

# Dragon Riders of Pearl 5: Twilight of the Giants

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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!)*

TO:

Samantha; who prevails.

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## Characters

### **Jayd and Darkwing**

Jayd is the married wife and adopted half-sister of Blayd of the Celtwyld. She led the first heroes to form the first dragonrider circle with her dragon gift of being a navigatoress – one who is able to find anything she is looking for, or the way toward it. Darkwing, her beloved shadowmancer, rose to the rank of Patron of their world during the terrible battle against the dragonmen. He now rules, unchallenged, on Pearl as the most powerful dragon upon it.

### **Rayn and Ironfang**

Rayn is the wedded husband and adopted brother to Jayd of the Celtwyld. He is a highly capable priest and wiseman, and he rides with the redeemed prisoner Ironfang, a standardform so powerful he can challenge most noble dragons in combat. Rayn loves diplomacy, and helping organize men and the world. Ironfang has a respected firebreath, and is known for his integrity and forthrightness.

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### **Snow and Windfyrth**

Snow of the Celtwyld, third of the dragonriders inner circle, is focused on motherhood, and raising a large family based on genetic contributions from the great heroes of the dragonmen wars. Her bond seems weakest to her standardform Windfyrth, a dragon who is noted for her wise counsel and effective diplomacy, and who enjoys organizing the humans with great effectiveness. Her deadly bamboo spike breath can penetrate stone.

### **Norvich and Stormbreath**

The 4<sup>th</sup> dragonrider and dragon, Norvich is a hero of the dragonmen wars. He focuses mostly on military and logistics, helping keep the military honed and capable. Stormbreath's powerful air control can now not only create deadly cyclones but can break up illusions and thoughts as well.

### **Ethnomancer and Fallen**

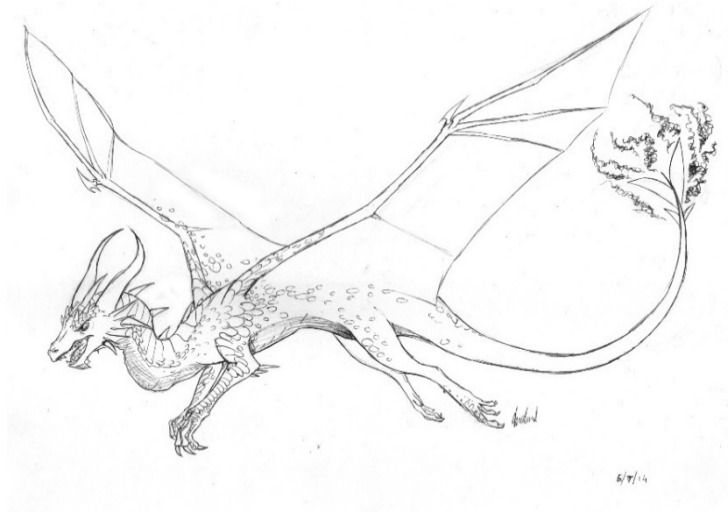
The 5<sup>th</sup> of the inner circle, Ethnomancer, sage and mystic, almost brought the dragonriders of Pearl to complete extinction by his knowledge and magic at the dawn of their rising twelve years ago. Converted by his own need for the bonding, and humbled by the successful conquest of Thiaz, his tactics redeemed the riders and help defeat Thiaz on that day. He commands a unique and debilitating form

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of matter known as ethnoplasma that continues to prove devastating against all his enemies.

He is bonded to a man who goes by the name of Fallen, whose entire family Ethnomancer slew in a failed attempt to prevent his own bonding. A man, who despite the great tragedy, overcame his bitter vindictive and chose, rather to assassinate a vaguely repentant Ethnomancer, to bond to him instead, completing both their broken hearts.

They work now as assassins and guns for hire, bringing criminals and warlords to justice that the law can no longer reach. They are now wanted criminals on all worlds except Pearl, who alone grants them sanctuary – for now. Their use in the battle against the dragonmen was so instrumental that, while none grant them a pardon, no jurisdictions are currently actively hunting them in all remaining eight worlds.



## Others

### Destiny

A rare unbonded dragon, the best friend of Blayd of the Celtwyld. She is a winged aerial serpentine with eletromancer powers. She can be a bit shy, like ‘her boy’, but is extremely talented and capable for one her age.

### Peyoth

A complex AI program, popular amongst Pearlans, based on a famous servant; given to helpful actions and kind words. Blayd manages to create a holographic body for him, which is usually a final year project for undergraduate university students.

### Godnor and Starwing

Of Sanmarellis, Godnor was one of a handful of scholars tasked with protecting the cryostasis pods during the plague years, till freed by Pearl. Starwing is a standardform with the ability to turn into light, meaning he can move at unimaginable speeds. Godnor has a soft, logical, direct means of communication, while Starwing is flamboyant, extroverted dragon, with a cryptic and almost ‘dancing’ style of communication.

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### **Sunfire and Cambion of the Erioth**

Sunfire is an Erioth, another humanoid species from near the Human/dragon alliance. He has great battle skill, but his dragon gift lies in his ability to sound truly convincing, capable of convincing a ‘stone to walk’, as they say. Cambion is a quetzlewyrn noble. He seems to be able to still, stall, and occasionally imitate other dragon powers. The full extend of that has never been truly revealed.

### **Astrid and Breeze of the Norgon**

Extroverted and shy, Astrid is a Norgon, who look just like humans but really aren’t. They avoid strife from their central world by living out on an ice planet far from home with scattered refugees from the strife zones.

The matron, Tsansefiorj, is quite possibly the most adroit shifter ever to be on record, adding legions to the already formidable DNA reprogramming of dragons. She can mass shift more than a thousand times her base weight in either direction, appearing as a normal Norgon, or giant terrestrial serpentine for intimidation purposes.

### **Stormclouds**

The ‘untamable’ Stormclouds features in this record as well, as a rare example of a dragon who has not only never bonded, but claims to feel no need for it either. He can teleport to any point within his sight, within a planetary spiritsphere.

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### Races

#### Human

A hardy race of bipedal quadrupeds, it is not known where humans came from before they arrived in this area of space, and shortly after found the dragons. Diverse and eclectic, they have a wide variety of shapes and sizes. But they tend to be charismatic individuals quick to appease and ally themselves with others.

#### Dragon

A rare example of a forged species, there is no redundancy in their considerable genetic life code. Their powers and abilities have inspired and directed countless civilizations across the galaxy, and perhaps far beyond, for more millennia than most know. They were made by an enigmatic race known as the ‘giants’. Dragons all possess a unique power each, known as their dragon gift, as well as bodies that can survive the vacuum of space, skin and bones that can survive direct high energy assault, and the ability to travel between the stars by teleporting along mystical channels known as the ‘golden threads’.

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### Dragonmen



A chimeric blend of dragon and human DNA, this species is incredibly hardy and resilient to almost all natural conditions – a fact necessary for the doomed planetary shard they were forged on. They have as much diversity and nuance as most human cultures, including the potential for great tyranny or crime. Their numbers decimated in the recent war, they are walking a careful path to acceptance from their cousins among the stars.

### The Giants

Little is known about this mysterious race, except that they were over 12 meters tall, apparently made of some form of stone, and that they made the dragons as pets. Their civilization is reported to be homed in the central stars of the galaxy, but they have not been in contact with anyone for hundreds of thousands of years, and most are assumed to have died or moved on to other dimensions long ago.

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### Erioth

A resilient race of bipedal quadrupeds, the Erioth survive harsher conditions than most other humanoids, and fare well in battle due to their strong constitutions. They can be unbending in diplomacy, and their inability to act with compassion and creativity have limited their options with other races, according to those other races. They can focus very intently, and cooperate well when amongst themselves. They are known for having a very mild form of empathic communication compared with similar species.

### Etherian

A semi corporeal interdimensional entities that usually pose as whatever sentient entity lives nearby. They live extraordinarily long lives, to the point of millions of years, before fading from



this reality. They are known for having great power, that they rarely invoke to benefit others, claiming they need to learn for themselves. They keep well away from most dense places of population, and have never been known to assist in conflict in any way.



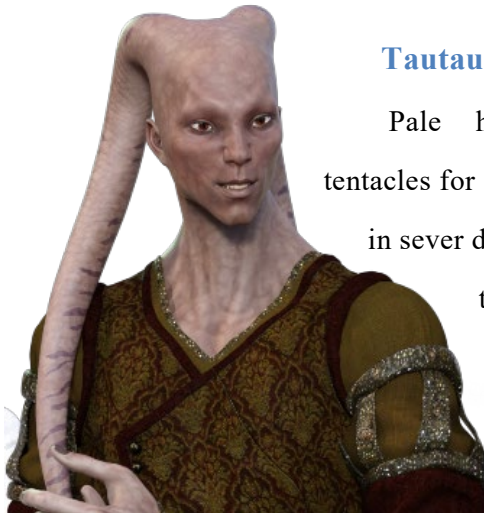
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### Norgon

A race of reptilian hominoids, who by raw convergent evolution look exactly like humans, at first appearance. Their single governed world has been struggling of late with decades of strife.

### Green men (Plubgdulgoids)

Amphibious hominoids evolved from submerged ambush predators, they have a generally very peaceful culture. Their world has been studied by other unknown lifeforms for centuries.



