn could not stop weeping, nor stop the sympathetic contractions that took hold of him. There was nothing he could do, and there was no way she could sense him. They had taken his staff, and he let them think their new protections kept it from him, for now. But there was a pure knowledge that surged into him – he had to stay out of this. He had to let his young wife face this, wholly, utterly alone. But he did not know why.

Strung up hands and feet by steel chains to iron pillars, they still made him watch each and every silent contraction and beaded sweat that ran along her brow and made her whole body tremble with agony, the images broadcast along with every other murder they still committed in an attempt to demoralize the survivors. They thought it was torture for him, and to an extent, it was. But she had never been more beautiful to him than she was now.

She could not see the room full of beings who stood by her and assisted her. This would hurt, and to all without eyes to see, she was entirely alone.

Rayn felt his body involuntarily convulse. The unseen were trying to get his attention again. He followed their directions, and immediately saw Rhoc, and knew he was in very big trouble.

Rhoc roared as he smashed yet more dragonman soldier's skulls into pieces. He swung about his rod, cutting asunder all who tried to injure him. In truth, he was exhausted. He was bleeding. But he would fight until death took him. They had already announced the capture of his queen, Pure. They had already announced the capture of his best friend Rayn, and of his beloved general Jayd. He would find and free them, if he had to wade endlessly through a river of dragonmen blood to get to them.

Trust, a voice whispered to his heart. It was not through the helm, but it felt like Rayn's voice.

All forces, full retreat! A voice sounded, this time from the helm. *A fourth dreadnaught is down! I repeat, a fourth dreadnaught is down!*

He cheered, even as the dragonmen stopped to contemplate their great loss. Yes, they had saved their world, but they were losing their ability to destroy any others, at least, in a single attack.

You need to leave. Rayn's soul pled with his own. *Your strength will be needed, but not today.*

He raised his shield, feeling its powers triple as the need to protect those that fled flowed through him.

My boy, Fairystone pled, so silent in her hidden chestplate crystal. *We need to go.*

But he could not leave Rayn here. He could not leave Jayd here. He could not leave his precious princess Gayl without a mother; Pure of Pearl. He would find a way to rescue them all!

The dragonmen turned to surge on the embodiment of death once more, but in a smear of light, Godnor and Lightwing of Sanmarellis took him away.

Snow looked about in deep curiosity. To escape the impact, she and Windfyrth had fled to the shadow realm. But here it was oddly silent. The dark denizens had fled, for some reason she did not know. Was the threat to their world a threat to them somehow? She doubted it. Had the dragonmen's emperor somehow ordered it? It was possible...

But now it was silent. Using the cloak, and with only Windfyrth for power and comfort, they stole a little closer to the normal realm – close enough to endanger themselves. But here the souls of living creatures were just a tad more ... 'visible'... like human formed clouds of glowing, colored light.

She scoffed. She had known the fortress would not survive the impact.

My rider, Windfyrth counselled, we best not think so loud. The time for diplomacy is past, and now we seek concealment in the reeds of shadow, as once before.

Snow agreed.

Windfyrth continued, *They have taken the queen, and the general, and the high wiseman. If we can, we should find them, and take them into this realm for safety.*

What of Rhoc? Snow asked before she could check herself. But why apologize; he bore an archetype, after all.

He has fled, or rather, been hauled away. His skills are surely needed elsewhere.

As are ours. Be careful, Snow counselled, knowing she didn't need to say it, but feeling better if she did, *they have tools that can find us here.*

She felt Windfyrth smile, *Even so, I have prepared my whole life for a time such as this.* And with that, she used her chameleon powers to blend them perfectly with the shadows.

Snow grinned. Silence was her ally, and loneliness her lifelong friend. They were **made** for this quest!

The Princess of Pearl

Pure looked out at the slaving monsters. They had her, chained and cuffed, standing unarmed in the center of their hated amphitheater. She grinned to herself; how they had paid dearly with a hundred thousand lives to capture her and Farwing. Looming cracks threatened the structure, caused no doubt by the earthquakes her attack had left on their world. It had only been hours since the collision, and the rest had fled. The war had dissolved to bitter skirmishes and halfhearted sorties into each other's territories.

She could barely move. Farwing, they had chained up along the entire outer circumference of the theater, and then some. Yet they did not attack him, nor injure him to her hurt. They seemed to sense they had a royal of his kind here, and dared not slay him, as yet.

Thousands of the dragonmen roared, but they looked like rabble – injured or immature soldiers rounded up for this event; her execution.

They would give them all a show to remember before they died today.

The crowd cheered as one as the benighted emperor entered the arena. He looked a little weary, but otherwise unbothered by the war his people waged in his honor. His clothes were immaculate and clean,

his scales carefully oiled. He looked as though he felt he had nothing to fear today.

His woman was by his side, and for a moment Pure ignored her. Then Farwing's sight showed her eyes more than she could ever see alone. The empress was far more dragon than they were letting on. There was some chemical... they were poisoning her, to keep her sedate and compliant most likely. But she was about as dragon as a dragonman could possibly be without being an actual full-blooded dragon. And that might mean her heart –

“Pure, Queen of Pearl!” a herald interrupted her thoughts. “You are called to answer for your crimes against this people! Of unjust war, of failing to submit to the government of your betters, of failing to surrender under just cause and with ample warning, you are hereby judged worthy of death in the highest degree. What say you for yourselves?”

She looked out at the hoard, now silent. There were young ones there now... not children... but young.

She and Farwing smiled to themselves. They might not have won the battle, but they might yet win the war. They had forced the dragonmen to change, to no longer consider themselves as indestructible as before. They had destroyed or damaged all their mighty dreadnaughts. They had given their world a death wound. They had... frightened them.

“Death!” she screamed. “Death! It is I who judge *you* worthy of death, fetid worms! Mutant abominations!”

They screamed their denial at them.

With seething, draconic rage they screamed back at them, and their voice suddenly silenced them all. “You could have had peace; but you started a war that cannot end but with your annihilation, or ours. And, let me assure you, it will be yours.”

They shouted again, and continued until the emperor held up his hand for silence. Then, with a gesture, four largish dragonmen began to enter the arena. It took her only a moment to recognize what they were – fire breathers, the few of their kind among these monsters.

Dread realization sunk into her that this was, indeed, her day to die.

Farwing smiled within her; the foolish monsters had not taken her headband from her.

“Know this, Emperor of Abominations,” Farwing spoke through her, “If you do not spare this Queen, you forever invoke death upon yourself, your spawn, and your whole household.”

The emperor stood despite himself, perhaps recognizing the patronic authority with which she spoke. For a moment he said nothing, and when he did, the fear was evident in his voice to all who heard it. “You cannot tell me what to do, I am the *Emperor!*”

But his people cheered anyway.

With a wave of his hand, he ordered her death by fire.

But she was prepared, by a vision years ago. Using her innate powers and the blessings of the headband she claimed that fire, and intensified those flames a thousand-fold. She incinerated the breathers where they stood, and spiraled the flames up towards the stands. Farwing added to them, fire bursting out from within his whole mortal form. Dragonmen screamed and fled, but few would get far enough away. The scorching flames burnt up flesh, air and stone, spiraling into a self-sustaining vortex of fire. The entire arena would be nothing more than a charred crater within only moments, half the local city destroyed. More would die in this hour by their hand and claw than in her entire life combined.

But she, and Farwing, would never live long enough to appreciate it.

Rayn

Rayn felt Pure and Farwing die. They all would. He gripped his heart as a savage guilt and fear from which he might never recover tore through him – until he heard his wife crying out again.

“Watch him, be careful!” Arj urged the emperor’s minions. They were trying to break him, to force him to reveal unseen powers, or to claim the white staff before the time.

Tears burned his eyes as ragged breaths shook his form, but Rayn did not break. This suffering would only sanctify him.

“Turn it off!” Arj demanded, and to Ryan’s disappointment the images of his wife struggling unassisted in childbirth disappeared.

Jayd lay back, panting. There was nothing she could do now, and was losing consciousness between each contraction. No position had lessened the pain, and what scant rags she could salvage from her own clothing would barely do to wrap her child in, let alone care for the birth itself. The room was cold, and the air dry. She had abandoned her dignity long ago, and simply lay, trying to remember to stay alive.

How Darkwing would be suffering so. Where was Rayn!

In a pitch-black cavern, far away on Pearl, Darkwing struggled.

Get up! the patron of Sanmarellis roared at him. *Your human suffers, what of it!*

This moment, this reality, the matron of Tourmarelle informed him in her five voices, *what is becoming now has always been. If it was not so, they would have told you.*

He felt her breathing courage into his form, but it did not appear to help.

Let her pain be your own, the matron of Ethphraim told him. *Let it stretch you beyond what humans can ever endure.*

Darkwing roared as her agony burned through his entire existence. It was magnified, magnified a thousand times by his dragon might and powerful sensitivity. He fell to the floor, gasping for breath. But he felt it, too. His skin was raw. It was splitting all over. But they would not let his dragon blood fall to the floor.

You felt your patron die, the matron of Argentus spoke from far away on her world. *And you know what you must do.*

He trembled to his feet. The other dragons, the nobles of his world, had sensed it too. Timeseer, the Watcher, had helped to prepare them all. But it did not make it any easier for him.

He looked to the dragons before him. Some watched him with sympathy, others with awe. Three – with raw, unmitigated hatred.

He pitied their fates.

The final patron spoke, for of the matron of Thiaz they would hear nothing – no one ever had. But the burning patron of Chalcedonah, from deep within a volcano far away on another world, explained, *Our strength will be with you. Your rise must of necessity be quick, and unexpected. All who would claim the throne before you have ceded their right and their authority, and their knoweldge and power now passes directly to you, Darkwing, Lord of the night. Let her suffering flow through you. Then do what you know you must do.*

With that, the assembled nobles slew the three rebels who had refused to submit to the dragon council's ruling.

He trembled as another stretching pain split his skin, turning him into an agonized chrysalis he was glad no human eye had ever seen, or would ever know. Nobels almost never rose this way, the ancient way. But it was needed today, and almost none of the humans knew about it.

The scent of the slain dragons drew a primal, irrational hunger from his soul.

Rise, and eat, the assembled nobility ordered him.

Arj watched in silence. The emperor roared as yet another administration failed to meet his standards. This time, the hapless dragonman priest's skull was crushed under his flailing fist.

Arj said nothing; the burns on the emperor were only light. His wife had saved him, covering him with her own body that could bear the full light of a sun without harm. She was uninjured. She lay nearby on a luxurious bed, ignoring him. The medicine often made her this way.

“Well!” the emperor demanded of her.

She shook herself from her idle doze quickly, “Yes, my liege. Indeed.”

He scowled at her, never satisfied with her, or anyone else. “Our losses were severe today,” he muttered.

She looked like she was still hoping to cheer him up, and gazed over at her high priest.

Arj took his cue, though he was deeply displeased with his indulgent emperor, and afraid for his people. What they had suffered today would change them all. “They are in full retreat, and their losses vast-”

The emperor shook his head. “Of all the blasted tactics we had prepared for, she really surprised us with that one. And just as the

tertiary dreadnaught was brought down! She could not have hit us at a worse time.”

“But we prevailed, darling.”

He stood up to take wine, but his queen wisely sat away for fear he might yet strike her.

He drank, and sighed, “Gather the forces, we strike back in two days. And let us have some entertainment here!” Musicians scurried to comply, one having a bandage on his arm, probably from the earthquakes which still troubled their world, and might for years still – till it died in the black sun. “Bah, show me the suffering woman.”

Arj complied, and showed him the image of the human general, the wife of the high priest. She lay on her side now, it seemed there was nothing else she could do. Again, a contraction took her, but again, she did not cry out.

The empress gasped, and sat upright.

“Sickly worms, indeed,” the emperor snarled, nursing his wounded wrist. Again, he took to eating grapes, ignoring the world around him.

Arj looked at the empresses. She watched the image with deep intensity. “Let her go,” she begged her emperor.

He paid her little attention. “Better they learn to die under our hands with dignity, than to prolong their suffering with resistance,” he replied with callous indifference.

Again, the human woman grunted as the birthing pains took her. Arj did not understand what madness bade humans such difficulty in giving birth, but he sent her a little strength that he felt he could risk. She adjusted her position on the hard floor.

“She suffers so,” the empress said.

Now the emperor looked angry. “Set these images to all the worlds!” he demanded the servants. “Let them all see what it means to deny the dragonmen!”