### Tautau

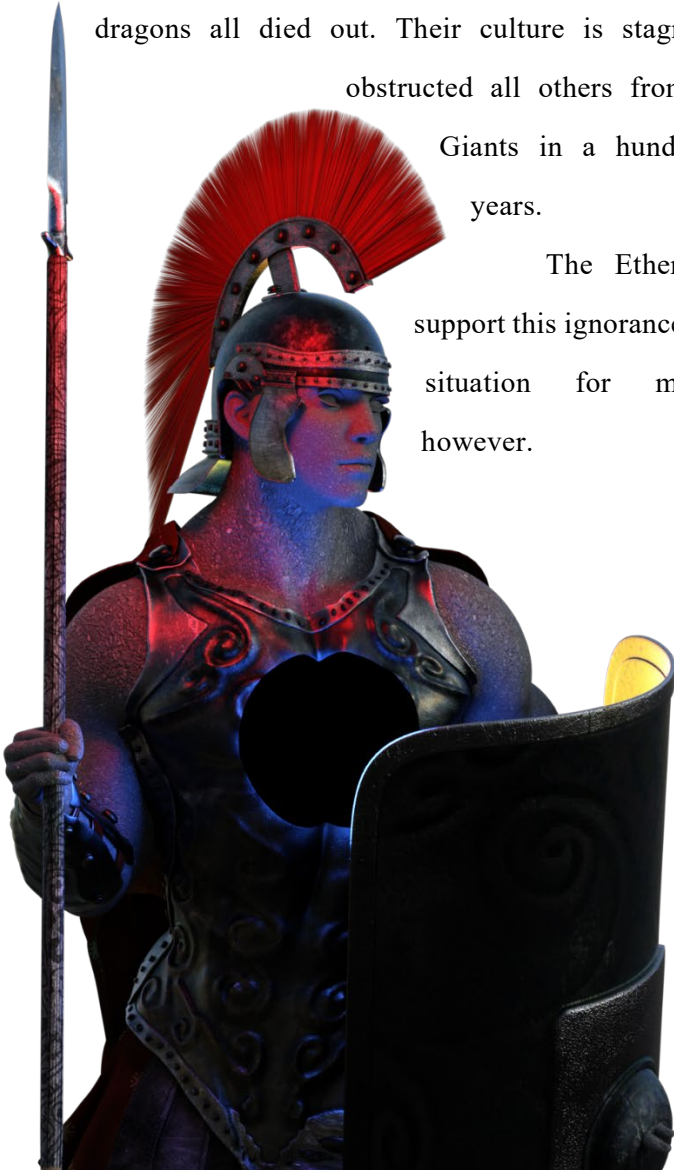
Pale humanoids with two head tentacles for defense. Their empire has been in sever decline of late. They are reputed to have a rich storytelling culture, and biology especially adapted to young world challenges.

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### Gadaleam

A powerful race inhabiting the central galactic cluster, they apparently have absorbed all dragon DNA into their own, and then the dragons all died out. Their culture is stagnant, and has obstructed all others from visiting the Giants in a hundred, thousand years.

The Etherian may not support this ignorance in the current situation for much longer, however.



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### Gayl's friends

#### Mintsi

From Tourmarelle, the high priest's daughter – a shy girl with black skin. Has a bit of a crush on Blayd. A rod wielder.

#### Orong

A studious girl and the military minister's daughter from Thiaz, loves to cook. A shield bearer.

#### Awoth

A very excitable chocolate skinned daughter of the chief diplomat from Sanmarellis. A harp bearer and keen dancer.

#### Rebecca

The sensible child of the surgeon from Ethphraim. She has a leaning towards military tactics and studying alien lifeforms. Unlike her mother, a cloak bearer.

## The Hatching

The little boy was crying.

He was barely two, and while he knew it was young, he knew most other children would not be crying. But this was his curse; he could remember *everything*. He could remember every day of his life; he could remember the whispers of those no one else could hear. He could remember his mother's screams as he was being born.

*Everything.*

But that still didn't explain why he was always crying. Why every new sound frightened him, as though it would steal away his soul from his body. It didn't explain why the lights were always too bright, or why there were always too many voices speaking to him at once. It was a pain and a fear that never abated.

Yet as he grew, and remembered it all, there was always one voice that he had learned to trust. Though it spoke as though ignorant of the noises that surrounded it. And though it seemed oblivious to the shining lights, it always spoke with love. It was the one that called itself 'mother'. The one the others called "My Lady", unless it was the man's voice, then it was, "Beloved." But he liked most the name she called herself ... "Jayd of the Celtwyld".

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And that was why, in spite of the chaos and confusion around him, he allowed himself to be carried in her arms down into the dark room once more. It was always hot down here. Hot, and even though the noises were softer there were still too many voices, too many feelings, and it was never nice to be down here.

“General!” a voice emerges from the throng. It is the voice of a living man. “S...sorry, you’re early.”

“Godnor, Seraph. Nice to see you both again. Forgive the intrusion.”

“No, no, that’s quite alright,” the man’s voice continues above the whispers. “I just, there’s-”

“I make no apologies, scholar,” mother interrupts. “I barely return from the uprising on Argentus, and now I hear plague has broken out on Amarii! The council is convening within minutes; I have no time to be here, but for *his* sake.”

He knows she means himself, but wishes for his sake he was not down here.

“I understand.” Godnor tells her, “Seraph, here, take the wand. General, there’s something I wanted to show you.”

For a moment the living voices are silent, but the noise of their thoughts is barely drowned out by the others. There is singing... lullabies. Soft words. Then a sharp jolt of emotion and a cracking sound.

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“I see another hatchling prepares,” his mother replies as if to explain the noise, perhaps to him.

“I will tend to it,” the woman called Seraph states.

Again, his mother speaks, “The robes suit you, you know,” she tells Godnor.

He blushes, “Never was I wiser than when I came to live here.”

“She suits you, you know.”

A riot of feelings from the man: frustration, embarrassment, uncertainty, all riding above an ocean of deep and abiding love. “I know.”

“And your dragon, Starwing?”

“He flies with his mate also. We are very happy, I can assure you!”

“So, what did you bring me down here to see?” his mother asks, within her often harsh voice, a smile.

They are walking again. The noise is still constant here, and the boy tries to hide his eyes in his mother’s arms to still the constant droning. But he does not need eyes to see down here. They are walking among the eggs now. Many different sizes, many different colors. Each bathed in a different element, and tended by their watchful carers – both human, and dragon.

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“Well, you know your son... well... he was never given the opportunity to bond to a dragon during his birthing, or even shortly after. I’m sorry, General, I am reluctant to bring it up.”

“Spare me your pity Godnor. It happened, we grew from it, we move on. I don’t know why it happened, but I’ve always hoped it was for a higher purpose.”

“I know! And your husband has never wavered from such a belief as well. The faith of this people is strong. I just-”

“Destiny will not be denied, and the course of the Divine cannot be swayed,” she told him, barely a tinge of doubt in her soul.

Godnor, however, could not bring himself to believe. “I had hoped, perhaps, not to sway the Divine... but... give it a little nudge, you know.”

“Scientists...” she muttered with false disdain.

“There was one, hatched at the same moment as your son. The syncopatic rhythms were sufficient to bring about a bonding, but it never happened. I was hoping, nudging.”

“And?”

“And I failed. Your son, his auric resonance is off the chart, as may be anticipated from one born of such gifted parentage. But his brainwaves are very ... vibrant. His hypothalamus alone is unexpectedly mature. Yet he clearly displays unparalleled sensory maladaptation and emotional instability.”

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“I thought the surgeon of Ethphraim forbade you saying such in his presence.”

A riot of guilt and anger, “Yes, I’m sorry.”

“His birth was difficult. There will be a higher reason, I am sure.”

“Let us hope so, the dragon chick did not survive its first two days, succumbing to respiratory distress. They would have never met.”

“Then let us assume that the first bonding was never intended to take place.”

“Perhaps, but you do realize what it takes to bond to a dragon, don’t you? Humanity outnumbers them a hundred thousand to one, so they are spoilt for choice. But to hope one child, even though it be the child of the most powerful priest and highest military commander on-world, and though she ride the patron dragon ... then to combine that with the chance he missed his opportunity for bonding to his most suited dragon... the odds are at best... astronomical.”

“Don’t test my faith, scholar. Nor my time.”

They had not ceased to walk quickly, the hot steam pouring against his skin in this humid place. The voices were still there, the strange lights that always flickered against his eyelids at their noises, and that sung music when he touched anything. His world was full of confusion, and a discomfort that bordered on pain. But they’d insisted he was best sorting it out himself.

But he could not.



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And now, as they did occasionally, the *other* voices were rising. He heard the nurses, whispering soft words of understanding and hope to the dragon chicks long before they hatched. He sensed the whispers in the air that wafted through the stones, carrying messages across the world to other minds, shouted from the stone eyes of the statues that everyone kept. He listened to the dragon chicks wondering about their world, embracing the safety of their egg. Their voices were the most peaceful, until they hatched, and were forced into the cold light like he had been. And then there were the voices he wanted to forget. Most of them were *trying* to be helpful, others *wanted* to hurt him and every life they encountered. They were always far away when his father or mother were near. But it was *their* voices he heard now. They were coming. He thrust his ears towards his mother's voice; the safest place he knew.

"I do not mean to waste your time, General, but I had hoped you'd give me more time. I have found something. Look, this was brought in today."

There was a sudden, unpleasant, high-pitched ringing in his ears. He covered but found no relief. The voices grew louder, as if some of them were arguing now. *No*, a voice insisted above the others, *it's too early. Too early for them both.*

*He will prevail*, another insisted.

*Keep them, keep them away!* a cruel voice shouted, *Look out! Danger, danger!"*

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Again, the scholar spoke, “So, given the chance at a perfect match for bonding, you can imagine my surprise when we took a look at this little lady,” he seemed to be kneeling down, his voice touched with reverence. “Their resonance is not perfect, I know. Here, see for yourself ... but perhaps, you know, with a little nudge?”

The voices begin to shout now, rising in a deafening cacophony. He could not help but cry out; the noise was so loud, the lights blinding, the searing fire on his skin unbearable.

“Hey, child, child!” his mother’s heart reached out through the noise, “What is it? Blayd, my son, stop screaming! Why are you always doing this?!”

He clutches against her, but each sound brings another explosion of light and thunder. The voices shout; he can find no sanctuary. He wants to run, but she holds him fast.