Arj knew it was plain stupidity, it would not humiliate them; it would motivate them all the more. Surely the emperor could see this? But he was hurting on his wrist, and he blamed his people for this inconvenience. Arj suppressed a snarl, and had to look away.

“Pah, I go to rest,” the emperor stated. “Have the military prepared to invade all seven worlds at dawn in day two, no less. Kill any that resist and use their worthless scales as food, and fuel.”

“Yes, emperor!” the servants replied, and unthinkingly scurried to comply.

Arj knew, at best, they needed three weeks to properly prepare for any counterstrike, seven at best.

The emperor walked wearily out, and his attendants scurried out with him.

Arj then watched with growing concern as the empresses stood up to the images of the struggling human. He could almost feel the

compassion burning from her towards this dying woman and her unhatched offspring. And Arj gulped; this was becoming a very, very dangerous situation.

Beyond this world

Rayn's soul drifted. He sensed Arj was not nearby, and he would have recognized the danger immediately. But there was a danger to Rayn too – he was approaching the place.

Immediately he sensed Ironfang's soul with him. *We... should not travel this path, my rider.*

Rayn knew it was true. But there was something utterly irresistible about this place. It was peaceful. It was forgiving. It was love.

And it was the place children waited before they were born.

Rayn knew, he knew this one truth – they had to go there. It was a father's role to bring the child's soul into the world, for the mother had formed the body. In all the months of his son's incubation, despite the impressive miracle of his son's health and development... in all that time he'd never mentioned his great misgiving – his son's mind was not like other humans. It was... fast, creative... unburdened. He would find life ... difficult to process. But even so, he could not explain why he'd never gone and gotten his sons soul. Not even the night before the battle and there had been time then.

But now, if you go, Ironfang assured him, neither I nor you will have the strength to return to the world of the living.

His heart stung. So this was to be it? To trade his son's life for his own?

Was that the price? And how long would the struggling, beleaguered infant live, knowing he was held prisoner in enemy territory with almost no hope of rescue, his father surrounded by enemies he himself was not yet convinced he should, or could, escape?

And, before them, the inexhaustible love of Divinity.

In that instant, his mind was made up. *Better to die to bring his life, however brief, into this reality.*

But even in the instant of that thought, Divinity stopped him. He felt its power, and warmth, like the day princess Gayl had been born.

The Divine spoke again, *Fear not, good priest, and the dragon that is his soul – your son's spirit has already passed into the world of life.*

He saw it then, in vision. The night that Jayd and Pure and Snow had drunk the bitter waters and dreamed the vision of their lives, awakening the new morning into adult women of their tribe. But that was also, somehow, the night that his son's spirit had crossed into this world. And, somehow, he hadn't even noticed.

Humbled beyond anything he knew he was capable of Rayn rested. This task was done. And he needn't not risk anything more to see it happen.

There yet, remains in these three days, unimaginably important acts for you to do, Rayn, child of the Celtwyld and soul of Ironfang the Redeemed.

He sighed, even as the pain and his consciousness began to return. But his dragon sent him strength and patience a thousand fold, and he knew, with absolute certainty, that he could bear with whatever he was required now to do – even if that was only to wait.

She had stopped complaining, there was simply no use. The floor was cold, but it did hold her and her unborn son. At least she could bring him into his first breath, then it did not matter what happened to her.

Again, the contractions hurt. They were so close now, they never stopped. Or, if they did, she was not conscious. How long had it been? 12 hours, maybe more? She clutched the floor, the pain dripping as her blood from her clenching nails, trying to distract her from the agony within.

She realized he was stuck now. She was too young, and she was supposed to have people on this side of the dimensional barrier assisting her. But there was no one, not even the guards.

At best, all she could do was kneel on her elbows and knees, and hoped it would perhaps be enough. She tried to breathe but found it almost impossible.

Again, she yelled in frustration, but not in pain. They would never hear that pain.

Arj watched as none impeded the empress' staring. None dared mock; they all could see how she felt. But they also knew if any dared tell her to look away they would be beaten to the floor. None dared impede her again.

The human woman was on her knees again, only this time she clutched up to the bedside. She had stopped sweating an hour ago, and the cold room would no doubt be the death of her once the birth stopped.

The empress glared at him.

Arj had no words to say. He knew what she wanted, but did not know how she could tell his thoughts. She had always seemed to know his thoughts, and where he was to be found. He lived in fear of that dragonwoman.

Her face softened, and she looked again, "Is nothing to be done?"

He would gladly help the human, if it didn't mean his death. Wisely, Arj was silent.

“Was this what it was really like, for our ancestors?” she said. “I thought the dreams were illusions. I remember the pain, and the fear... giving birth to an egg was never something my ancestors had been truly prepared for... but at least there was always someone to help.”

Arj waited. He wished he could get away... but something kept him nearby. In a stab of fear, he realized what it was: he cared for the empress' sorrow. Perhaps there was truth in Rayn's words after all; how deeply, he realized, he cared for her.

For once it was if she did not notice. She spoke, “Motherhood. It ties us together as one beyond time, beyond race. She should not have to deal with this alone. None ever should, for it is *sacred!*”

Arj spoke with great hesitation in his voice, “I... you... it is death to any who assist an enemy.”

She replied, staring with compassion at the image. “Then we are the very monsters they feared us to be.”

On Argentus, silence reigned.

Legionnaire himself, greatest warrior of their world, and companion to the goddess in her quest to find the matron, could barely move. The brutality of the dragonmen paralyzed him. What they had done to Thiaz, well that was war. But this... this was worse than bestial brutality. No tyrant of his world had ever done anything so brutal as what they were doing to the goddess, right now.

And in all his life, never, ever, had anything managed to bring his entire world to silence.

They had been little bothered by the dragonmen, who had bothered little with them. When the war had started... it was a sport. A diversion. None ever considered the dragonmen any real threat. But then they'd shown their planet killing thorns. And then... they'd destroyed the fortress from beyond the clouds. And even, for all this, only the soldiers had fought. But now, this, this...

It took all his will just to speak, and when he did, he spoke the only truth his world knew right now, "How dare they..." And all Argentus began to prepare to commit their entire world to the war.

Darkwing felt nothing now, hidden within the sacred chrysalis. He felt his bones breaking, stretching, growing. But they were the memories of sounds he no longer heard.

He knew she was suffering; his soul. She was growing faint. But he knew, and it should have brought his heart wrenching fear, but it did not. He knew, if she died, she would leave the universe ... without him. He would survive the death of his rider. And just for now, he did not feel fear about that at all.

Rayn's head shot up. The dragonmen were electrocuting him again. He ignored it; it was a bother. They laughed, and went their way.

Again, he bent his head to the task. *Jayd, I am here. Jayd, hear me.*

But again, she did not. Somehow, in the fear and immorality of her dire situation, she had erected barrier upon barrier in her mind that he could not pierce. She was full of pain and suffering, more than he could ever hope to imagine, or bare.

He wondered if, perhaps, Darkwing sensed its approach across time too, and that was why he had fled so far away.

Deeply, with every molecule, he wished to tare the white staff from its pretended imprisonment. To use it to teleport to her side, obliterate her captors, and whisk her away on the golden threads to the safety of Pearl.

Patience, the voices counselled. He knew he could ignore them, and he knew they would forgive him. But he knew there was something even wiser in waiting.

She is going to join you, you know, he told those voices.

They seemed to smile, with sympathy, and deep compassion for his pain and hers. *This test is not for her*.

Tears stung his cheeks, for to make his wife suffer for his growth was a deeper pain than he could have ever imagined.

And it's not for you, either.

Wonder stilled his tears, and he pondered who might possibly benefit from such a terrible test?

The Empress of all Dragonmen

Arj waited. The birthing had stalled. Again, the woman heaved; the top of a little human head was visible. She did not open her eyes now; she had not for some time.

By now five of the dragonwomen had joined the empress's vigil, and a soldier to accompany Arj. They watched with baited breath. The dragonwomen clutched hands, but none touched their empress, who alone knelt up next to the image as though she were there in person.

Suddenly, the human woman fell to the floor.

For a long moment, there was silence. Everyone held their breath. Again, the stomach began to harden, but this time the woman was too weak to even move.

"Get up," the empress ordered.

No one spoke. The soldier looked at Arj with concern, but he did not dare leave.

"GET UP!" the empress suddenly roared. "Your child yet lives, but he needs you to *push*. Get up, GET UP, NOW!"

The dragonwomen seemed horrified at their empress, then, the bravest of them took her claw.

Again, the empress shouted. “Are you not the bravest and most dangerous woman in all the seven worlds? Goddess of Argentus, Dragon rider of Pearl, get up! Your child needs you. Get up, get up NOW!”

Somehow, by the mystical power of her words, or by the pain of the next contraction, the human woman gained consciousness. She cringed.

The dragonwomen cheered.

Arj bid the room to silence, but they ignored him.

Hand over hand, the human woman clutched at the bed, resuming her kneeling position.

Then, she screamed; a raw, primal scream that shook Arj to his core. Within it he could hear the pain of every mother, the hope of every new life. Something sacred was happening inside the body of that woman, and it required a price; and this price was pain.

Again, she screamed, louder than before. It was unlike any sound he had ever known. There was no fear within, only acceptance of the awful price that was required of her.

Then she screamed again, but this time, something was clearly wrong. The scream faded long before the others. Its power left her, and she started to fall again.

The empresses cried out in dismay.

Silence filled the room.

Then, a small cry pieced the emptiness. It was a baby, a human baby. And the child wept; loudly.

But the woman did not move. She could not. Her strength was lost.

“Why does she not feed him?” a dragonwoman asked. “She has the mammary glands; her child must feed!”

The dragonwomen looked up at the empress.

She did not reply.

“Because she cannot,” Arj replied.

“Then... she and the child will die.”

Without warning or explanation, the empress turned to leave.

But Arj knew what her intent was. He ran to stop her, but it would be as much good as standing in front of a mountain.

“My empress, please!”

For a moment, for just an instant, it looked like she would have struck him. Had it been any other dragonman, she probably would have. And, for her strength, it undoubtedly would have killed him.

She stopped. “Tell my husband, if you must. I would rather die than live in a world that denies that *miracle!*”

The empress began to weep, and saying no more, shoved him effortlessly aside, and she ran towards the healing room.

Without a sound, Arj switched off the projections to the other worlds.

Blayd of the Celtwyld

Her next conscious memory was that of a cold liquid that touched her lips. Jayd sat up, trying to remember where she was, and what she had been doing. Her entire body was exhausted beyond anything she had ever experienced, and every muscle ached. But the liquid quenched her desperate thirst, and it seemed to hold powerful healing properties as well.

A small cry of a new baby sounded in her ears, and she stopped drinking immediately. “The child!” she said, desperately searching for him.

Another voice spoke, deep, and dragonlike, “Here, he feeds from you already.”

She looked down to find a pale and sickly looking infant on her bosom, and immediately felt a godlike surge of love for him. She held him close, breathlessly grateful that he lived.

She looked up, and was momentarily terrified to see her savior was a dragonwoman. It was the empress herself.

The scaled woman spoke, “You were torn badly, and have lost too much blood. This liquid will replace most of it within the hour.”

Jayd looked up at the beast, tempted to smash the bottle she offered and gouge her eyes out. But she was in no position for combat

right now... and it seemed the older female had just saved her life, and the life of her son.

Cautiously, she took the bottle of precious blue liquid, and drank the rest of it. She watched as it stemmed the slow oozing of blood from her wounds, mended her injuries in moments, and helped fill her breasts with life giving milk. The child suckled long, and well.

The dragon empress had not moved, not in several minutes. Jayd began to wonder what she was doing saving her life like this. Was it another cunning ploy by the emperor? Or did she risk her own life and position by being here.

But the empress did not speak. Soon, she turned, and gave her several blankets she had taken. Jayd took them with intense, speechless gratitude.

The empress looked down at the young child, not daring to touch him. “What will his name be?”

“Blayd, of the Celtwyld, after the blade that lands the killing blow, and ends the hunt,” she said, deliberately performing an official ritual as the first to speak his full name and it’s meaning.

The empress nodded.

Soon the child stopped sucking and seemed to fall asleep.

Jayd looked up at the empress, wondering again if she had been sent here. But there was a gentle kindness in all her words, nothing Jayd had seen in all the violent strength of the dragonmen warriors,

not in all the time she'd known them. Jayd recognized something in this woman of another species; the compassion of mothers.