“It will do, take him!” she shouts, and he feels her push him forcefully towards a ovoid horror. Dark shadows leap between them. Then a clawed horror slinks out from behind the egg, reaching over it as though it might crush it and the precious dragon chick within if they bring him any closer. He screams for all he is worth, digging his heels into the soil of the hatching grounds.

The one named Godnor grabs his arm now, flames bursting from his touch. His terrified wails shatter the muted silence of the sacred grounds, bringing fear and curiosity to the unborn chicks. But he cannot

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stop them dragging him, and neither could the horrors that surround them prevent it. Horrors the adults seem completely oblivious to.

She made him kneel before the large blue egg, twice as large as he is.

Now a dark, sinister voice rose above the din. It speaks with terrifying horror, *The race of dragons, the kingdoms of men. Touch that egg; and you will destroy them all.* Images flashed through his mind, born of the singing cacophony of light and sound that was his constant world. They found shape and form, becoming dragons, falling from the sky. His father stands, proud, by his dragon. Then a great rift opens up, and they turn on each other in war. A new door in the sky opens, and new riders arrive, joining a battle that promises to destroy everything. There is a shrieking of absolute horror and fear that abandons all reason.

But, then, there is another voice, or was it a light? He cannot tell. Some scent in the air that carries with it an enticing presence of peace. He immediately perceives he is filled with a choice, and calming advice: focus on what matters most. The fear shouts at him, but inside, in the deep space within the human spirit that transcends time and fear, he is seeking a place. A place called home, a place within. A place where he belongs. A place... where there is peace.

The shouting fades, but he does not even notice. Slowly, his consciousness is pervaded by a single, hallowed song. It reminds him

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of the moment in his father's arms, before he falls to sleep. It reminds him of his mother's breath as she talks and sings to him. It reminds him of who he is.

And everything else, everything that he was not, simply fades away.

He looks out, and sees the egg for the first time with his own eyes. It is purple and blue, and scaled like a dragon's hide. It has been bathed in lightning; he can tell from the smell. Within, he sees a little life. Small, even smaller than his own for now, but what a bright life it holds! A life so like his, but not his. Another one... another... like a friend.

"Thank you, scientist," he hears his mother say. "I think this is the first time I have ever heard him awake, and not crying." For a fleeting moment the confusion of lights and scents accompany her voice, as always. But not so much, not this time. He hears her voice with his ears, and her sound is more pleasant than he remembers.

"They have not bonded," Godnor assures her, his heart wavering and afraid. He fears he has failed again. He has a proposal, but knows she will not like it. "Perhaps... you are right, it was not fate that he bond with the first dragon. But something more than a prophet's sight must guide us here, for they are not bonded! Not yet... but maybe... you know, with a little nudge we can guide destiny?"

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Her voice is hard, “No. I will not allow it. I know you have the science, that you can change their brain waves and make their blood change. I know what the matron of Argentus did to force the bonding and perhaps that was for a necessary cause. But you will not touch my son. If this is the way Divinity intended it, then so be it.”

“I... respect that. But he is no normal child! Son of two *living legends*? Surely destiny demands every opportunity for this boy, and to be bonded with a dragon would only increase his power a thousand-fold!!”

Now her voice is kind. “No, I will not move my hand against destiny’s cause.”

He hears a voice, the voice inside the egg now. She is purring. She can feel him too. He is like a familiar presence to her, more than her father. More like a friend. They will be good friends together. Then she is speaking to him. She is asking who she is.

He reaches out, and touches the egg. There is a warm thud, like falling on a pile of pillows.

“Did you feel that?” his mother asks.

“Yes, still no bonding though. The resonance is still not high enough.”

But he ignores them. He wants to answer the dragon’s question. He knows her name already, “Destiny,” he tells her.

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There is a tremendous thunder, and his mother falls to her knees weeping. The hot thunder echoes around the cavern, but he is covered by the protection the egg gives him now. He barely hears her saying, “His first word! His first word is the name of his dragon!”

For a moment there is silence in the cavern at her tearful gratitude. But he is not worried. He knew, deep within a part of his soul he had forgotten was always there, that there was nothing to be worried about all along.

Again, Godnor speaks his fears, “You know, General, that as both he and this dragon age their thought patterns will diverge. With each passing day the opportunity for a successful bonding falls further and further away... from difficult, to unlikely, to infinitesimal. To find one so synchronised after a failed bonding is a miracle, but to lose the opportunity to nudge things along... I fear might be ignoring the opportunity your Divinity has sent.”

“Let them be, let them be! For the first time in his life, my son does not weep – he speaks!” He feels her tears now, sobs of relief from his mother. His heart goes out to her, but he does not take his eyes away from the egg.

A moment later she stands, her tears stayed. “I am already late.”

Godnor is startled, “Well, take Starwing. He is returning from Thiaz as we speak, he can take you both.”

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“No, just me. Leave my boy. Leave him here for as long as he likes. Call the maids if he needs anything.”

“You ... do not wish to take him with you?”

“Wherever he goes, I am with him. You have done well, scientist. Thank you.”

So the boy stayed by the egg, not knowing how many days or weeks passed. He heard them both, his mother and father. They came and watched him, waiting for the egg to hatch. He heard them worrying, worrying if they had done the right thing in not forcing a bonding. But as time drew on and weeks turned into months he heard them less and less, though he saw them just as much. Soon, he needed to hear their voices to know if they were there at all, or feel their touch, or see their worried faces. But they didn't need to worry about him. He was already home.

## Growing

“You think you’re sooo good,” she jeered at him, her voice as cruel as curved daggers, “but you can’t even bond to your *dragon*.”

Rage boiled up inside him. No one, *no one* in all the world, in all the nine worlds, could upset him so easily. It was annoying, and deeply hypocritical. She didn’t have a dragon either, and now they were both nine years old, it was unlikely she ever would.

The room was silent. They were supposed to be having fun together, but he’d grown tired again of her trying to remake the game’s rules to suit her whim. Cool air drifted through the high castle parapets, and the guards below must have heard them fighting, again, but wisely never said a thing. The nurse was silent too. Blayd was half a mind to throw the tapestry at the girl’s face, but knew too well she’d beat him in a fight if it ever came to that, again.

“So!” he shouted at the girl. “You... you... you’re just arrogant and proud!”

She laughed. It was a poor insult, and they both knew it. “I am *not proud*, snotty-nose. I am just as smart as my mother, and she was a *genius*. Besides, I am an artisan, and that is a *rare* talent!”

It was true. Nine worlds governed the empire of both dragons and human, and nine tools were the heritage of humanity in populating



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those worlds. Each tool was an archetype of usefulness, the shield for protection of both life and law, the staff to govern civilizations with healing and wisdom. The boots for swift trade and travel, the orb to gather knowledge, the wand for manufacturing and medicine. The blade for warriors, cloak for the wise, and the harp for the artists. The headband would command matter, the preferred tool of her royal mother Pure of house Oordu. But the young princess had invested both time and talent, and like only a handful of other living, was likely to master them all. Yet it was the thought of her mother that gave him a cruel idea.

“So,” he retorted, thinking only to hurt, “at least I still have both my parents!”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she ran from the room.

He knew he was in trouble for that.

To his surprise, his father arrived in only moments, brought in by the light almost a full breath after his terrible insult. The boy was terrified. He did not see enough of the most powerful wiseman of his home world to know him as well as he should. Rage turned swiftly to fear. To have summoned his father almost instantly like this ... he thought he might be about to die.

“Blayd,” a man’s voice spoke his name, the unexpected kindness in that voice shocking him so much it almost forced his fears to burst from him in a shower of apologetic tears.

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He could not stop the trembling in his arms, or his voice.  
“Father.”

The older man pressed down the cushions as he sat by his side.  
“Son, what made you say something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Blayd tried to believe.

His father said nothing, but instead just waited, praying.

Blayd fidgeted, struggling to contain his guilt. Still, his father waited, saying nothing. He turned in the cushions till his face was pointing down, his feet up in the air.

And his father waited.

He tried not to think about what he’d just said. But it didn’t work.

Then Blayd burst into tears, and with a sorry cry threw himself into his father’s arms. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” he tried to apologize to the wrong person. “I knew I shouldn’t say it, but she was just being so mean! She is always so mean! She was being unkind to me!”

His dad didn’t say anything; but held him.

“What am I supposed to do?” Blayd asked.

Rayn, high Wiseman of Pearl and his father, sighed before answering. “I am not sure, my son. I am not sure. The princess is still young. I think sometimes, just like you, she says things she doesn’t really mean. Sometimes... there’s a deeper reason people say mean things. They’re really trying to hide their own fear, or anger, and they take it out on you. What can you do? Pity them, show them kindness.

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Teach them that being rude will not heal them. Do you not see her? Do you not know her fear? I know you son. You are special. You are very gifted. I've never met anyone with a memory like yours, not even her mother. And you are creative; you see things in such a unique way! And you are connected, perhaps even more than me. Remember that time you spoke to the warrior's spirit at the anniversary of his funeral? None could see him but you and I; you are destined for great things."

He kept his face buried. He knew this talk. He had heard it every day for nine years, or at least the six or so he could remember properly. It was intended to motivate him, but he saw it for what it was; a subtle and well-meaning attempt to manipulate him. To make him a bold warrior like his mother, or a skilled diplomat like his father. To make him what he wasn't.

For in truth, he was neither of these things. Try as he might, he was small, and weak. For all his supposed intellectual gifts he still stumbled at his words. His greatest redeeming quality was his dragon friend, Destiny, who apparently he'd named. But they still had not bonded, and as each day grew on it was even more and more unlikely they ever would. Perhaps one day, a century after he'd passed away, Destiny would find her true rider, and they would finally be one. And she would not be an incomplete dragon anymore.

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And that was, in the end, why the princess was so cruel to him as well. She wanted him strong, like his parents. Like her parents. Like her.

Because, try as they might, none could hide the fact that they expected him to marry her one day.