Then Jayd wondered if this was not a chance to build some kind of bridge between their two warring worlds. To test if there was any compassion within them, for even with all her love it was better to die now than watch him die later. With breathless courage she held out the sleeping child for the empress to hold.

The older woman paused a moment, then swiftly stood without touching either of them. "Your child lives," she announced, and left.

Realm of the Shadows

The darkness here was impenetrable by sight. Snow and Windfyrth found they had to ‘feel’ their way through the ebon ichor, tangled about in this darkened realm of the shadows. For hours they wandered, keeping away from as much trouble as they could. They only found two surviving prisoners; a high-ranking military of Thiaz and medic of Tourmarelle, and slaying their guards stole them back towards the safety of a nearby military fortress. But of Jayd, or of Rayn, they had found nothing.

Let us try the central fortress again, Windfyrth suggested, invisible against the perpetual night.

Snow was wary. Guardians both living and unseen protected it day and night. They had found nothing on their first, brief, excursion. But the broken, dying planetary shard that was their home world was so large, larger than the Celtwyld by many times. It would be lifetimes before they could search it all piece by piece.

Suddenly thunder rumbled in the darkness. They tensed.

I did not know that was possible. Windfyrth admitted for them both.

Harken! A voice rumbled from the thunder, and Snow gasped as she recognized that power, if not the voice itself. It was Darkwing.

How is he doing that? Snow wondered aloud.

Again, the thunder shook the hidden realm. When she heard Darkwing speak, it was as if a shard of Divinity itself had awoken within him.

He has crossed the fire, Windfyrth mused, speaking of the moment when a dragon nearing their thousandth year finds a cause compelling enough to make them into a noble. Snow immediately realized he would be a lot larger the next time they met.

Darkwing, newly risen noble of Pearl, spoke directly to her through his unparalleled mastery of shadow. *My rider has need of your assistance. Her son is now born, and has crossed over into this realm. Bring them to me.*

Snow marveled. There was a might and nobility in all his words, riven new with authority and power. No power they could bear could stand against him now, nor need they, since their own goals coincided with his. But in that moment a vision like a dim light shone on her conscious mind, and her dragon's. She saw through many leagues, penetrating stone and shadow with her gaze. She saw Jayd, cuddling a tiny infant in her arms, locked away in a heavily fortified prison cell.

What terrible price has been paid for this power? Windfyrth mused.

Go, Snow requested.

Windfyrth raced through the shadows.

Jayd waited, holding her child, for whatever fate intended for them. Was he to be the emperor's next meal? But the empress... she had not wanted the child harmed...

She sighed, holding his silent, perfect form. He would be a bold warrior for the Celtwyld, for Pearl. She knew it, she felt it in her soul. He would save the world, just like she had, and a thousand others like it. Just like his father; spiritual, and strong.

But, for now, they waited, wrapped in rags in a prison cell. She didn't dare imagine what cruel sufferings the dragonmen had for her and her son. *Please, she begged Divinity, let Darkwing find us!*

Suddenly a large, green and shadow claw emerged from the shadows under the bed, and began to wrap itself quickly around her. Jayd barely had a moment to scream, and even as she did, she realized she knew that hand.

Windfyrth had found them.

A moment later they were in the cool of space, then Jayd realized they were still in the shadow realm. It was, as ever, unwelcoming. But this time, moreso than ever, oddly silent. The world of the dragonmen seemed a dimming light far away.

They sped into the stars, trying to get a hold of the outer threads, trying to get away from the hold the dying planetoid yet held on them.

Snow turned, and embraced Jayd. She looked at the child.

Even to Jayd's eyes he seemed a little too pale, but alive.

I am glad – Snow began, till a familiar tugging on the golden threads of her dragon informed them both that the enemy was approaching.

A small battle cruiser of the dragonmen appeared nearby, dozens of individual battle fighters, and dragonmen in spacewings, emerged from that ship.

Windfyrth took evasive actions, but still headed out towards open space, away from the terrible hold the dragonmen maintained on their own threads of a dying world as fast as she was able.

Despite being hidden in another dimension the hunters somehow honed in.

We're nearly there! Snow shouted, calling upon all her strength to help speed her dragon along.

The hunters could not see them, but they seemed to know where they were. Two were drawing dangerously close.

Suddenly Jayd felt an intense welling in her soul. She felt her heart reaching out to Darkwing. With a passion she did not know was possible, she felt a unique reconnection of what they had lost since their forced parting before the birth. It felt a thousand times stronger

than ever before... and instantly her heart thrilled to realize a wonderful truth: Darkwing had become a noble.

And he had finally found her, *My soul!* she wept.

Through the impossible immensity of space, a dark portal opened up, forged from Darkwing's breath, and made perfect by his new mastery of shadow and space. An enormous, dark tendril of light emerged, and slammed into the battle cruiser. Fire exploded from it, then the tendril began to wrap around, crushing all within. A moment later and the entire battleship and most of the fighters were drawn into a dreadful implosion, crushed by Darkwing's terrible vengeance and gravity more powerful than any built of their kind could survive.

Windfyrth wasted no time to admire the scene, but taking advantage of the portal left for home instantly.

Darkwing, Lord of Shadows

In the next moment Jayd saw her beloved Darkwing sitting in the conclave of dragons, filling it. His dark wings now encompassed the entire inside of the mountain. Faint lights streamed up from the crystals and were swallowed by the shredded shadows at the edges of his wings. Within him a saintly rage burned, and terrifying indignation.

She looked up at him, the sleeping child in her arms, and felt a burning guilt within her, not sure if the feeling was Darkwing's or hers.

There were others there, thousands. The priests, and the scholars. Seven worlds. But she did not pay them any attention at all.

Darkwing began to step down from the throne of his power, his enormous skull now almost the size of the patron, Farwing. The mask of concentration faded, and his face twisted in pain and regret, tinged with understanding and patience. "My Lady," he wept.

Holding her child in one arm, her tears joined his. She knew what he was going to say, but she also knew he needed to say it aloud.

"I wish I could have been there for you! I needed to be there."

"You were always there, Darkwing. Your presence never left me."

Yet it felt to her as though she had just said the same thing to him, and he had reassured her with those very words. She had missed his great transformation.

Or caused it, Rayn's voice pondered in her heart.

“Rayn! Where *were you!*” she looked about.

Darkwing smiled grimly. *He is not here. Not yet.*

Jayd looked at Darkwing, momentarily enraged at the thought her husband might be kept back from seeing their son a few moments more.

The shadows cleared, and then Jayd saw them – everyone. The elite of the seven worlds. Instantly she knew that they had seen her trial, and they had watched her give birth. And they all knew who had saved her life, and the life of her son.

Men applauded, and women approached to greet the rising honored of Pearl.

Jayd collapsed to the floor, and took a few moments to rest and enjoy the attention. Healers attended her and the child, and to mend and dress her properly. They mended her stretched and tortured muscles and skin, and the priestess blessed her with every gift of motherhood. They shed tears for Pure and her grieving husband. Yet for just one hour, one sacred hour, Jayd rested.

High priest's gambit

Rayn laughed within himself. He had not been kept back from seeing his son, and welcoming his physical form into this troubled dimension. He had not been kept back from helping his wife, though she did not feel it. Now, chained and guarded in the innermost vault of the dragonmen hoard, he knew he could not be kept here any longer than he wished either.

“Guard him, keep him fast!” Arj, the ‘man hearted’ shouted. Clearly, he sensed the rising danger.

But Rayn had paid the price. He had done what he had been required to do. Yet there was just a little more for him to do here.

He sighed, and prayed. *What was to be done?*

They did not say. But there was such great sorrow in Divinities being. The dragonmen emperor had brought death upon them all. But how it was to be accomplished? What were they supposed to do? He did not know, and perhaps that was the best – for they could not yet force his plans from him if he didn't even know them. But he sensed Divinity had a plan, and all it required of him, for now, was to wait as a prisoner. Even as much as his young wife had set the standard of submission for him.

A thousand guards watched him now, weapons pointed at his chest. The 'general' had been rescued, from the midst of their darkest prisons, and evading all capture had fled back to Pearl with their newborn son. Somehow, in the midst of the dragonmen's pyrrhic victory in defeating the fortress and scattering the combined armies of the seven worlds, still a single key prisoner had been taken from them.

Now they guarded him with their lives, knowing that if he, too, fled, they would all be put to death.

Ryan looked up at Arj, feeling renewed. She was home, and his son was safe.

But, chained in the air hand and foot, any time would be a long time.

As if to grant his wish, the emperor stormed in. Any guard not actively guarding him threw themselves to the floor and trembled.

As soon as the emperor was in arms reach, he struck Arj to the ground. "Did I not command you to keep her!"

Arj had clearly been expecting it, and was not harmed. "Yes, yes Exalted! I have no excuse. I am not even worthy to be crushed under your claw!"

The fawning appeared to appease the emperor. "Bah!" he cursed, ignoring his high priest.

The emperor turned to face Rayn. With a gesture, lightning seared down the chains and into his body. Rayn allowed it, his form twisting and convulsing in raw agony.

But the emperor did not allow it for long. “You, speaker for men, will live to see the day all humans quail at my feet.”

“Please, your grace –” Arj began. He knew Rayn could get a message to his friends, even if he did not yet leave these chains.

“Silence!” the emperor roared. He simmered with rage, torn from his sleep. “In the dawn of two days’ time, Manling, my combined forces will rain down fire on all seven worlds.”

“We can take you,” Rayn mumbled.

The emperor gloated with a savage fist, “No, for this time, you forget, we will bring all from our world which you have cursed with death. All our civilians, all our dragonmen. You will not survive such an onslaught. Your worlds will be ours, and your children our slaves forever.”

Rayn did not reply, and the emperor, in a timeless display of waning authority, spat on him.

Laughing, the emperor began to walk away. “Death to all and their families should this man be allowed to escape!”

The legion within the room watched him with drawn weapons and unblinking eyes.

Rayn waited four hours.

The attention in the room was just beginning to wane, he could feel it. Subtly, he stretched out toward the white staff. It set off an alarm. He tried again, even more subtly. He found the familiar spirit that was the archetype, and used it to connect with the orb. They both knew where the headband was now, but that was not important information.

A moment of regret burned at his injured mind – if they had only listened to him! But that was all in the past, he only had now to deal with. And wasn't getting the pain done with and over quickly proverbially the 'Celtwyld way'.

Now that war was with them, it could be over the fast and painful way, or the slow, careful, and agonizing way.

Patience is not, traditionally, the Celtwyld way. But it is the lesson you have been learning your whole, entire life. Ironfang observed, even from his unconscious form somewhere far, far away.

But, they knew, it was time to report to the others.

Gently, carefully, as nothing more than a lost spirit, he appeared in the council chambers of the largest remaining human battle fortress, the lead ship of Chalcedonah. As he knew, the lords of all seven worlds had only just gathered.

They seemed very surprised to see him there, still chained and waiting. He could sense the power in the room around him. And the fear. There was mourning. And praise.

The last sentiment surprised him. Turning, he saw three; Godnor, Twoswords, and Jayd. Rayn could scarcely stifle his joy at seeing her, but did not want to risk setting off any further alarms. He felt secure in the untested conviction that he could wrench the white staff from its stronghold and teleport right there in person. But he also held an even stronger conviction that, for the safety and destiny of all in that room, he was of more benefit in the lair of the enemy, free to converse with a desperate, exhausted, arrogant emperor.

But his thoughts fell to silence at seeing her. She was beautiful beyond any woman he had ever known, and his only true and honest friend. And when she looked at him, it was as if she saw no other person in the world.

Twoswords had to cough into the uncomfortable silence of the room to stop them staring into each other's eyes.

“What news, all father of Pearl?” a diplomat of Tourmarelle said.

“Two days,” Rayn replied.

The assembled groaned in disbelief.

“We feared as much,” Ko mumbled. “All their citizenry is on the move, arming themselves. They are boarding vessels of every kind.”

“Perhaps we wounded their world more than they care to admit?” Jane Jones of Ethphraim stated. “And they need to flee it?”

“That would be inconvenient for us,” Godnor confessed.

“Regardless,” Jayd, general of all Pearl stated, shouting the room to silence. “What matters most is what we *do*.”

They looked at each other.

Rayn feared asking Divinity what to do, because he already knew the answer. When he did, finally, speak it, it was if a mighty weight had been taken off his chest, and he could find a little comfort hanging by his wrists and ankles. But it was still not easy to say, “We surrender.”

They glared at him in disbelief, and fear.

Ryan repeated. “We surrender, one and all.”

For a long moment, there was silence.

Ko, glaring at his orb stood, “I see the high wiseman’s logic: The current planetary government mechanism need an adversary to exit. Their entire culture right to the core is determined on having someone to hate. If we no longer provide them with that enemy, it is a solid gambit that they will soon turn on each other once more.”

Scholars and diplomats protested.

“We will have to hide the archetypes, and the children and hatchlings,” Norwich stated.

“I canna believe we are seriously considering this!” the rider of the matron of Ethphraim protested. “It’s ludicrous!” people were shouting. “Ta think those monsters will somehow abandon their lust for our suffering simply because we submit to their yoke? Madness!”

There was much debate, but it all fell to silence once Jayd spoke. “Pearl will do it.”

No one spoke. Once the strongest remaining economy of all seven worlds stepped down, there was little the others knew they could do in the long run, except perhaps run a drawn-out war costing untold wealth and suffering on their own people.

But to hope the Dragonmen become too ‘bored’ to notice their seditious plan? Too much.

Rayn knew he had spent too long conversing, and turning to his wife, nodded at her – imparting her the strength and conviction he had in his plan.

She did not need it, but she was still heartbroken to see him leave.

The Surrender

As Divinity would have it, the emperor was in the room insulting him when the news arrived a few hours later that five of the seven worlds had surrendered; unconditionally. Argentus was ‘too far away to matter’, and Ethphraim, too proud.

For a moment the emperor was silent, then he laughed. He threw his fists into the air, and roared a victory cheer.

“My Eminence,” Arj began to protest.

The emperor ignored him. “You see, you see! I told you they’d cower rather than fight. I have won!”

The dragonmen in the room cheered.

To his surprise, Rayn felt the chains on his ankles and wrists slacken. He was taken down, and dragged before the emperor. The arrogant monster spoke first to his military, “Tell the other prisoners our news; they are now our slaves, or they die. Put them to work, our conquerors will need new servants!”

Rayn looked up at the gloating warlord.

The emperor spoke, “But not this one. This one I keep as pet. Come, former wiseman of all, you may polish my lavatory.”

Arj was continually begging his master, “Emperor, please, no, hear me out. This is just a ruse, you must –”

Laughing, the emperor ignored him, and began to organize seven forces to conquer the worlds of men. “For today, I am no longer the Emperor, I am a God.”

His soldiers cheered.

Arj walked up to Rayn, close enough to gorge his eyes out if he’d wanted to. “I don’t know what you are doing, but it won’t work, Rayn. You do not know us as well as you think you do, priest of men. This won’t work. I know it won’t.” But he could say no more as the celebrating military dragged the priest away.

Rayn was on his hands and knees, dressed only in a loin cloth, scrubbing the emperor’s guest room floor. He worked slowly, trying to seem in every way the broken man. Twice today the emperor had brought in various dignitaries to mock him, and then they’d made him clean again the already spotless floor.

But Rayn knew he could afford to be patient. It had been two days since the surrender. It would not take much more... just a small event.

Alarms sounded. Rayn looked around, watching high ranking dragonmen scurry around. Carefully, subtly, he reached out.

All the worlds of men had surrendered, except Argentus, which the dragonmen ignored, and Ethphraim. Rayn thought them pitied; for the Dragonmen would swarm their worlds and kill them all, making sport of their dragons.

But something had gone wrong ... the fleet that was heading towards Ethphraim...

Norvich, Rayn asked the man on another world, *What has happened?*

The older soldier laughed; *I think you might find this amusing. Someone from Ethphraim managed to smuggle one of their incendiary devices onto a dreadnaught, and detonated it next to their antimatter chamber. It evaporated half the fleet just outside Ethphraim's solar system. That leaves only the damaged one to go.*

Rayn was amused, but immediately felt regret for seeking so much death. And yet, he knew, it was a small thimble next to what he was trying to do.

The next moment the emperor stormed in. As Rayn guessed he would do, he picked him up by his throat. Rayn struggled in the monster's grip.

"You better not have had anything to do with this!" the emperor threatened him. "Arj keeps telling me you're up to something, and if you are, we are going to find out what it is. Manling, you –"

He was cut short as his military generals entered.

The emperor turned to them. “Call up the last remaining garrisons and put them onto whatever ships you can find. I want every available dragonman ready within the hour to storm Ethphraim.”

Rayn heard Arj begging, but could not see him, “Please, no, my god! You have only just conquered the other six worlds! They are up to something – being stubborn and hiding... Ethphraim can wait; we must fully subjugate the other people!”

“Silence!” the emperor warned, “I tire of your petty fawning and endless fear, trying to dictate my policies for me! We will crush Ethphraim within the hour for this insubordination. All forces, to the sky!”

The generals cheered.

Rayn tried to catch himself as he fell, but it was a lot harder without the staff in hand.

Within moments Arj had him paralyzed in a demoner’s spell, pressed up against a wall and barely breathing. “I will be watching you, human. You won’t get away with this. You won’t get away with anything while I watch.”

Rayn suspected Arj might even be correct, so allowing his physical body to succumb to the lack of breath, he projected his spirit outwards and fled the shard. Arj tried to stop him, but his faith was dim and his power over the tools of men truly lacking.

He found Rhoc by looking first for Fairystone. They hid deep inside the world of Pearl, with the children. Princess Gayl was there, a deep crimson pink of rainbow colors, and Blayd, a dark, contemplative blue that shook with bright sparks like fireworks from his birthing pains and of his very nature which he had not yet resolved. Rayn wished he could help them at this crucial time, but there were other healers there.

They stood at his arrival, but he spoke only to Rhoc, "It is time."

Something in his voice must have troubled the warrior. He did not reply.

Norvich spoke, "We fight? What is to be the course of action?"

Rayn hesitated a moment, reaching out with the wisdom of the white staff for the explicit course that would bring them the most bloodless victory in the least amount of time. Only then did he understand the immensity of the task.

But if they didn't do it now, nine billion more would perish before the end of today.

"Sage Monstrar, only *daughter* of the dragonman diplomat Gardur. Pil Clawtooth, *councilor* to the military house of Deathmark. And Vwilophanth, second *commander* of all military forces here on Pearl."

Fairystone gasped. "You want them... dead?"

Rayn lowered his head. "If there was any other way..."

Fairystone was not content. “But she is only twelve!”

Norvich interjected, “They say a dragonman would rather die than defy their emperor. Let us give them that privilege.”

Rhoc growled his agreement.

Fairystone translated. “The daughter and the councilor will be little trouble, but we won’t get to the commander without a fight.”

Rayn just looked at them, heartbroken at the request.

“If we die, we take a thousand monsters with us!” Rhoc shouted.

There may have been a time when Fairystone would have disagreed, but this time, she would not part with her human.

Rayn was thrown forcibly back into his body. A hundred priests were there, desperately trying to prevent him from projecting across the vastness of space. Trying, and failing.

“There, we have succeeded!” Arj yelled, jabbing his staff into Rayn’s forehead just a little too victoriously. “You thought you could wrest the white staff from our powers! Ha! You have failed again, human!”

Rayn knew it was his cue to weep, or at least to anger, but his hope boiled over within him, and he laughed.

The dragonmen priests trembled as they looked at each other.

Rhoc and Snow

Rhoc had only moments to go. He would have left already if it were possible. But getting on to Thiaz was going to take *her* permission. Only one person needed to die in this mission. The room was full of priests and scholars preparing to launch him via golden thread in the chariot Fairystone powered, and they would be gone in less than an Ethphraim minute. But still, if it was going to work at all, they needed the permission of the mysterious matron of Thiaz – if she even existed at all.

“Don’t go,” a soft voice spoke to him.

He turned. It was Snow.

There was no way they could have seen the shock on his face. But, perhaps, the speechless silence that followed was cue enough. The others respectfully left the room.

And, for once, he *was* afraid.

She walked right up to him. Her face was difficult to read. Why had she told him to stop?

Fairystone became an otter and wrapped herself over his shoulders.

It was the death then. Snow didn’t like death. She avoided it. Just like all the animals did, taking some time to be quiet and then just

moving on. She never talked about it. And there was no way she would approve of what Rayn had asked them to do.

Then Snow put her hand on his arm, and looked up in his face. Her eyes did not dart away, not like they always had.

Take off your helmet, silly, Fairystone finally advised him.

Snow watched him. Her breathing was steady. But he did not know what she wanted.

Perhaps she does not know herself? Fairystone said.

The helmet came off. Rhoc looked down at her. “Snow?”

She smiled. “My mother always told me to wed a strong man. A healthy man. But when I saw you hold that bolder away from us the very day we first met the dragons... that was very impressive Rhoc. I thought that was very impressive.”

He looked at her, and slowly, just slowly, began to smile.

She almost looked like she was blushing. But she did not. She just held his eyes waiting for Divinity knew what.

“I have... something I need to do,” he must have sounded very guilty.

“Yes. I know. And... I’m sorry. You cannot stay, I don’t know why I said that. Time slowed down and I just wondered what it might be like... you know... without you. Without you and Fairystone, I mean. I don’t know what I mean.”

Finally! Fairystone grinned.

Rhoc was beginning to hope. He really did hope he knew what she meant, and what she, too, was finding so hard to put into words.

“When I return,” he said. “Will you walk with me?”

She looked puzzled. “Where to? To see the mighty prebeasts of Sanmarellis? The battle yards of Chalcedonah?”

He smiled, “All those places. But, first, let us walk in the shadow of the conclave mountain, by the river that runs past your home town. I know you have walked there often, ever since you were a child.”

She blinked, as if processing that took some deeper thoughts than she was used to. “Rhoc... I...”

“I just want to listen to your words. They are very sweet to me.”

Now she blushed. “Rhoc. I am so sorry. Why, only now, do I realize how good a listener you would be for me? I think I have so much to say. But I never felt like I had anyone to listen. Perhaps that was why I could hear the animals.” She glanced down at her feet. “I would enjoy that, Rhoc. I will enjoy that.”

Rhoc smiled. He must have beamed.

Without any warning she pulled his arm down and he bent towards her, not sure what she wanted. But then she planted the softest, gentlest kiss on his cheek that he’d ever experienced. It was as soft as a butterfly’s wing, even softer.

And then she walked swiftly away.

He smiled as she went, the room again filling with soldiers and priests. And the *god of death* adorned his helmet one more time.



Figure 1 Darkwing, Ironfang, Fairystone and Windfyrth debate.

The Fall

Arj looked over at the screens with concern. He conferred with the mighty implement in his hand, but it had not been happy with him in all this time since they declared war on the humans. He knew, he knew in his marrow; his 'god' was making a terrible mistake.

A hundred, million soldiers waited at the edge of Ethphraim space for the full force to gather. They would crush the impudent little blue dot in an hour.

But Arj knew something was wrong. All the other priests now were watching Ethphraim with all their might. He knew the human high priest had done something but they did not know what. Was it better to just kill him now? No; the emperor found too much delight in tormenting him. All the other priests were *here...* so where was Rayn's play going to happen?

Arj looked again at the white staff, concealed now in evercreet, held in a secure location off any world. It had not moved, and the tremors had stopped once the high priest has returned to his body. Was this to be the hidden play of the alliance?

Even the emperor had left his throne. Surely that was where they'd try to get him; to cut of the infection at its source?

But Arj shook his head. The humans and dragons would know that the emperor's cause would live on without him. So, what were they trying to do?

A minor news brief lit up Arj's consciousness even as it happened. He knew the emperor would be interested in this. "My god," Arj began, and waited for permission to continue, "The human warrior, the one they call the *God of Death*, has been sighted in the capital on Thiaz. They say he wrought havoc, slew the entire royal guard, and disappeared in a bolt of lightning. The diplomat is all right but they say his daughter has been hurt."

The emperor was unperturbed. "See to it yourself, man-hearted. I have slaughter to attend to."

Arj nodded his consent, but paid careful heed. The ambassador, the *God of Death*, right hand of the human high priest, had finally made a move. But to what end? The diplomat was unharmed, had he failed his mission? At the very least house Deathmark would not be pleased with their old allies house Killblood, charged with their defense... and yet, every dragonman warrior dreamed of being the one to slay the *God of Death* themselves.