But he *hated* that princess, and she *hated* him.

Oh, they never said anything out loud. None of them ever did. But he knew, and she knew because she was right into what everyone else wanted her to be. Always so obedient and pretty and well behaved, at least in public. When they got together, when her father brought her over for “playtime”, then her real self-came out. The self that hated everything he was, and always wanted to boss him around, and change him. He’d given up on her games of making him the knight and her the princess two years ago for what they were; attempts to live out a fantasy rather than actually get to know him. And since then she’d become even more bitter about losing that control. So now she actively taunted him, making him miserable, criticizing his every decision, making a fool of him to the other youth.

With so much hurt, maybe it wasn’t so surprising that he’d said it after all.

But he knew what his father was thinking, mostly because he allowed it; he was thinking that he still should not have hurt her in that

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way. That he should have talked to her first, or her father, and told them what was happening.

But Blayd didn't want to do that. That was just another attempt at a diplomatic solution that would one day lead to the inevitable marriage that would be the end of Blayd's individuality and freedom. Blayd knew that, and he knew his father knew too.

The old man sighed, "Not since the council generations ago has a father been allowed to choose his son's bride. You know my preference, but I will not make your choice. However, I am allowed to have my opinion, son."

Blayd knew he spoke the truth, as he often did. But what he doubted his father knew was how much he wanted to please the older man. How desperately he wanted his decisions to make his father happy. He didn't know if he could ever be happy again if his father hated him.

"Oh, Blayd!" Rayn of the Celtwyld shouted in exasperation. He flung the white staff away from him, where it hovered in the air, and reaching down with hands clutched into claws like a dragon, tickled him.

"Oh, no! Stop!" Blayd said, out of tradition. He hoped he'd never stop.

The tickling continued, "Now you hear me, you hear me boy! I will never stop loving you, no matter what you choose to do! You burn

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this whole castle to the ground, dig up your grandfather's grave, throw yourself into the pyre of sun and I will never stop loving you, you hear me!"

"Ah, ah! Yes, yes, I hear you!"

"Good, now let's never forget that again, do you hear?" he spoke in a bossy voice that hid his playful teaching poorly.

"All right, all right, I promise!" Blayd huffed, struggling for breath. Again, the sense of peace he found in his parents arms returned. But then he felt the mood in the room grow sober as his father gathered severity. He allowed himself to be picked up by the older man's powerful hands, placing him on his lap.

The old man held his face, looking right into his eyes. "Son, I would still love you if you put a sword through Ironfang's heart."

Blayd could not help but gasp, blinking in disbelief. But the anchor of severity was still there. His father was not kidding. Not at all.

He felt his heart tremble at his father's words. To love him, more than his own dragon? It was death to a dragon to lose their rider's life, extending human years by triple. And for a human to lose their dragon was equally as much a death sentence, in spirit if not in body. None lived more than a year once their dragon died, so great was their mourning, so profound and unyielding was their sorrow.

Tears pressed themselves to the young boy's eyes, and he held his father's face, still not quite believing what he'd just heard.

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“Blayd, my son. I love you, always,” Rayn, wiseman of the Celtwyld told him.

He nodded, and suddenly his feelings seemed to explode with compassion and sympathy. What had he done? What had he so thoughtlessly said to the princess, who had lost her mother and whose father still mourned? What had he tried to take away, without which... he did not know how he would have survived without his mother or father?

He flung his arms around his father’s neck, “I love you too, dad.”

His father rubbed his back, and Blayd felt himself fill with the realization that he needed to apologize to the princess.

They let go, and Blayd was not surprised to see tears in his father’s eyes. “You, ahh, better not tell Ironfang that, though.”

Blayd laughed, “As if he doesn’t already know!”

Rayn laughed too. Then he spoke, “Oh, look at this, it seems you have another visitor!”

Blayd wondered who it could be, till the familiar beating of dragon wings sounded from the outside window of the castle. “Destiny!” he shouted before the dragon could speak to him.

Rayn laughed.

Blayd ran to the window, and threw it open just as his beautiful and best friend in the galaxy landed on the balcony. He rushed to

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embrace her snake-like scales and feathered wings. Her serpentine neck curled around him to share that embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I heard you had a little upset with the princess, again,” she told him in humor and rebuke.

He smiled, and without bowing moved to climb up on her back. She wasn’t bothered, and bowed down to help him up. They were both still so young, but dragons grew very fast, so these past three years she had no trouble carrying him. And, like all dragons, gifted with the knowledge of their parents and ancestors she’d gained the ability to speak, and countless others, before she was even hatched.

“Yes, we had a fight, and I said something I should never have.” Blayd admitted. “I’m going to apologize right now!”

“Good, good!” his father agreed, already the white staff glowing brightly in his hand. “But wait an hour. She is being tended to by her father. Give it an hour, and you’ll have a moment to speak.”

Blayd didn’t feel so good about that.

Destiny seemed to sense it, “Gives us a chance to fly together.”

That cheered him up. “Oh, yes please! An hour to fly, then a moment to apologize!”

She roared, sizzling purple lighting crackling from her scales and maw unintentionally. His father was not harmed, but the stone parapet was left twisted like butter and smoking with fire.



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Destiny laughed, and Blayd shouted for joy and they leaped off and into the air, flying freely, ignoring the guardian dragons or those on other business. His dragon friend danced in the air, moving with the unseen breeze with prescient skill as though she'd been here for many lifetimes, as indeed she had. She was a dragon, powerful, devoted, created by a divine hand and not forged by accidents over millennia. And dragons, Blayd knew, would always be free.

But an hour was far too long for a nine-year-old boy, and that moment to apologize came, and went.

## The princess

“Oh, please!” she scoffed. “That is the one boy I am most *definitely* not interested in!”



**Figure 1 – Not THAT boy!**

She was eleven now, and her best friends had come over for a sleep over. There was Mintsi, from Tourmarelle, the shy daughter of Tourmarelle’s high priest, her dark skin contrasting with the light gown she wore. There was Orong, a studious girl and the military minister’s daughter from Thiaz, and a good friend. Awoth was the very excitable,

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chocolate-skinned daughter of Sanmarellis's chief diplomat. Finally, Rebecca, the sensible child of the surgeon from Ethphraim.

And she was Gayl, princess heir to the throne of Pearl, though her father ruled in her stead till she was of age. An age that was only, technically, five years away. He had already begun to let her make most of the decisions, except for a few. At times it was frustrating, and even more frustrating that she couldn't let anyone see how frustrating it was. But she knew he was wise, and all said he *did* care. At least, he cared for their home world, much more than he could care for his only child.

For he was a broken man, having lost his heart when her mother died protecting them all from the rage of the Dragonmen eleven years ago. So, she was left in the care of the tutors, and the nurses, nine out ten days. She used to resent it, until she finally realized around four years ago that there was nothing she could do for her father's constant mourning. Now the day with him was something she dreaded, and she'd keep him talking about politics or diplomatics, because there was never any telling when his eyes would glass over, and silent tears run down his face once more. She could never bare those moments, but he didn't try to be strong for her. He worked as the honorary King of Pearl, though he was born of Thiaz, and he worked without smiling. Not once, not in eleven years.

So, when she found she could escape her father's self-indulgent attitude, she was grateful. He was busy with the trading sanctions

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against a warlord and his nation on Chalcedonah, so she had made her way to the boarding college at Nenwe mountain, near the conclave of the dragon's and there had found her four best friends. They had grown up together, and they played together. And now they played a popular game for the young unmarried women of Pearl: Turn the rib.

It was a bone, a human bone, taken from all that remained of her mother after the monsters got her. Kept in sacred remembrance in Gayl's home, the treasured bone of a blood ancestor was traditionally used for divining, though Rebecca was still dubious even after Awoth had explained the science to her. The bone, spun by one who could ask a question, would rest pointing to the most likely location of the answer, or the person who would be affected by the fate. If it pointed to the rising bright light it meant *yes*, and to the falling bright light it meant *no*. Finding answers had always been the gift of her god-mother, the General of Pearl, Jayd of the Celtwyld, and the mother of the boy in question. A question which had been, "Who is Gayl going to marry? Is it Blayd of the Celtwyld?"

Her hand shot down, clutching the rib, preventing it from spinning. "No," Gayl insisted. "That's a stupid question."

The other girls chorused their protests.

"Hey, you promised," protested Orong. "You cannot take back your oath!"

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She clung to that rib. “No, no! That’s a stupid question. I’m not going to ask it.”

She caught Mintsi’s eye, who quickly looked away as she spoke, as was her way, “She is afraid of the answer.”

There was sudden silence, and even as much as Gayl felt the truth of those words from her shy friend, she feared everyone else felt them too.

But she couldn’t let them know that.

“Get real!” she quoted one of Rebecca’s favorite phrases. “I am NOT. Come on, I’m going to be Queen one day, queen in a few years. I cannot seriously, ever, EVER consider pairing with that stupid, inconsiderate, small, weak-”

“I think you like him!” Awoth accused her, and the others laughed.

She shouted them down, “I do not! Seriously, I mean, look at him. He doesn’t even know how to tie his own sash properly.”

“Oorw, don’t you speak so ill of the high priest’s son!” Orong warned her. It was taboo on her world to speak ill of the wiseones of the people.

“I can say whatever I like about him!” Gayl protested, and as future queen, she sincerely believed it.

“They say he is very smart.” Awoth continued. “That he masters the orb unequal to any other.”

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“Peh,” Gayl countered, thankful that no one continued to try and take the rib from her. “That’s all he does! I mastered the orb years ago.”

“No, *really* mastered. He’s making it do things they never knew were possible.”

“They say he can name every star in the sky,” Mintsi whispered.

“So, *you* marry him then!” Gayl shot back, her voice far unkind than she intended.

Mintsi looked hurt, then smiled to herself knowingly.

It was infuriating.

“He *is* kind of cute,” Awoth continued.