Arj put out the message: *find the God of Death, but do not engage*. This one wanted battle. This one sought out carnage himself. He would need to be taken by guile.

The forces had gathered. They were waiting for only the emperor's command. Then another alert caught Arj's attention.

"My god!" the messenger sought the emperor's attention, but Arj knew better than to let the message go any further at this time. He stopped him, demanding the message himself. "Pil Clawtooth, councilor to the military house of Deathmark, has been found dead in his chambers! We heard noises, but he was already departed in a cloud of red and... angry smoke; the God of Death was here!"

This time, Arj's heart leapt into his throat. This was too clinical. This was a pattern. He interrupted the emperor organizing the invasion force for maximum fear potential – first a few small strafing forces, the rest the next day just as they would begin to hope. "My god! We need to consider-"

Once glance from his emperor was all Arj needed to convince him this was not the time to speak. But what was he to do? The *God of Death* would be gone already, so his only hope was in preventing his next strike... an ambassador wounded, one slain... why target only the messengers? Could it be that the high priest's right hand was simply seeking vengeance after all? No, it could not be. Arj tasked the legions of priests in house Slaughterhand to attend to the matter; he

had to protect the emperor. If the God of Death appeared here, this battle must surely be his last.

The emperor stood, and addressed the quailing planet foolishly standing against him, his voice heard within every mind of the entire globe. “Mighty Ethphraim. You are proud. You are strong. And today... you will fall. I am the emperor of all dragonmen, and now, we humble your arrogance and pride, and submit you to the rightful rule of those who are your intellectual, moral, and genetic superiors. All who do not immediately lay down arms this hour and become our eternal slaves... will die.”

Pandemonium broke out on the surface of the world far away. They had never known telepathy, not as a group, and to face it all at once with such conviction and hatred... it would destroy them.

The first real forces began to move in.

Fairystone fluttered about his head, trying to get her bearings. *Why do they keep moving him? Do you think they can tell?*

Rhoc shuffled uneasily. Crawling along the access tunnels of a battle cruiser was never an easy task, even though they were made for dragonmen. But wearing the greater dragon rider armor made it almost impossible.

They were making their way toward the command room, where their target awaited. It would be difficult for them to move beyond this point without being found.

Rhoc accessed the site of the helm, given him by the hard work others were doing to 'hack' this fortress. The dragonmen were smart, but they were fighting against Pearl's home-ground advantage now.

He saw his target in the command room, protected with over twenty other dragonmen. They pondered their options. Fairystone could try being a mouse, but they were wise to her shifter powers by now. Maybe storm in as her stone form? No, the walls were almost too powerful for her, but not for him. If only they would take their target down the nearby corridor, it would make it easy!

Fairystone was unusually grim, as she had always been on this task. *We need to hurry, as I suppose. The dragonmen have begun their invasion of Ethphraim.*

So much for their many secrets, Rhoc smirked to himself.

Fairystone laughed to him.

How long do we have?

I do not know, she replied. *Snow would want me to wait. But every breath I take tells me to hurry.*

He'll be out of the command room and off the ship if we set off any alarms, he reminded her. *I wish we'd brought the shield.*

Fairystone did not reply. This was a solo quest; they knew they could not risk it here.

They waited, ten Ethphraim minutes? It was hard to tell.

Suddenly, the commander was surrounded by guards. They began to lead him out of the room, in the other direction.

Times up, Rhoc told her.

Charging through the steel wall in front of him, Rhoc ran. They bashed their way through at least three bulkheads before they hit the command room, and there wasn't time for anyone to stop them.

The commander's guards were pretty quick, Rhoc had to admit, and covered them in fire the instant they entered the room.

They are getting better at this, Fairystone admitted.

Rhoc tore a console off the floor and flung it at them. They stopped firing to dodge it, but he missed the commander. New guards began to pour through the door even as the commander began to be dragged out of another one.

"Stop them!" Rhoc roared, and as one, threw Fairystone at him. She was a stone monolith before she reached him, peppered with blasts of fire that stung her skin painfully.

But the diplomat and his guards had ducked. She blocked the doorway with her body, fully emerging into her stone form as the doors shrieked and expanded with her.

She was stuck, but no guards could get any further within until they cut her up into pieces.

Rhoc felt pinned down, ripping up parts of the spaceship and trying to kill the commander. Some guard at the side got a lucky shot, and he felt his left knee die, and he fell to one knee.

This is not going well, he thought.

Arj's heart beat in his chest. The emperor was entirely diverted at the destruction being rained down on Ethphraim. Their grey buildings fell, their blue water turned red with the blood of the slain. Again, he laughed.

But something was happening aboard a command vessel on Pearl. The *God of Death* was again making a carefully considered and precisely calculated assault.

Cautiously, Arj approached the emperor.

The emperor-god spoke to his generals. "What sport! So, have we taken their main installations yet?"

Another general grinned, "Surprisingly, not. It's not that they fight well, either. They just have an apparently superfluous amount of ordinance!"

“You mean they were ready for us?” the emperor looked dangerously displeased.

The general laughed nervously, “Not at all. Some of these long-range missiles are a little dated. I think they were preparing to fight each other, or they did it all the time!”

“Interesting,” the emperor admitted.

“My god,” Arj whispered.

The emperor glared at him.

“There is a situation on Pearl. The God of Death is attacking the command vessel.”

The emperor glared, then shrugged it off. “See to it yourself, and if you must, annihilate the population of Pearl, they are a particularly troublesome lot.”

Still the alarms sounded on the faraway world. Dragonmen were dying at the hands of the *God of Death*. He was wounded, but working his way towards the commander even as they watched. The commander’s exit was blocked by a stoneformed dragon. They were trying to kill her right now, but her skin was very tough.

“They...” Arj begged, “they are requesting assistance.”

“Whatever they need,” the emperor replied, and went back to watching a slaughter. The fighter planes of Ethphraim were made for this atmosphere, but there were just so few of them!

Arj nodded, and with a relieved sigh, got back to work, “House Deathmark, you are hereby ordered by the emperor to support House Slaughterhouse deal with the incursion of the *God of Death*.”

Aggravated hissing came as the reply. To Arj’s surprise, it was the head of all house Deathmark that spoke, “They demanded as much? So, it is true then, that they have stood back to let my cousin’s daughter die, and now we are ordered to solve their little situation? Whatever. Humans make poor sport anyway.”

And, realizing the finality of his mistake, Arj’s blood ran chill.

Rhoc’s head was thrown, again, sideways by the violence of the blast. They had them pinned down, trapped between his growing rage and Fairystone’s blockade. But they were hurting her. She would not last there long.

But between them hid half a dozen dragonmen monsters and their quarry – a quivering commander.

Fairystone cried out. They were using something else now, and her wound was deep.

Rhoc breathed in deeply. He knew this could be his last act, but if he could only take the commander, it would well be worth it. He’d never failed his friends before.

With a roar to rival the fiercest dragon, Rhoc leapt up from his hiding place. In his hand he held a rod he had torn off the barriers that surrounded the control room. In just that instant, he sighted the commander, quivering with fear.

As time slowed, Rhoc began to throw his improvised spear. But a huge explosion rocked against his chest, and he was thrown across the room.

Fairystone cried out.

Rhoc looked up. He had missed.

The room fell silent, and the dragonmen looked at him in fear.

Rhoc tried to stand, but found it impossible. Half the dragonrider's mask was torn away, and he bled from a thousand wounds.

The commander stood, and the fighting stopped. He was about to say something.

Then the entire vessel rocked with another explosion. And then another. He heard the dragonmen shouting at each other, then one of them activated a view screen, and they fell silent once more.

Another dragonmen vessel was firing at them. Firing all over.

Rhoc smiled to himself. *It is done.* The other vessel was 'helping'...

Their vessel began to lose height, then it tilted. They shouted, and Rhoc crawled to his knees. His strength was spent, but finding power beyond he leapt toward Fairystone.

She was lying on her side, still in stone form. She was bleeding grey blood all over.

Again, the vessel rocked. Then it sounded like it was returning fire. Great cracks appeared all over the room.

He tore off his broken helm and clutched her giant head in his hand. Then the entire sky boat split in two, and they tumbled out as it was crashing towards the ground.

Rhoc and Fairystone clutched to each other in the air. Slowly, painfully, she took her natural form. But she could not fly. She would never fly again; her wounds were already too great.

Rhoc admired the beauty of fire and steel as the dragonmen began to war amongst themselves. *I am sorry I cannot make our appointment, Snow, but whenever you speak, I will listen.*

They felt no pain as the ground raced up to greet them, swallowed up in the conviction of their connection and triumph – they had done what they had been sent to do.

By the authority granted Darkwing's rising power, Jayd knew the moment Fairystone had died. And that meant Rhoc would as well: it was the nature of their unique and powerful bond.

She brushed the tears fiercely away. They had done what none others could do. They were heroes, forever.

But now, she had a new battle to begin...

Tears stung Rayn's eyes as he watched them fall to their deaths. But it was done. 'Farewell, my brother. And dear little Fairystone. Divinity watch over you eternally. You did good.'

Again, the white staff trembled. But, again, he did not move it... not yet.

"All craft, take final positions," the emperor demanded.

Arj could not shake his terror. He could feel the rising pain and rage, and even with all his strength and the power of the hundred thousand staves under his authority, there seemed to be nothing he could do against this inexorably rising tide.

He watched his arrogant, ignorant emperor. The plan was to swarm Ethphraim from all angles, giving each house an entire continent to plunder and savage and slay. It was their reward for so fitly serving the rising 'god'.

But nothing would matter if he did not stop the rising tide.

“My god!” a commander shouted. “House Deathmark is breaking formation. Cruelflame and Sinweave are taking their lead!”

“What?” the emperor demanded. “House Deathmark, what is the meaning of this!”

The intercom crackled, and a voice spoke uninvited over all their, clearly compromised, systems. “You think you are the only one that deserves the title ‘god’,” it asked rhetorically? “For today, Deathmark earns the title ‘God Slayer’. Maybe it’s time we sorted out whose genome is *truly* best to carry on the dragonmen line?”

Arj’s strength left him, and he fell defeated to the floor. They had done it. *That* was the high priest’s play, and there was nothing they could have done to stop him. Despite himself, he grinned. How they’d known to fear the human’s knowledge and the dragon’s might, but how they’d underestimated their combined patience, and intuition.

And in that instant, he felt Rayn flee effortlessly back into his wife’s arms, the white staff in hand.

Arj hoped, *hoped*, he would not be next to speak.

The general of house Deathmark cleared his throat.

The emperor crushed his skull in an instant.

War broke out on the bridge of the last remaining, battered, beleaguered dreadnaught.

The Emperor of all Dragonmen

Two days of fighting had not apparently wearied the emperor, not one bit. But Arj knew better. He was making decisions quicker now, with less council and less cunning. The façade was about to start crumbling.

“Move the dreadnaught to position 3. Let them know we are prepared to use it to obliterate house Sinewsin if they do not yield to my demands!”

Soldiers scurried to comply. They had not even removed the blood from when the next civil war had started. It was just like at the beginning of this generation, and the emperor was still using the same tactics; play them against each other, divide, and concur. But this time their foe was different. The three other noble houses combined against them knew what to expect. It was putting the emperor’s old tactics to shame.

Suddenly the entire aft section of the dreadnaught they were on, visible from the view screens, lit up with interstellar plasma.

None needed to report what had just happened. House Deathmark had used their largest remaining battleship to ram them.

The emperor stood from his chair. The shattered trembling of the mortally wounded dreadnaught they were on hadn’t even reached

them yet. But Arj knew what the emperor's next tactic would be; there were no other options now.

“All forces, swarm Deathmark and take it in the name of the Empire.”

Arj stood, preparing to teleport them over. But he also knew something the others had not yet realized: this would be the cue the humans and dragons had been waiting for to begin their uprising.

The uprising

Blood stained the emperor's left brow, but he did nothing to remove it. Carefully, he lowered himself into his throne of bronze. Soldiers stood around him, none uninjured now. They had prepared for a weak and timid resistance from the humans of Ethphraim. Instead, they now faced the elite hordes of their fellow dragonmen. Blood had surged as never seen before in their entire history.

The emperor hissed a ragged sigh, demanding the healers attend him. "Report!" he demanded his only remaining general, the dragonman who was his only biological brother.