“Fine, I give you my permission to marry Blayd of the Celtwyld,” Gayl said with an imperious wave of her hand.

“Eh, maybe. If I feel like it. But why rob you of the hope of your true love!” she teased.

“No, no! He’s not my true love. No, I like Robert, son of Gengd, the weaponsmaster.”

“Ooh, Gengd!” Awoth mused romantically, and the other girls nodded. “So handsome, *and* obedient.”

“You think he will make nice children?” Orong asked sincerely.

“He’d better!” Gayl joked, sitting back, grateful the discussion wasn’t about someone who hated her so much. Someone who her family, her friends, and her entire world, to use another phrase from Ethphraim; had “shipped” her with him. He was nothing like the man

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she wanted, he was too much like her father. A *feeling* man. Emotional, inarticulate. Always hiding behind his parents when there was something that he didn't like to face, which was everything in the whole wide world.

Everything except his blasted dragon. The only dragon on the entire world of Pearl who had not taken a rider yet. How it was possible for her to be happy was a mystery. Why they hadn't forced a bonding was an enigma. He didn't *deserve* a dragon. He was too shy. Not at all like Gengd, or any of the sons of the Celtwyld or any of the other eight worlds, nine if you counted the dying shards of the world of the dragonmen mutants. But perhaps a dragon would do him good; make him more courageous, less emotional and brittle. He was clever, she knew that. And he could be gentle, and that was necessary in a prince. But she had seen his cruel side, and he was frightened of everything. And she knew she would never ever love him that way.

"I think we should ask about Blayd anyway," Mintsi insisted in her soft voice.

Gayl felt the rage rise up inside her. She had just managed to get the conversation to where she liked it, and now Mintsi had stolen it away again. A part of her just wanted to throw the bone right at her head.

Much to her relief, a soft bell suddenly sounded. It was the butler again, and he was calling the young princesses to dinner. They'd all

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been so caught up in the discussion that they hadn't even noticed the time.

"Hurry, we'll be late!" Awoth, an avid student of all things culinary, was already standing.

The others made for the door, and Gayl still knelt, covering her mother's rib with her hand. She waited for the others to leave; thankful they had given up on pursuing this stupid question.

Gayl had been warned. Blayd's father, her godfather, and a better parent to her than her own father, had taught her all about the staff, and also how to divine using the rib. He'd warned her that often one must be very prayerful about how and what questions one asks of the Divine. He'd told her that even though no divination forced us into a particular fate or destiny, for we still had choice, sometimes the answers can be more honest than we were ready for. To ignore them, because we didn't like them, was to invite painful lessons.

She held the bone tightly in her hand, knowing that as much as she hated any suggestion that she might be meant for the most annoying boy on the planet ... it was something she wanted to know. She didn't notice her hand tremble as she reached out and spun the rib, whispering in her mind the question she never wanted anyone to ask.

It spun, and spun well.



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Yet as it slowed, she began to fear. What if it *did* point towards her, and not another? What if fate intended they be together? What if she spent the rest of her life with a stupid, rude, small, ignorant –

She waited no longer, and before the bone had stopped spinning she ran for the door. For a brief moment she paused, noting its spin, watching it slow down. But she could not bear it anymore.

Violently she slammed the door, leaving the bone spinning, never knowing where it had stopped.

## Failure

The lightning flashed, and wild sparks flew all over.

“Keep trying!” Blayd shouted.

His eyes widened, breath catching, as Destiny swam in a gentle circle. She



Figure 2 – I can do it!

was covered in her purple lightning, and strange vortexes of twisted space curled away from her. They were only eleven years old, but it was clear now that she could use her lightning to bend space itself, forming portals as had been discovered and taught by the mighty Farwing, previous Patron of Pearl.

Sweat formed on Blayd's brow, knowing the inherent risks. Farwing had taken hundreds of years, with ample time to prepare. She was only eleven.

Blayd watched as she spun around again, a dangerous tactic. It was hard to force so much lightning into a full circle, then to use it to pull wide open the distances between spaces. Difficult, and dangerous.

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Without any warning there was a blinding crack of red electricity, and to Blayd's miscalibrated senses it brought a wafting sense of sea salt. Destiny was thrown clear across the room, saved only by the quick actions of Peyoth, his holographic butler.

Blayd raced over to her, while Peyoth cleared the excess electricity and removed the safety stones. She stumbled to get up, and was bleeding along one tooth.

"Peyoth, quickly!" Blayd begged, and the illusion quickly ran over to her.

"Hmm, a minor flesh wound. Hold your sash against it until the bleeding stops," he said in his calm and soft voice.

Blayd quickly removed his sash, the one his father had given him, against the wound. If the virtue within it wasn't enough to stop the bleeding quickly, the impressive healing ability of the dragons would be. He studied the wound, which seemed far deeper than just a scratch

"Ouch! Ow, ow, ow," Destiny weakly muttered.

He patted her head, and she placed it on his knees. For a moment neither spoke.

"Don't feel so bad," he told her. "You're just too young. You'll get there, once your genetic programming kicks in."

"It felt so close... it felt like I could really do it this time," she said, a tiny blue tear rimming on the edge of her eye. "I want to, I can see it... but it still just doesn't happen! Oh Blayd, why can't I do it?"

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“I don’t know,” he replied. He continued to pat her head, and to rub her brow. He really didn’t know. All his life he had borne with Synesthesia; mixed up senses. He would taste what people said, he would feel the sounds in the air. Bright lights left his ears ringing. Everything, all the time was a mess of senses. All his life he’d been struggling to make sense of what was real, and what was all just an illusion. The word “toast” made a brown light to the left. Sometimes it was all too much, and he couldn’t tell what was real.

And then when people were unkind... it was the most painful realization that it was *not* an illusion after all.

So, he patted her scaly skin, ignoring the hissing in his hand, no longer noticing the taste of sand in his mouth, seeing through the gentle blue patches in his field of view he knew weren’t really there. Destiny was there, and she was looking to him for comfort. A dragon had put her head on his knee and closed her eyes in trust. Her skin was snakelike, but he knew it was strong enough to survive the emptiness and radiation of open space. Dragons were amazing, and a dragon was his only friend.

After a minute she pulled herself up once more, licking her lips, seeming content that the healing was complete. Blayd noticed the blood dissolving completely in the sash, one of its very many useful functions now that his culture had learned how to use them properly once more.

“Go on,” he begged, “try again.”

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“No. Enough for today. Enough for the whole next year I think! That really hurt, I’m not going to try that again where it can hurt you.”

He wasn’t sure what to say. A part of him wanted to say, ‘Go on, you can do it without hurting me!’ and the other part wanted to say, ‘But ... you are hurting me when you give up.’ But in the end, it seemed the part that wanted to say, ‘You are my friend, so I’m going to let you decide what you do,’ won out, and he said nothing at all.

Just then the door burst open, and a young woman shouted, “Just what in Divinities’ name is going on here!”

Blayd’s breath caught in his throat, and he felt his blood beginning to boil, as the saying goes. It was the worst person in the whole wide world. The princess apparent; Gayl, Heiress of Pearl.

She was with one of her friends she spent all her time with, the curly haired girl of Tourmarelle. A guard-at-arms, possibly hers, stood at the door just behind her as if he was the one responsible for opening it.

She glared at him with open disdain before speaking again, “Oh, it’s you. Well, we don’t usually hear explosions from this end of the college, you know.”

He was furious. He didn’t need permission to study here, and it certainly wasn’t her right to know every single happening in the city. She wasn’t even queen yet. He shuddered to think of what life would be like when that finally happened in five years’ time.

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“Well!” she demanded, “have you nothing to say for yourself!”

He stood up, Destiny slithering away to help him. He still hadn't yet managed to turn his thoughts into words when the annoying princess spoke again.

“Oh! You've hurt your dragon! Here, let me help-” she was already marching into the room at full pace, one hand out, the other hand back as though she expected someone to place a staff or wand there at any moment.

He lunged forward between them, “I *know* how to take care of my dragon.”

She stopped dead, her eyes glowering with spite.

For a moment she stood there, beginning to twist at the hips with whatever thoughts she was playing with. Her voice became kind, her demeanor overly helpful, “Well, good. Excellent in fact. Are you... are you all right then?”

He didn't know what she meant. She hated him. Everyone knew that. He knew that. He knew she knew that. His confusion and anger turned his expression into a sneer.

It made her angry. “Well, fine then, you *stupid* boy! Nobody likes you anyway!”

He held his peace, but glared at her angrily.

She turned on her heels and stormed out, muttering something he didn't bother listening to. The door slammed.

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**Figure 3 – I KNOW how to take care of my dragon!**

For a moment there was silence, till Peyoth spoke. “I suggest, young master, that you forget your manners when speaking to the king’s daughter.”

Destiny was silent. Blayd knew the hologram spoke the truth, but didn’t know what else to say about the terrible woman and the future for his world.

He hadn’t realized how fast he was breathing, when suddenly Destiny spoke.

“So how about your project?” she asked him, slithering up to press against his leg, clearly trying to distract him. She was still too young to really think about what was going on, but caring enough to know she didn’t want him to get lost in these thoughts again.

He grinned. He knew she was also distracting him from pressuring her into trying even more, but he really did like his little side

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project. There was no school, no college to attend any more. Dotted all over the planet were the “teachers”, little stone statues that contained all the world’s knowledge, and much more. They held the true history of humanity going back six thousand years to the arrival of General Zev and her husband Adama. The fleet of colony ships landed at Ethphraim, preparing to reform and colonize the seven most populatable worlds of the local star cluster. For the first two thousand years all had gone well, dragons and humans living in peace, fighting back enemies together, building a mighty empire neither imagined could ever fall. There were other colonies, of course, far away in other habitable parts of the galaxy. But one of the risks in coming here meant traversing the great distance; decades at best.