"Deathmark have technically surrendered, but we're finding more and more of their forces and ordinance amongst Sinewsin. Killblood report their citadel on the spine is about to be sacked, but their leadership remains. Caul –"

"No!" the emperor roared. "The humans and the dragons."

His brother Greyskull lowered his internal eyelids in shame. "The dragonrider's have routed the forces of Tourmarelle and Thiaz. Ethphraim continues to defy us. We looked to be gaining ground on their key world, Chalcedonah, but just this day the forces of Argentus have finally played their hand. They slaughter our hoards with weapons of Ethphraim, and are a match, one to one, for the strength

and power of dragonmen. They cripple all attempts to defy them within moments. And their *rage...*”

“What of it?” the emperor inquired, helping a medic to bandage his wound so that it might heal within the hour.

“They fight in the name of one they call ‘the goddess’...”

The emperor snickered, but it was a futile gesture.

Arj barely hid his own sneer. He knew, from the moment they’d made sport of a parturating human female, that the mighty emperor had made a fatal mistake. But this dragonman... this... dragon*monster*, had led them all to their deaths. And, watching him tend only to his own wounds taken while striking down the pride of his own house, Arj knew, the emperor knew, they were all going to die as well.

He sighed. If there had been any way to turn the arrogance of the emperor to pity? Perhaps if he had shown some kindness to his own race, they might yet crown him emperor again. But he slaughtered all who stood against him with no pity or compassion. And there was almost no trained military to support him now, just those who feared death at his hands more than death at the hands of his enemies, and what little honor remained in his own house.

There was a stirring in the control room, and Arj felt his hope rise even before he knew consciously who had entered.

It was the empress.

Arj stood in her presence. This, this was the new hope. This was a chance to turn the madness of vengeance into the leniency of forgiveness, and a chance for peace before they left nothing of themselves for the humans and dragons to destroy.

But Arj's hope fell when he saw her face. She looked angry.

Forgetting all decorum, she bent forwards onto her forearms, just like a real dragon, and roared at the emperor with all her might.

The medics fell back and covered their faces.

He just sat there, winding his bandages.

She stood, again the royal queen they all knew. "A hundred million deaths in the last hour alone. A hundred, million more predicted for the next. End this madness, *God* of dragonmen, or we all *die*."

He huffed.

She did not let him consider a reply, "End it!" she demanded.

Arj knew the emperor could. He could call off his forces. But there was punishment to attend to.

The empress seemed to speak Arj's own thoughts, but she knelt at his feet to implore him. "Unless we stop this, *now*, there will be no strength in our people left to protect our home world from the combined, and justified, rage of both dragons and men."

Arj felt the emperor's rage boil. "Deathmark must pay for their insolence, and the others."

“We cannot stand without them! Unless ... my fire, my god... I cannot stand to live the day you bring ... you cause –”

He ignored her pleading. “They are houses no more. NO MORE! There is only one house of dragonmen that will prevail after this matter is done. ONE! And it will be our own.”

“Then you sentence us all to *death*.”

He hit her, hard, across her face.

She turned to glare at him.

Arj stood back, and tried to protect those that stood behind him with a forcefield.

The empress lashed out at her husband, but he was ready for it and leapt backwards from his chair. But her claw sundered that throne completely, the shrapnel embedding itself in the walls, consoles, and dragonmen behind it.

He was quick to respond, and had his blade out in less than an instant. Again, she clawed out and he parried her blow. Then again. No one tried to stop her, and the emperor called for no assistance. Hers were wild, animalistic attacks, and his; the cautioned repartees of a skilled warrior.

Arj’s heart feared he knew there was only one way that this battle could end. But he also knew that if the extremely popular empress died at his hand, he would never be loved again.

This was a battle the emperor could not win either way.

Almost as if he'd foreseen it, the emperor took advantage of her ferocious blows to knock her to one knee. He raised his sword, and brought it down towards her neck.

But then, as if destiny intervened, she turned her neck and caught that ultra-sharpened blade in her teeth. One or two must have cracked, but the blade remained stuck there, the emperor too surprised and confused to withdraw it.

So, she snapped it in two.

Everyone stood back.

Arj sighed, and everyone heard it. There was only one way... one creature whose bones and body were dense, and powerful enough, to withstand the full force of dragonman steel.

"She *is* a dragon," the emperor's brother gasped in disbelief.

With a wild swipe of the back of her claw, the empress then smashed the emperor into the console beyond. It lit up with light and fire, but he crawled swiftly out. Then he knelt, unarmed and clearly terrified, in front of the dragonwoman whom he had called wife.

Again, she roared at him, begging, demanding he stop the war that would end all their lives. Demanding... he kill her before she live to see the day they all die.

Then she tore off her armor with her naked claws, something that should have been impossible. Again, she knelt on all her limbs, and trembled.

Arj looked inside. She was... healing! She was purging all her blood of the poisons that made her feel, and think, like a dragonman. Like the creature whose blood had touched her own, but whose nature she was wholly not. Her mighty wings unfurled like never before. She was not a dragonman. She had never been.

Then she roared. Roared as though the stars themselves would tremble at the sound. All within the room trembled, and covered their ears. Some dropped their weapons, never to take them again – for now, to slay a dragon, was to slay one who was kin to their beloved empress.

Then, incredibly, she fled.

Arj knew it, he watched it flow across the legal and compromised channels of telepathy amongst all dragonmen. The empress had denied the emperor.

The selfish dragonman ‘god’ fell to the floor, not knowing what that would mean.

A moment of silence filled the room.

Then the emperor stood, and the soldiers who remembered who they were armed themselves again in a moment, the rest of them hurriedly following this example.

The emperor knelt at his shattered throne. He picked up a broken, bronze, shard. It did not matter if they had a gaping hole in side, nor did it matter that they had yet to they fully repair the damage the late queen and her enormous dragon had done. There was only one

task for the final, remaining dreadnaught and all who lived upon her.

“Take this ship to Pearl, and snuff out that light forever.”

The Patron of Pearl

Jayd knew the moment the emperor had given the command. Her blood ran chill, but within her heart, and inexplicable hope.

The command room broke out in panicked fervor.

“Sever the local threads!” Norwich commanded.

“That will barely give us an hour to destroy that dreadnaught,” Ko spoke up the fears of all. “And that, if we are fortunate.”

Dragons and men rushed to the skies. There was little hope of penetrating that bronze hull without the might of the fortress from beyond the clouds, or perhaps the late Queen’s considerable skill, especially since the headband archetype still remained with the emperor and his forces. What few pockets of dragonmen tyranny still remained were being snuffed out one at a time, but now their wicked emperor was going to kill them all anyway; all for the unforgivable sin of not loving their emperor’s lives more than their own.

But noise fell to silence as seven noble dragons began to gather.

A wisdom of millennia swelled within her soul. “Hold the threads as they are,” Jayd said.

Everyone looked at her with confusion. Then they looked up, and saw the noble dragons gathering – one from each of the seven

worlds, each trailing the powers of their royal matron or patron. Lesser dragons and men scurried to get out of their way.

Then Darkwing spoke, “Now behold ancient powers from beyond mankind’s reckoning! Secrets hidden only within the souls of the dragons!”

Jayd did not know what he was going to do, but her whole soul resonated with his conviction and power. “Get all forces within the atmosphere of this world immediately,” she demanded.

They hustled to comply.

The noble dragons formed a circle around the patron Darkwing, wing tips touching. As one, their humans stood on their dragon’s heads, arms outstretched. Light and power already flowed among them, reflecting within the crystals of the conclave.

Jayd flew to stand before her beloved Darkwing, largest and most powerful dragon of all Pearl and, right now, quite probably the most powerful dragon in all the galaxy.

But when he looked down at her, no larger than one of his daggered incisors now, she saw fear. No... wariness. He was... nervous.

She smiled, blinking back tears. He, the shy one, was about to do something that would make sure he was never forgotten. And she, his soul, was the only key that would turn his apprehension into glory.

Leaning close, he bent his head towards her. Without effort, she flew up to meet him. She knew his thoughts. *You got this*, she told him with perfect conviction, and it was impossible for him to disbelieve her.

Dark thunder shook the mountain, and Jayd looked through his eyes to see the great sheets of shadow at his wingtips spreading rapidly out. They flowed through the mountain and out into the muted sunshine of their cloud wreathed world, but this time they did not dissipate. The light did not make them less. ***This*** was Darkwing; undisputed Lord of the Night. Shadow was his companion, and darkness his tool. Rapidly, the impenetrable darkness flowed out, beyond the edges of the continent, racing out along the great seas that flowed right around their world. It engulfed every city, it embraced every mote. Families cowered in the sudden blackness, but dragon cries sounded out to reassure them.

The world was embraced in his wings.

Then the dreadnaught appeared. It began to turn in their direction, and in a moment, Jayd knew would speed almost as fast as light, with enough power to turn their whole world inside out.

Behold, the hidden wisdom of the dragons, and the secret strength of men! Darkwing proclaimed, and with a mighty lurching, took their entire world of Pearl into the shadowrealm.

Silence unimaginable surrounded them all, nothing but the memories of each other's souls to warm them. For a few breaths they waited. Then a few more.

Jayd did not know what would happen next.

Gone

“Their world... it’s gone,” Greyskull whispered.

Arj held his breath. He already knew it was true. Their entire planet had disappeared, sucked or forced into some nearby dimension. It was not possible. It simply was not possible.

An explosion rocked the side of the dreadnaught, some few hundred thousand militants from house Deathmark still resisting the will of their god. But then a new sound reached his ears. It was a tearing.

Someone took it upon themselves to explain the situation. “An armada from Thiaz and Sanmarellis have penetrated the ventral plating! We’ve lost lateral helm control!”

Alarms sounded, and soldiers scurried about.

Arj shook his head. The emperor was already defeated, but this was to be his dying act of defiance.

Again, the mighty dreadnaught shuddered.

“Set course for the sun, fifty breaths till we take the threads.”

No one paused before complying. They already knew this was their death mission.

Explosions again rocked the massive machine, but Arj knew they were fleeing it in droves now. They could not all hope to escape,

but he also knew that the dragons attacking now would make sure most they loved did escape, and those they hated, did not.

Arj sighed; clearly it was his time to die as well. He felt sad, and a little angry. There was yet so much more that he'd wanted to do. A new azalea for his queen, perhaps? He'd been thinking on it for some time.

The emperor's brother knelt before the crudely reconstructed bronze throne his brother sat on. "Come. Let us away."

The emperor stared at him. "Today, we die."

His brother seemed angry, "Not like this! Not this way! You are the greatest emperor we have ever known! If they had only trusted you, your empire would have never fallen!"

Tears touched the emperor's eyes, "You're a good dragonman, Greyskull. You are a fine leader of our people."

The brother stood. "Well... so be it... When we rebuild, perhaps in many generations... they will remember you. They will all remember you!"

The emperor glared up at him, then set his jaw tight. The taller dragonman stood to face his oldest and most trusted ally. "Thank you, Greyskull. I don't think I could have ever done it without you."

"Gorund," the general spoke his brother's name, "You mean everything to me, you –"

Suddenly, as unexpected as the weather that would tear at the planetoid they called home, Greyskull's voice was cut short as his brother stabbed him next to his heart.

"A little... too good," the emperor seemed to apologize.

"I don't..." the general said, but died before it seemed he could say 'understand'.

"When I die, they all die," the emperor stated, and without further words ran towards the escape vessels, killing any who stood in his way.

Arj remained alone in the control center of a dying worldkiller. He looked out, towards the sun they had now turned to face, awaiting the few last breaths before they would destroy the last dreadnaught of the dragonmen. There would be little more than a mild brightening of the sun's energies to mark the end of the greatest feat of manufacturing at dragonmen's hands, the greatest trophy of the emperor's undisputed rule. His hand paused over the throttle that would end it all in the fiery conflagration that was their sun.

This was the end. This was...

Suddenly white light gathered around his scales, and Arj had to laugh; the human high priest of men was not yet done with him, it seemed.

It is done, Darkwing announced. All hearts cheered, yet none dared raise a voice within the sacred darkness.

But the light did not yet return.

Jayd reached out, feeling her dragon's apprehension once more.

He liked darkness. He belonged here. This was his place. This was... him.

But she knew they could not all stay here. They would freeze to death in a day or three.

She heard him sob, but felt the enormous pressure against his soul of all who lived on this world as they reached out towards the light of their home dimension once more. But they needed him, and she was still... the key.

Find a way, she asked.