So, when an enemy finally arose, an enemy neither men nor dragons could destroy, there was no help to be found. It took four thousand years and the best blood of each of the worlds to defeat the plague. In the end, it was his father, Rayn of the Celtwyld, who risked sacrificing his own life to stop the disease once and for all. Not destroy it, for that had become impossible, but to simply “tame” it so that it no longer caused a problem, no more than a runny nose on occasion. The battle had been won, and the worlds again found peace... more or less.

And now that there was peace, there was time for learning. And to learn, all one had to do was look into the eyes of the little statues, at least for an hour a day, and the statues would tell you what you needed



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to know. You could learn languages, the names of all the stars, new skills. It took time and practice, but there was no one to organize what you needed to learn each day. Oh, his parents, just like many others, still made frequent recommendations. But no one told children what they had to learn. They just let their natural curiosity flow to where it wanted to go, and everything worked out all right. Then, after the learning, there were the presentations. You could join the competitions, exhibit art, practice for battle. It was all possible, and it encouraged people to grow and be their best.

And, deep inside each teacher, was a huge list of almost every mind that had ever lived among humanity. A personality profile, a map of their brain and personality. You could, to a certain extent, reach back through time and speak to someone who lived a thousand years ago. It wasn't them, of course, and they never pretended to be real. But some of those persona's were useful, pleasant, even fun.

And one such personality was Peyoth.

"My project, and thank you for asking Destiny, is going well. I've effectively finished construction of the light form body, the "assimilation". Now we just need to shoot it full of energy, and I can begin the final testing protocols."

"How long will that take?"

"A couple of weeks."

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“I’m impressed,” Destiny said. “Isn’t this usually a completing project for final studies in sentience and artificial life?”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but I just find it interesting.”

“Well, I, for one, look forward to stretching my legs once in a while!” Peyoth smiled. “I hope this project brings you satisfaction, young master.”

“Indeed, it has.” Blayd switched on the light stone, a wide dais that could have served just as easily as a low dining table. Above it a glimmering humanoid form coalesced into existence, beginning with bones, muscles, skin and clothes. The internal organs were replaced with a wide array of useful devices and tools made out of light. He even left some space for carrying things. At long last, a dignified man stood there, the image of the ancient servant of the Venfirth; Peyoth, dressed in the simple robes of a high-ranking servant of the nation where he lived, the Celtwyld.

“Are you ready?” Blayd asked Peyoth.

He grinned, “Why do you ask?”

“Just pretending you’re really going to become my helper?”

“Young master, I am always your helper!” He said in false indignity. “And every memory we share is inside the teachers, so wherever the light form body goes, we will be together.”

“I know, I know,” Blayd agreed. But he was still a little nervous.

“Well, I guess there’s no point in waiting. Let’s power it up.”

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Lightning sizzled along Destiny's spine.

"No, Destiny!" Blayd shouted, hoping she was only joking. "That's not the kind of power we need."

She hopped back, grinning.

Activating the conduit, a gentle light began to flow into the butler's glowing form. Peyoth, the illusion still stood there, looking calm and dignified, and slightly impressed.

After only a few seconds, the other butler, the one made of light, opened his eyes. He blinked, and looked around. Then he spoke, "Very good young master! I am Peyoth, and I am here to s-"

He was cut tragically short as his head exploded in a blinding flash of light that tasted annoyingly of singed hair and failure.

"Oh no!" Blayd mourned, "that took *weeks* to build!"

Destiny was laughing.

"Hey!" he shouted at her, his voice carrying his upset.

She stopped laughing immediately, and wrapped her serpentine scales around him, patting him on the head gently with her feathered wing. "Sorry, Blayd. Yes. I know it hurt. But you can fix it. Whenever you are ready, you can fix it."

Blayd sighed; they both had so much to learn! But he knew his dragon was keen to have him try again just as he wanted her to perfect her skills as well. So, with Destiny's help he deactivated the broken assimilation, and began to rebuild.

## Trouble

Something was approaching. Something wrong.

They were trying to relax together, lying under the warm, bright clouds. He wiggled down, always feeling comfortable and welcome among her iridescent, scintillating scales and soft, firm feathers. Her voice, always mild and pleasant, pierced the shroud of colors that accompanied every voice. It pierced the shroud of colors that accompanied every voice, and thus it always made sense. Destiny, his best and only friend, yawned.

But try as he might, *he* was not feeling very relaxed. He was worried. He'd tried to distract himself by being busy, but time and time again he found himself staring once more at the orb. Something was happening. Something big. A year had passed, and he hadn't had to say a word to the arrogant princess in all that time, for which he was deeply thankful. It meant he had more time to study, and that had given him time this week to realize that something was very, very wrong.

"What are you *doing*, my boy?" she asked.

He laughed. "I'm still not *your* boy," he reminded her with a grin.

"Then what are you doing, my very best friend?"

He sighed, "Orb gazing."

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“No, and you know that’s not what I meant!” She sounded wise above her twelve years, and always would, the memories of millions of ancestors inside her dragon mind. “What are you looking at *this* time? And why, Divinity reveal, are you stressing out on such a beautiful cloud-cloaked day!”

He sighed again, “I guess... I’m looking for patterns.”

She was silent for a moment. “I have no idea what’s been going on in your head recently, but this really has you worried, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t reply. He *was* worried. Gazing at tomes of information every second, he found patterns imposing themselves on his mind. Something was wrong, and it was only just beginning. Something was wrong with the dragons.

He knew he could not lie to her, “Oh! It’s just... I first noticed it almost a month ago... something is happening Destiny. I don’t think anyone else has noticed yet. Look, when I gaze into the sphere, when I clear my mind and just let it take in everything the orb has to offer, I see patterns.”

“You mean synesthesia?” she asked.

“No, gazing actually helps to cut out the sensory mess of my mind! Look, the amount of information the sphere can handle is vast, more than a human mind can memorize in a lifetime. It is running programs through the obelisk in the center of this world, translating every conversation, recording trade, analyzing every piece of data on

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this world and then reanalyzing its own analysis. It's beautiful; I wish you could see it."

"Sometimes, thinking about my mother, I think I can," Destiny told him.

He nodded. "Well, something is happening. I'm not sure what. But I can feel it; I can smell it, these past few days. Like burnt cinnamon or a dark blotchy green. I'm trying to figure out what is going on."

"I take it, then, that you don't think it is a good thing?" Destiny asked.

"Just last week my father had an argument with Darkwing. This morning I hear Venwith struck Wildvoice. Something is happening here, Destiny. Something to do with the dragons. And I'm going to find out what it is."

"And you think you can find out using just that little orb."

He paused before responding, needing to be as accurate as possible, "I am hoping, for what else have I got to work with?"

"So, what do you see?"

"I don't know. Nothing yet. Just a sense, a premonition. Something is coming. Something not good. It's almost like... an illness of some kind."

"An illness?" Destiny shrank away. "Like the plague almost wiped out everyone just a generation ago, and would have except for people your parents and their dragons; General Jayd and the Patron

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Darkwing, and high wiseman Rayn and the redeemed prisoner, Ironfang.”

“Yes! Well no... it’s *like* an illness. Like the plague of old... but not like it. I’m not sure. I’m studying everything I can about the plague because I am going to make a difference if it ever comes back.”

“But surely you know that is impossible!” Destiny said.

Blayd nodded, “In this world? Ha; nothing is impossible.”

Destiny shook her head, and he gazed right into the sphere. There he saw, dancing beyond the crackling sounds he knew did not exist, the entire life code of the most destructive disease known to the galaxy. It was made, long ago, from an altered life strand of the immune cells of a dragon. Now, it existed as an inert form. The codons that allowed it to adapt and invade any cell known were gone, the aggressive reproduction programming forever dormant. But ‘impossible’ was a word humanity had long since abandoned once they’d met the dragons. Anything was possible. If the disease returned it would take control of the minds of men and dragons, and lay their fair cities to waste. It would turn their entire worlds to dust.

He was *not* going to let that happen again.

Suddenly a new pattern began to surface along his consciousness. It was a flow in the attentions of a thousand or so key individuals in the country.

“Wait a moment, what is this?”

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“What is what?” Destiny replied, tensing up.

There was something happening, something out of the ordinary. Something that broke with the usual pattern. “There are people heading towards the conclave of the dragons. Important people. Look, my mother. And father... Lady Snow... wow, that’s all of them!”

“You think they have called a conclave of the dragon riders?”

“No, we would all know. This is it, Destiny! We have to go to that meeting!”

Her scaled form slid out from under him in an instant, sending him painfully on the floor. The silicate sphere bounded on the hard stone, but Blayd wasn’t bothered; they were almost unbreakable.

“Go to a meeting, without an invitation? At the conclave? Are you mad, boy?” Her tone was irritated, and condescending.

For a moment, just a brief instant, he wondered if it *was* mad. But there was a compulsion. He had to know. If the dragons were sick... he really had to know.

But Destiny would not know what he was thinking.

“Please... I know you can do it!”

She hid her head in shame, “Don’t make me try this again, Blayd. You know I fail every time I do!”

But this mattered. It really mattered, for everyone. His hands wrung themselves together and he experienced something like a mild, incessant fear. “You can, I *know* you can do this!”



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“No, I can’t. Farwing was the mightiest dragon Pearl by the time he learnt how to use his breath of bending space to create a portal.”

“Please, you must try! If only you can get us in to the outer sanctum, I know we will be able to make our way closer. I need you, Destiny! I need you to try.”

“I can’t, not even for you...”

“Not even, if it was going to help save the world?”

She straightened up, and turning around him once, growled. “I see you’re not putting this down, little boy. Ah! Very well, if it’s to save the world, I will try once more!”

They hid from the sun, finding a covered area where no one seemed to be looking on. The sound of thunder was not unusual in these parts, the focus of dragondom and human culture on the world. Other dragons could breathe lightning, or the humans were testing their new inventions. So they hoped no one would mind another thunder.

“Very well, here we go!” she told him. “Take cover!”