He reached out towards her, within her. She could feel his soul searching deeply inside, looking for something... looking for... the strength and power to return to where they belonged.

She knew what he was looking for. *As one who has travelled to the edge of death to bring one into life, I can help you. I know the way back.*

And, as if she was the only one alive who could, she directed the incomparable strength of Darkwing, the patron of Pearl, back towards the light and warmth of the living dimension.

As if all the world had been holding its breath, they sighed as they returned to the light. Yet still no one spoke. It seemed silence was the most profound gratitude to him who had just saved them all.

The last refuge

Rayn picked his way through the rubble of a decimated city. The other elite of Pearl were there too. But the streets were deserted. The war between the houses of the dragonmen had been brief, but intense. And just as it seemed Deathmark would claim a shallow victory, naturally, the humans and dragons rose up.

By now they had defeated all the military might of the dragonmen, and taken the citizenry captive in their own vessels. None had stopped them. Now they all waited in prisons, including a broken and humbled Arj and, fascinatingly, a subdued and cooperative empress.

But the humans and dragons were more cautious with their captives. They treated them well, but let them near no weapons. Most military they bound; but not one in a hundred thousand had survived.

And yet, predictably, one had. Somehow, despite it all. The emperor had. And in the final battle, he had fled beyond the protection of his falling military might, and run back to his dying home.

Rayn looked carefully now. The emperor was deep within his home world, where none of their spies had been able to go. The chamber was darkened.

“Do not delay,” Ironfang urged him.

“Then let’s go,” Windfyrth demanded.

Rayn pondered, “It is not a trap. He has not fled to draw us out. He has fled to die.”

Ironfang agreed. “Come, let us see him, alone.”

Snow might have protested, but Windfyrth nodded.

Rayn thanked them, and mounting Ironfang, they rushed along the golden threads and into the middle of the planetoid.

The room was dark, and humid. It was a large natural cave... except the far wall heaved as though... alive.

Ironfang roared in threat, but no threat came.

“Come to gloat?” the emperor’s bitter voice echoed across the walls. He sat, in a crumbled stone throne, against the wall, a huge blade imbedded in the wall next to him. But the emperor’s form was weak, and crouched. Rayn did not need faith to see the emperor had chosen a coward’s death – to poison himself and his world rather than face judgement.

Ironfang growled at the arrogance in his voice, but they sensed no threat in him now.

Rayn alighted off Ironfang and walked to look closely at the wall. It was scaled, and hard. It was a dragon.

“The patron of all dragonmen,” Ironfang realized.

Rayn nodded, but he was almost bleakly impressed at the enormous scythian blade stuck into that wall. From that blade, dire purple bile dripped – a poison of some kind.

I only wanted to save them. The immense voice whispered in mortal anguish.

Rayn nodded, but the insufferably arrogant emperor spoke, “And failed us all, too, I might add.”

I fear, you may be right, the patron muttered.

Rayn searched the will of the Divine as he scanned the wound with the staff. The poison was long inserted, its action fatal. There was nothing he could do now, not without a miracle beyond his reckoning.

The patron seemed amused. *Would you have pity on me human? I am the one who first saved your kind on this planetary fragment. I found the way to blend our life ribbon, and yours. It was all we could do at the time.*

Rayn nodded, seeing in his mind visions of the far past, and how much damage the plague had wrought on them all. He saw the humans and dragons, working together, trying to save the dying humans. There was compassion, and peace. No women cried out in horror and fear at sight of her first egg.

The emperor snarled. It was apparent that he, too, was feeling the effects of the toxin. A golden cup, dripping the purple bile, fell from his hands.

“Coward,” Ironfang accused him.

“Say what you will,” the emperor boasted. “In less than a minute, I will be dead. And the whole shard with me.”

“What do you mean?” Rayn asked, fearing for the lives of his friends, and perhaps even for the million or so dragonmen who had fled to this place to avoid the civil war. But Rayn knew his friends heard and saw everything that was taking place in this chamber.

Ironfang replied, “He is going to destroy this world, in bitterness for his own, pathetic, failure.”

Rayn was incensed, “You want to kill your own race, simply because they could not win your war for you?”

“They were,” he grunted with pain, “mine to do with as I wished.”

“You are a poor excuse for an emperor,” Rayn replied.

“Perhaps, perhaps,” he muttered, “but your world will never forget my name.”

With that, Ironfang threw the emperor to the floor. He was almost too weak to stand.

Ironfang’s indignity boiled within him.

Ryan could barely speak, “You would kill your own people...”

Ironfang ended the need for further conversation, and crushed the emperor’s skull slowly under his claw.

The patron laughed. *I would have liked it to have not gone this way. I tried... I tried... he was the best chance we had for hope in seven generations... why when human ambition met with dragon strength did war become our only way? I tried to let them learn, to grow... but they never did become all I hoped they could be... kind, and patient. My death is fitting, for when I die, the radiation from the dying star will scour this place of life in a day, the gravity tearing it apart hours later. I, above all else, am the reason this world is somewhat livable.*

You are the reason life survived, even here. Ironfang mused.

He ‘nodded’, pain deeply evident in all his thoughts now. *You should probably flee now, you know.*

Rayn had already sent the message along. *Is that why you let him kill you? As punishment for making monsters of your children?*

The patron took a long moment to reply, his mind waning in the terrible toxin that filled his entire form. *Perhaps... perhaps... oh, I did try. For four thousand years! But I wanted to keep out of their way if I could... I suppose you will slaughter them all. Oh, did you not find compassion in any of them!*

Ironfang looked at him. *We need to get out of here,* he said.

Rayn pondered the enormous life before him. A mighty dragon, guardian for a broken planet. Had he truly wasted four thousand years only to find his children vile and monstrous?

“I can name three that are worth saving,” he told the dying patron.

The old wyrm shifted with immense pain. *If you could spare them... if not, I would understand. My children have done nothing to earn your respect ... but if you would spare some of them, perhaps? If you have found goodness in any?*

Rayn promised. And in the moment the patron died, he fled the crumbling planetary fragment forever.

The Pyre

For so many dead, there were not enough funeral pyres in all of Pearl. But for those they honored, it was worth every effort.

Rayn looked over them in the humid night air of the bright night, and did not hide the tears from falling down his face. He stood with Jayd, and Snow – the others sent away the dead in their own ways, on their own continents.

Snow stood by him. “That did not go the way I’d hoped.”

He looked over at her, his heart stung. “Oh, poor Snow.” He said, wishing he could hold her like a child she so often looked like. “You were only just begging to find your way into love, and Rhoc has been taken away from you!” Tear fell down his face, and in his grief he buried her in his arms.

She pushed him gently away, Jayd helping. Then Snow patted him gently on his shoulders and face. “Do not weep for me, wiseman. I have loved a warrior. I will see him again.”

Rayn pushed back his tears, feeling a little foolish. But, oh, “And Rhoc, taken before he could make child... he was my best friend, the best of my very best friends!” and, though tradition allowed it, he cried openly towards the clouds.

Suddenly Snow grabbed his shoulder, turning him around. “You have the staff, do you not?”

It was sitting in his lap, clearly visible, so he was not sure what she was meaning.

She shook his shoulder, which was not very proper but this was a funeral, after all. And each were permitted to show grief in their own way. “And the staff holds the life code of the warriors, of Rhoc of the Celtwyld, does it not.”

Jayd spoke up, “Yes, Snow, but what you are proposing... you wish to bear children to those who are dead?”

Rayn looked at her.

Her face was set with a conviction. “Yes. To any who have not born children. All of them, if I could. Rhoc, a hero from every world, and more! They will be remembered. I will remember them, and raise up children to the fallen of the greatest warriors of the people. 30 of them, if I can. If I think I have the count of it from the dreams at womanhood.”

Rayn looked over at Jayd, speechless.

Jayd didn't seem to have anything to say either.

“I will go make the arrangements,” Snow announced, and walked off, likely to seek Windfyrth.

“That is a lot of children,” Rayn observed, feeling too confused to mourn right now.

Jayd simply nodded.

“It is a very brave thing to want to do,” Rayn replied.

Jayd glared at him, then watched the retreating image of one of the most powerful and influential dragon riders in the whole entire world. “She’s going to need some help, a nurse perhaps... probably several.”

Jayd stood in the great hall of the dragon riders of Pearl. The funerals were done yesterday, but her heart still felt so heavy. Something was amiss; she worried that she did not produce enough milk for her son. But she knew why it was. This time, this trauma... it would not heal in a day. It would unlikely heal in her lifetime.

The horns sounded, and he twitched violently in her arms. She was aware now, due to the work of Jane Jones this morning, that his senses were all confused and uncalibrated. He would taste sound, and feel light. But this was his trial, bought on by having such a profoundly intelligent, gifted soul. He would need to find a way to deal with it, even as she had found a way through all life required of her.

But, still, she held him close and covered his ears for him.

Rayn approached, and Snow with him. Then to his left and right Norwich, and Fallen arrived. Ironfang glared warily at Ethnomancer, but they were both changed dragons, none looked to fight the other today.

“Here we are,” Jayd observed, “The inner circle of five riders, the first to complete the spiral.”

Snow looked surprised.

“The other’s ceded their positions to us,” Fallen said with a grim smile. “So, we may have gotten a promotion a little earlier than expected.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t earn it,” Norwich struck his younger companion on his shoulder, with a grin. “You led the forces at the battle of the Fragment, and saved my life at least twice. And none could escape the traps of the mighty Ethnomancer!”

The once very cruel dragon grinned, looking quite pleased with himself and his rider. The war seemed to have... done them good, in some twisted way.

They looked like they might argue further, but the man who entered brought the room to silence. He was holding a three-month-old baby girl. He smiled bravely, but Jayd could see it – the strain, the enormous fear. “Caspina will never be the same again.” she said sadly, watching the prince.

Snow looked worried at her, and Rayn put his arm about Jayd. If they'd been among the warriors, she would have not allowed it.

Jayd looked up at them. "Well, we won!"

They grinned, and nodded.

"The cost was great, but the battle is won," Norvich stated, Stormbreath almost glowing with pride. "I will miss Twoswords, and the Polar Warriress. But we will remember them, and we will rebuild. And what of the dragon men, now they are behaving themselves. Do you think they will fight with us, should the day come?"

"I think so," Jayd observed.

"I'd rather die," Fallen spoke and Ethnomancer nodded.

Norvich seemed to consider those thoughts. "So, what now?"

"Well, I, for one," Rayn observed, "Had best be seeing to the refuges of Amarii."

They nodded grimly, and the older men saluted as he left.

The ground thundered as Ironfang set down, and it made Rayn almost giggle inside. But it made the three hundred or so refuges tremble, most cowering on the ground.

But Ironfang had no intention of hurting them.

They were a ragtag assortment of dragonmen too. Rayn had never really seen the citizens. Tall and short, with a wild variety of postures and scale colors.

We have only really seen the military, Ironfang explained. *All drones of their failed emperor.*

These are not warriors, Rayn agreed.

But there was one he recognized almost immediately.

She took leave of the human and dragon guards around her before cautiously approaching. “Well, handsome man, I must say I am very pleased at the surprise of seeing you again!”

Rayn smiled at the old dragonwoman.

Unbelievably, she held an entire bouquet of flowers in her hands. Some were paper, others of steel, but one was authentic. “I made these for you.”

Rayn took them with speechless gratitude.

Within a breath the one particular dragonman whom he had come to see came running up. As was the way of the dragonmen now, he knelt on the floor in front of Rayn and his dragon.

Rayn had mixed feelings as he saw Arj drop to the ground in front of him. A part of him wanted, very much, to yield to Ironfang’s lust for vengeance and crush his skull where he quailed.

But even Ironfang knew it was not tactically the best option right now.

“Please, I beg you, spare these. I am the one who deserves to die at your hand.”

Rayn considered the words, so terribly, terribly true. “All your military, all your leaders who oppressed us with vigor and passion, are already dead these two days. But you, man hearted, are still of use to us.”

The dragonman stood, and all looked on him with fear. But none looked to fight. They were all the refugees, milling slowly into the reception booths hastily constructed to facilitate the dragonmen transition onto Amarii.

“For what it is worth, I **am** sorry,” Arj confessed.

“That does not repay the butchery you committed in another being’s name,” Ironfang replied.

“I know,” Arj said.

Rayn sighed. “The portal will remain forever upon Argentus. If any of your kind seek war again, they will gladly flood your world with death.”