It was unnecessary instruction. He had never told her, but probably didn’t need to, that he found her lightning unbearable. It tasted like over-salted butter whenever he heard it. He knelt down, covered his ears as tight as he could, and waited out the discomfort.

The sizzling crackles grew as Destiny summoned the power into her maw. Tall spines flicked up her back, trailing the purple lightning

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back into the ground. The air inside her mouth seemed to twist and pull as she tried to manipulate space itself. Then she flew into a slow circle.

But she was too slow, and the portal never completely formed.

“Not to worry, try again,” she whispered out loud to herself.

Again, the lightning crashed, and he hoped they weren’t gathering too much attention to themselves yet. However, this time, she was a little too fast. The resulting explosion threw them both against the far wall.

He was too winded to say, *Try again*.

She bent down, the first to recover, and licked his face with her forked tongue. It was a display of compassion, and sympathy.

“I think I actually felt it that time,” she said with determination. “I’ve got this. I’ve got this. I can do this, I can feel the lightning. There is no more time to be afraid. I am Farwing. I am lightning. I am one with all of space!”

The lightning was crackling more powerfully than ever before, and she didn’t even seem to notice. He looked down, and was amazed to see for the first time that stones nearby began to levitate in the interrupted gravity. Blayd look up, uncovering his ears, too enchanted to be overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. She was going to do it, this time, he was sure she was going to do it!

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The purple lightning cracked around her. Leaping up from the ground to encircle the flying dragon. She floated in a gentle circle, and sure enough, a portal snapped into form in the air within.

“You did it!” he squealed.

“I... did...” she smiled.

“Come on, let’s go!”

It was a portal all right, and he could tell it led right to where he’d shown her. He was so proud of her.

Lifting him up carefully so as not to touch the ill-formed edges, she carried him across.

## The council

They were in the darkness.

“Aren’t you afraid someone will find us here?” she said.

“No, I played an old trick for which my mother is famous, I checked to make sure no guards or guardians were in this part of the conclave. It looks like they really want to keep the meeting a secret. They have absolutely no security.”

“That is odd. Very,” Destiny agreed. “So now what?”

“Now, I wish we had a staff, so that we could try one of father’s sequesters. But as we don’t, and I’m not really very good at it, we’ll have to do things the old-fashioned way.”

“Sneak?” she suggested.

“Sneak. Though I might be able to bend some of the light. Should make us partly invisible.”

“Then do so,” she obliged him.

It took a moment, and he had to be very careful not to set off any of the wards while bending light within the conclave boundaries. But after a few moments, they were mostly invisible.

“So, to the conclave?” Destiny asked.

“Let’s go.”

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She flew in almost complete silence, carrying him. He didn't dare breathe, grateful no dragons yet at this meeting were known for their excellent hearing. All dragons had a special gift, or talent. And the older they became, the more talents they developed, especially after their one-thousandth birthday or so, where they decided either to pass away, or to become an even more powerful dragon; a noble. Gifted with unquenchable curiosity, the nobles often surpassed many hundreds of human scholars in exploring the depths of natural law, breaking new ground with their discoveries, harnessing new powers humanity had never imagined. It was how, millennia ago, they had first learned they could travel by the invisible golden threads that stretched between the worlds and upon which dragons and men could travel the vast distances in only a few breaths.

But it was more than a few breaths to reach the outer chambers of the conclave. He watched their reflection in the glittering crystals that grew along the pathway, becoming more and more numerous, and hoped they did not give away the uninvited guests today.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't realize how close Destiny had taken him. They were high above the central conclave, looking down on the assembled dragons and riders. Both his parents were there, Ethnomancer and Stormbreath, and every dragon rider of the central thirty and their dragons. With them came Wenthoc, high chief of the council of chiefs. There was the head scholar of this world. With dread

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suspicion he saw the head Wisewoman was here as well, chief of births and healings. This was an important meeting and, for reasons unknown, it was entirely a secret.

Then he saw her. The spoilt brat. The bully: Gayl, princess of Pearl.

“What is she doing here!” he whispered in disgust.

Destiny had to look around a bit before she realized who he meant. “You two really do love to hate each other, don’t you?”

*Don’t get me started*, he thought.

They waited a hundred breaths in silence, trying to make out something in the babble below. People were concerned, that much was clear.

An unconscious thunder rumbled around the conclave, bringing with it bright sparks of light Blayd knew only he could see. The noise brought the room to silence.

It was Darkwing, head of the dragon conclave and patron of all dragons on Pearl. He rose up like a shadow from the stones, his massive wings so large they filled the entire cavern and even beyond, trailing into whispers of smoke that had no end. His breath was a weakening fire that could both immobilize and kill, and his master of shadow grew daily. None dared challenge his power, though he was the youngest patron in the history of Pearl, and perhaps all the worlds. And his mother, Jayd, general of the military, was Darkwing’s bonded human.

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“Welcome, and abide in peace,” his impossibly deep voice told them. A blessing seemed to settle on the hearts of all who heard it. The room seemed to turn a shade of mauve when he spoke.

“Darkwing, why did you call us?” Caspina, the insufferable princesses’ brave and kindhearted father, spoke first.

“Good king, I have dire news. The results of the studies of the Matron of Sanmarellis and their scholars has concluded. As well you all know; there has been an illness of sorts among the dragons for this past two weeks.”

*Hmm, scoffed Blayd, I sensed it two weeks before that!*

Darkwing continued. “As well you know we have all felt it. It is a poison in the heart, a ringing in the ears! This noxious voice that speaks dissonance to rider and dragon alike!”

“Please, speak clearly,” Caspina begged.

Darkwing paused. He seemed annoyed with the king. Deeply annoyed, more that he wanted to be. But he continued, “And the results are simply this – the bond between men and dragons... is dying.”

The assembled warriors gasped; their dragons growled. Each tightened their grip on the other, a few clutched on entirely as though for dear life.

“Impossible,” General Jayd, his mother, said.

“Have you not lived to see greater miracles?” Darkwing told her. “Besides, is not the witness of your own heart convincing enough? You

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still hear my thoughts; you still know my desires. But feel it! It is as if we are growing apart! Our desires were once as one, now we must put effort in to agree. And mark my words, all of you, if you haven't already noticed – this curse is getting worse.”

They now broke out in babbled confusion, each questioning, or denying. Blayd had to cover his ears to stop the bright explosions flashing in front of his eyes.

“I will never, ever unbond from my dragon. I think I'd rather die!” someone proclaimed.

“How long, can it be reversed!” another shouted.

“Curse Thiaz, they have never told us truth!” another claimed.

Darkwing's growl brought them all to silence. He took a step, looking out, the pain unhidden on his face. “I do not know how long we have, and I do not know what to do.”

The voices continued, and one little voice managed to cut through the crashing lights. It was the princess, “I don't understand, father. If the dragons unbond, what's so bad about that?”

Darkwing stared down at her in pity. As he drew his breath to speak the others fell silent. “You mean, aside from the agony of losing your own soul? If that alone is not misery enough ... But I am sure as the hearts of men and dragons divide, as pride and greed take root without the steady influence of a love borne of the deepest union...”



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he paused, lowering his massive head so that he was only a few lengths in front of her. “There will be war.”

To her credit, she didn’t even flinch, or gasp. She just stood there, looking puzzled. Looking like she didn’t really believe him. “But, is there nothing? Cannot the mighty Rayn use the white staff and heal the bond?”

At this point his father spoke, “I have already divined that I cannot prevent this curse, only stall it. Each of the nine worlds has been contacted this day with similar news and they are dealing with this problem in their own way. Until we find out what is *causing* this curse, we just have to deal with each day as it comes.”

“But no *cause*? There *must* be a reason!” the princess shouted. “I am not about to allow this world to fall apart again, and I will never, never, allow men and dragons to turn against each other!”

“Neither will I,” Darkwing vowed, gazing meaningfully over at his rider, Jayd. “But history has already taught us that not all will listen to the voice of reason, even though it be spoken by the patron. Once word gets out that the dragonriders are no longer bonded to their dragons all will correctly surmise the power of the riders is in question. They will rebel against us. This will lead to resentment for, in their hearts, each race has always felt themselves superior to the other. They will abandon each other, or, at worst, enslave or destroy them.”

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Again, the room descended into babble. Among it all one voice continued to call, unanswered. It was the princess, “I’m not going to let this happen. I’m *not* going to let this happen!”

Blayd shrank away from the confusion. He felt the panic rising in his throat; his breathing seemed to become his enemy. “I don’t understand... the bonding? Then... it’s not the plague? No, now I think about it, it cannot be the plague at all. I haven’t studied the bonding, how am I supposed to help!”

Destiny shoved him against the wall; he hadn’t even noticed how the colors had begun to shine against them once more. They were becoming visible.

“Shh, tshhh, shh, shh,” she chided him. She was young, but incredibly clever. “So? It’s not the plague. Thank the Divine! What are you so worried about? You can handle this, yes, I know you can. You are such a clever boy. Go on, study the bonding!”

His breath steadied in Destiny’s iron glare, and he wondered again at the hypnotic power she seemed to have over him. She was right, however. So, it wasn’t the plague? That was a *good* thing. It was time to study the bonding.

“Yes, you’re right. Very well then. Come on Destiny, back to the college. Let us study the bonding.”

And he couldn’t hear Destiny whisper to the wind as he ran silently from the conclave, the break in her voice betraying just how

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keenly she meant it, “And then, perhaps, you can tell me why we haven’t bonded yet...”

## Option

Five days flew by. News still hadn't reached the general populace, but the people were beginning to ask questions. A dragon had refused to go on guard duty; a caravan was late arriving from Ethphraim. Every waking hour, and each moment of his sleep, Blayd had studied with Destiny, under the care of Peyoth who kept them both fed and made sure they got just enough rest. Five days still didn't seem to be enough time, and what was worse, it only seemed to invite more questions.