Arj perked up at this, “Indeed! Unparalleled warriors. Very fearsome!”

Rayn scowled. Was it so easy for this priest to be the nice guy now?

Arj looked up at him, hope in his eyes, “We cannot thank you, ever, enough for allowing us a world to dwell on! After all we did!”

Ironfang stood up, speaking loud enough so that everyone heard. “We hold your dead emperor in contempt for his deeds, but hope for a better future from you all.”

Arj stood tall, “Yes, a people’s republic, we will have! No more a military dictatorship. The price was too high, too high. But there is, at last a chance for peace. And this world, it is so large!”

Rayn nodded, “You alone can survive in its dead air, as a people. Why the council has allowed you to keep the artifact of the headband I do not understand, nor agree. But it will help you terraform this world greatly, and bring back oxygen to the air. And, for what it may, you have already demonstrated it is a formidable tool for defense.”

“It seemed a fitting gift,” Ironfang observed. “The sin is laid to your emperor, and your people now considered his first victims.”

The old dragon woman was beaming. But Arj looked chagrined. Rayn could feel the dragonman was pleading for forgiveness, but this would take time, and because of what the emperor had done, no creature alive would ever forget what the dragonmen had done in his name.

“Our terms are strict,” Rayn told them, “No military for seven generations. No vessels of military capability in your skies, ever. As for planetary defense, the council of seven worlds have granted you the last remaining dreadnaught, damaged beyond repair and altered

today so that it is no longer capable of interstellar flight, but will be used for trade and protection.”

Ironfang nodded, “You have no further knowledge than what you could pry from us, thanks to the gift of my rider here, so you will have teachers. And as for the tools of men, you have your own now. But I warn you strictly against ever looking to make men and dragons your servants once again.”

Arj nodded, but Rayn knew the policing of such was going to cost generations. Deep in his heart, he feared the bigotry of the dragonmen, combined with the fear and loathing of their draconic and human ancestors, could only result in war once more.

But at least not for a generation or two.

Arj agreed, “We are not one hundredth of those who lived while the emperor, spite his wicked name, commanded us. You will see. We work hard, and can survive conditions others would struggle to thrive in! We will never repay this debt of you granting us our lives this day. It is in your power to wipe us out from the universe.”

Rayn sighed, and Ironfang agreed; was it really in their power? The last time they’d tried to wipe out an entire lifeform from existence it had almost cost them their own race entirely. Neither would risk tempting Divinity in that way again. And the dragonmen were never as vulnerable as they seemed.

But as Rayn looked out at the frightened and weary citizens, he found a flicker of hope. These were *true* dragonmen, not genetically altered clones of an insatiable power-mad tyrant. Perhaps, these could make a civilization just and true, one even he could be proud of.

He nodded at Arj, wishing somewhere deep inside that he could trust this creature once more, but doubting it.

There was a stir in the crowd. Rayn looked up to find the empress of all dragonmen flying gracefully over the cowering dragonmen heads, keeping low in Ironfang's skies. Her battered entourage of six royal guards, only two of which looked like they'd actually had any military training, stood flanking her. She bowed, and then glared at Arj.

He stumbled as if to say something, and she suddenly grabbed him and hugged him tight. Arj was simply smiling.

In that moment Ironfang showed Rayn something profound – they had bonded.

“You... I don't understand,” Rayn stuttered.

Arj waited for the empress' permission, which she did not grant.

Instead, she spoke for herself. “I have always been in love with the manhearted, but until I embraced my true self, I did not know why. But yes, he is my soul, and he is my mate.”

Rayn's mind boggled at that thought, a bonding *and* a pairing?

But Ironfang seemed amused, even happy for them. *It seems the race of the dragonmen will yet be sustained in the universe, as yet.*

Rayn nodded, then because it seemed right, said, “Well, congratulations. I hope you have many... eggs.”

The empress grinned as if it was exactly the right thing to say.

Rayn looked at her. She seemed clearer, healthier. He remembered Jayd’s report that they’d been poisoning her to try and keep her from bonding with the most human-like beings around.

But was Arj her true bond? Or had she simply willed it? And would that mean that she was, also, the matron of this kind?

She glanced at Rayn with a serious look on her face. It seemed to say; *Yes, I am their queen, and I am their matron.*

Arj understood, “And my wife, matron of the dragonmen of Amarii! May she live long, and prosper!”

The dragonmen cheered, a little cautiously.

The empress held out her claw, “Will you both consider joining us for an evening meal? We have little to share but our deepest apologies. We would have you... consider us as friends, one day.”

Rayn shook his head in disbelief. Friends? He could have hoped for nothing better right from the beginning – had the coin, indeed finally landed on the sheaves?

Or is it, as yet, still spinning, Ironfang pondered for them both. *Their story is not yet completed. This bitter chapter ends better for*

them than I might have expected. An empress to lead their new government, and a matron to lead their dragon-forged souls? Perhaps there was no other way to bring them to this place.

Well, Rayn thought, it is what it is.

And if it leads to peace for all of us, then why not? Ironfang mused.

Rayn had to agree, and went to join them for dinner.

Jayd of the Celtwyld



Jayd knew he'd found her even before he came riding down through the clouds on his red dragon's silent wings. The time of mourning was ended for the warriors, but her heart was not yet resolved. Darkwing had business amidst the dragons, but he knew she was here.

She stood, alone, in front of the unnatural cavern. An escape pod had accidentally malfunctioned, and melted its way through the solid stone four thousand years ago. And within it, it had held the sole surviving member of the only remaining royal house of Pearl. And they had found her. And they had called her Pure.

The soft scoria crunched under his boots as he approached. As true companionship bade him, he simply stood by her side, leaning just a little on his staff.

Without thinking she touched the hand that held that staff, in memory of the tradition when one would kneel when seeking the advice of the village priest. But that was such a long, long time ago. “Two years... but it might as well have been a life time.”

His gentle laugh warmed her, and she pressed against him. “So, you return to where it all started, here, now at the end?”

“This is all my fault,” she pushed back her sobs.

He laughed, and that infuriated her. But he spoke, “How could you have known that one dare would lead to all of this?”

It was hard to find the words to reply, but she did. “I have never told you; I have never told anyone... but I had a dream. On the night before I took you here. I was standing, just like this. Alone, before the Howling Ruin. And a voice within the cavern mocked me. It told me I was not an adult; I was not ready for the changes that would come if I entered in. That I would never rule an army that surrounds a world, and battle monsters from beyond the greater light that makes the day. It mocked me, and I said, ‘You will see. I am ready. I am ready to become all those things’. And then I awoke.”

That got his attention.

Tears forced themselves to her eyes, “Oh, how could I be so fool hearted! If I had never come here, she would still be alive! And beautiful Rhoc, our friends!” Now sobs racked her freely of her own accord, and she buried her tears in his great cloak. “And the ten million soldiers of Argentus, and Pearl, all dead! Dead and gone, because I was an arrogant fifteen-year-old who thought I could make a fool of you!”

She fell to her knees, and he knelt down to hold her. He did not speak. Not at all. Slowly, she began to realize this was not the man who had taken her here two years ago, and who had tried to prove his courage to her by entering the forbidden cavern. No, he was wiser now, more silent. That foolish, younger man would have argued with her. He would have tried to make her remember the good – the defeat of the plague, the hero’s deaths their friends had earned. Their love, and their son.

But wisely, he simply said nothing, and held her.

Soon the tears dried, and she stood up again. She looked out at the cavern, a part of her wanted to go down again, to see if the escape pod was still there. Another part feared to do so, lest it set off another adventure that ended a hundred billion lives, decimating entire populations, and filled the world with plague, and monsters.

But that was just her fear that spoke, fear that she had left behind long ago, when she’d first entered into the dare, when she’d first

claimed her dragon. And when she'd somehow managed to give birth to her son unassisted by living souls.

"I would not do it again," she admitted.

Rayn huffed. He still did not believe her. "I think you are wiser than you know. Yes, what you started... you really did start all this, didn't you? But what you started has changed the stars."

"I only did it because I wanted you, and you were too proud to see it."

"I hope I was never so proud as to risk the fall of humanity twice before I could see your value."

Her heart melted. Sometimes he just knew what to say. She held him close.

"Tell me," he asked, "do you think we will have another son?"

The question seemed a little odd. "We can so choose, if you like?"

"I'd sooner let Divinity decide. But you evade my question, will you ever give birth again?"

"Oh," she thought. Birthing had taken her to the edge of death the first time... but the pain now seemed so quickly forgotten... how was that possible? "Perhaps, but not soon."

He grinned, and looked at the cavern. "There are a lot of caves to explore in these mountains. And I think you should keep on looking."

It seemed a ridiculous suggestion, and her face showed it.

“Just as you give birth again, I think your chance to change the fate of the universe will come again. And I think that, hopefully, it will not hurt so much the next time, or that you’ll be better equipped to handle it.”

She had to think about that. A part of her was absolutely furious that he’d liken childbearing to unleashing a plague that would almost destroy the world simply because she wanted to mock her adopted brother. But there was a cold logic to it. “Perhaps...”

He smiled at her, “I, for one, would not want to be stuck in the cave. I would not trade what we have experienced and learnt, for what we had back then. If I had my way, Jayd, I would thank Divinity that you tricked me into this adventure. I would not have it any other way.”

She pulled him into her arms again, and turned to glare at the cavern. It seemed so small, so small compared to dragons whose wings circumferenced worlds, and skyboats that rained fire down on cities from so high up that they could not be seen.

Yet still it mocked her; daring her to face the unknown, and unlock the untold stories within.

But her son needed her, and he would need time to make stories of his own for others to tell. “Soon, but not today,” she told her husband.

“I dare you,” he grinned.

The Moons of Thiaz

Lrobros – The innermost and by far the largest moon, this moon boasted a population of a hundred million souls. Recognizing its tactical advantage, it was heavily fortified prior to the dragonmen treachery. Knowing this, the dragonmen claimed it first and spread their conquest from there.

Mindros – the second furthest and third largest, this moon supported a solid research and development community, as well as some excellent touring and sightseeing vistas. It was defeated swiftly in the treachery. It is known as the shepherd moon from legend, as a shepherd who directed the stars to safety during the day.

Eidros – the third moon and second largest, Eidros is actually a small exoplanet captured by Thiaz' gravity eons ago before it settled into orbit. It still had a solid community and military capability, and held out surprisingly well against the treachery. The brightest star in the night sky, it was called the 'jewel of the night' by those on Thiaz.

Cabros – invisible to the naked eye on Thiaz, Cabros boasted some heavy artillery designed to dissuade conquest. It held out well, residents destroying their own weaponry rather than face it being turned against Thiaz. In retribution the dragonmen, during their second conquest, destroyed the moon, raining down prolific meteor showers on Thiaz for weeks. It is expected to accrue into a dust ring over time, but it is unlikely it will be reformed again.

Theros – Predominantly a residential area, it was revealed during the first conquest that the moon was actually a secret research and scrying base for the Thiuzian nobility. It is not known how this moon survived the second conquest, but it did.

Sendros –Small, unpopulated and cold, the irregular orbital instability means this moon will be lost to the vacuum of space in the next million years.

The seven houses of Dragonmen

Dragonmen were organized in huge clans known as ‘houses’, numbering between a handful and up to three billion individuals. The listing of houses numbers in the hundreds, perhaps thousands. But of these houses six are ‘noble’ houses; preeminent, highly influential, and roughly equal in power. All lesser houses find they must ally themselves with a higher house in order to simply survive. Until the emperor rose in power a generation ago, they were in a state of constant war. The seven most notable houses are;

Deathmark – Rose to power aligning themselves early with the rising emperor. They are known for their mastery of science, and they development of machines that allow multiple dragonmen the power to use the tools of men – though theory posits they, as sentient beings, should be able to invent their own tools eventually.

Sinew-sin – Notable for manufacturing and industrial skills, this house fails in no other important talent.

Slaughterhand – deeply cruel and challenging initiation rituals make this house smaller in numbers, but its military has always been exceptional.

Caul – known for treachery and underhanded manipulation, this house lacks in no important skill.

Killblood – reported for their excellent food growing and logistics, this house lacks in no important skill.

Cruelflame – boasting some of the most skilled pilots in the Empire, this house lacks no important skill.

Sinweave – the unity of this house is not to be underappreciated, fiercely loyal they try to think themselves in an open alliance with the emperor, and not his subjects.