"I don't understand," Blayd protested, his head falling into his hands once more. "Here, the t41 gene is recorded as being vital to the development of cerebral structures in dragons that allow for bonding, yet here Gendolin admits it is absent in 54% of all electric type dragons, so how can that be possible!"

For a moment no one spoke.

"As mentioned, paradoxes and anomalies are commonly and frequently detected in all human records." Peyoth explained. "The world of human knowledge is not yet finished--"

"I know that!" Blayd shouted. It wasn't that he was angry at his butler, he was angry at himself. Angry at wasting so many years studying everything but the bonding, and now it was the most important

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thing in the world he had only spent five days to catch up on it all. No human could do that.

“What are we going to do?” Destiny asked. She was laying on the floor, the most honest of them all when it came to admitting she was exhausted.

“We need to speak to an expert,” Blayd said.

“Who can we see?” she asked.

“Well,” Peyoth answered, “I see the chief medic has a very full schedule. One of his assistants perhaps... hmmm. Well, if people didn’t know something was wrong, they’re going to know it soon. The medics have been deployed without leave to all areas of the planet. So too are the military forces. It almost looks...” he refused to finish the sentence.

“How about your mother!” Destiny shouted with excitement.

“Dear hatchling,” Peyoth tutted. “You realize this is likely to be the most busy person of all.”

Blayd nodded, and stood. “No, we go see my mother.”

“Are you sure?” Peyoth almost begged. “You are her son, granted, but she-”

“If she does not have time for me before war breaks out, then we are as good as abandoned already. Come on Destiny. Let’s go.”

The dragon leapt up with unbridled enthusiasm to the wide-open window, clearly excited about being able to stretch her wings. Little

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sparks of lightning formed around her scales as if to say, *Hey, want me to form a portal?*

“Well, um, your mother has a lunch scheduled in four hundred breaths at the council,” Peyoth told them, trying to be a little bit helpful.

“Hey, human,” Destiny teased Blayd, “How many breaths do you think it will take us if we just flew.”

“At common velocity, accounting for current winds and trajectory. About three hundred.”

“See, with time to spare!” she said, and jumped off the balcony.

“Let us hope that may soon be said for us all,” Peyoth muttered, and went to clean the dishes.

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Three hundred and two breaths, by Blayd’s reckoning. There were far more accurate and intuitive ways of keeping time, but since his mother had formally imposed a standard measure based on the old reckoning on their world, it was the time he preferred to keep.

They found her in the head offices. She was with her beloved Darkwing, and together they were taking records. Warriors and clerks rushed about the buildings, and all the guards carried weapons. Destiny fell silent as they walked across the mezzanine. The mood here was tense.

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No one stopped them, and his mother seemed aware of their approach before they'd even arrived at the building. At the head of the dais Darkwing's shadow covered the entire building, even though it was just past midday. They were talking to the dragon diplomat Windfyrth, her rider Lady Snow being nowhere in sight, probably tending to her numerous children. After the dragon was dismissed, his mother asked the messengers, at least two with orbs still glowing, to stand aside. It was clear she had no real time for this meeting.

But, to Blayd, the matter was truly urgent.

He was twelve, almost a man, yet the urge to throw his arms around her was almost overwhelming.

She looked at him, holding him by his shoulders, respecting his need for distance. Her tired and bloodshot eyes were full of love, as though his presence was a breath of fresh air she desperately needed. She stood back. "Son, I am *happy* to see you."

He looked around at the chaos about them. "I need to ask you some questions."

"Please do."

"I... don't really know where to begin."

She smiled, "Neither did your father! Just start at the top."

So he did, "I don't understand how the bonding works. I've been trying really, really hard and studying every day but there's still so

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much we don't know and I don't know how much I don't yet know but I'm trying and I just have so many questions and –”

She cut him off with the forcefulness of a general. “Slow down there, son. What did you say? Why are you studying the bonding?”

Already he knew he'd blown it. Suddenly he wished, really wished, he'd at least thought about what he was going to say before he opened his mouth. Maybe even talked to Destiny first.

But he hadn't.

“Why are you studying the bonding, son?” she asked him directly.

“I just... you know, curious,” he lied.

Well, half a lie.

Unexpectedly, she smiled. “You always were clever, weren't you? So, you've figured out what is happening already? Took the high priestess of the Vestrans up till yesterday, so I'm impressed you're only a day away. The news is about to hit, son, and we're preparing to give an announcement. I'm impressed you figured it out on your own.”

She grinned, but he did not. She had no idea, and she still hadn't answered his question. “But the bonding. Doesn't anyone know why it is failing?”

Her face darkened, “No, son. No one knows.”

“But the priests, why can't they just divine why it is happening?”



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“They’re doing everything they can, I assure you,” she said, her face grim. No one was more responsible for the priests than his father, and he knew, no one would take this task more personally than he. He had neither been seen or heard from in five days.

“So... no one knows.”

She shook her head, and the tiredness seemed to come flooding back. “No one. I can have a student of the college give you some time, if you’d like.”

He was about to protest; a new student was unlikely to ever know what he needed to know.

“And that is all I can do for you now.”

Reluctantly, he nodded, the messengers already shifting their weight forward in expectation of talking to her.

“But there is one thing you can do for me,” she told him. “Check in on your younger sisters and brother. Make sure they are all right. You are the oldest, and you must be responsible for them if... you know...”

But she couldn’t seem to bring herself to say, *If everyone and everything you know and love is destroyed.*

Yet he wasn’t ready to take on the responsibly of his younger siblings. It was easy enough for him to forget they even existed between his orb staring and time with his dragon friend.

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A messenger seemed to sense his hesitation, “General?” he asked, voice polite.

She sighed, and placed a hand on his shoulder, “These are crucial times, Blayd. We’re doing all we can to stay any coming calamity. We’re going to need you to be a part of that. Will you do what is necessary?”

“Yes, yes of course mother.”

She touched his shoulder, eyes speaking more love and gratitude than words could. Then she spun on her heels and, without looking back, went to speak to the messengers once more.

With a sorrowful heart, Blayd walked away. He knew that talking to a student was going to do him no good, but where was he to start? Who could teach him what he needed to know, what no one knew, about the science of the bond between humans and dragons?

In a rare moment of inspiration Destiny seemed to know his thoughts, “I bet I know someone who’d be able to answer your questions.” She told him, slithering to place her head in front of his, “The Giants.”

## Message to the Giants

Blayd wiped sweaty hands on his tunic. It was impossible to keep himself from jiggling his legs. He was nervous.

But Destiny had been right. She'd seen through the confusion to make the only suggestion that made sense in this madness. He'd done everything he could to prepare, but he needed help, or at the very least, courage.

The meeting was about to start. Only yesterday the news had gone out, only moments before it could spiral out of control on the telepathic communications around the world. Thiaz figured it out first, then Pearl. Recorded messages of peace and comfort were broadcast across all standing worlds. And now, since the heralds were placated and the populace informed, they were hosting an open forum to allow the communities of all seven worlds to contribute towards the looming problem. A problem the announcements had downplayed with a falsehood that was almost transparent. The word "war" wasn't used once. But "peace", "cooperation" and "Divinity" were overdone tremendously.

So now the people were allowed to speak to their leaders.

Blayd knew this was his best, and possibly only, opportunity. He only hoped his father would give his voice preference as a son.

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He waited out the first four hours of debates and informing as patiently as he could. He could sense his time was coming. The minds of the people were switching on to other things, returning to their normal lives in the hope that someone smarter or more interested than themselves would rise up to solve this problem for them. Perhaps that was necessary; everyone had a job to do.

Indeed, the meeting was beginning to look like it was about to close.

“... we are thankful for all you have done, for your energy and prayers, and your commitment to deal with this most grievous situation in a measured and responsible manner. We pledge ourselves to hear any and all suggestions-”

That was his cue.

He stood up, and shouted, “I have one!”

The high priest was momentarily stunned, and paused a breath longer when he'd seen who had spoken. The old man looked over to his leader, the High Wiseman Rayn of the Celtwyld.

“Come on, Destiny, this is our only chance,” Blayd whispered, nudging her down towards the center of the room. She floated over the heads of assembled humanity with ease.

Blayd looked at his father. It would have been so easy to brush him aside, to draw attention away from him and his dragon and simply

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carry on as if an interruption had never happened. For a tense moment Blayd held his breath, hoping his father would listen.

His faith paid off, with a welcoming wave, he invited his oldest son forward.

Blayd heard the voices explaining, *The council recognizes Blayd of the Celtwyld, son of Wiseman Rayn and General Jayd.*

Men and scholars stood aside so that he could address his father, and, though he tried desperately not to think about it, the greatest minds on his entire world.

His father stood up, and nodded at him as he might a real man. “Speak, Blayd of the Celtwyld.”

He wanted to say, father, *I know what to do!* His heart burned to shout it. But he’d put a bit more thought into it this time, and this was not the place for familiar conversation.

“Honored High Wiseman. I bring before you a proposition. Long ago, eons before the plague, before even humanity and dragonry spread among the local stars, we came from far away. We know there was a time when humans and dragons did not know each other. We know the dragons, like fair Destiny here, were made from clay by a race known only as the Giants.”

Here, his father made a puzzled expression, and Blayd could feel the attention of his audience fracture and split and a thousand questions

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and dissention entered their minds. *Why would he mention the Giants?* They wondered.

He stuttered, but continued, leaning on Destiny's firm head for support. "We know... we know this mighty race formed the dragons long ago. Only the giants knew the dragons perfectly. Only they-"

A scholar cut him off, an old man, "Surely, young man, you are not suggesting we try and visit the Giants?" A ripple of laughter flowed around the audience, beginning at the old man.

That was it. He was done. Blayd felt his confidence and his heart dying.

Rayn looked at the old man, and was clearly unimpressed. He stepped forward, and put his hand on Blayd's shoulder. Despite all protocol, he reached forward and cradled his head into his chest, holding him. Then he reached down, and held Destiny by the face with impressive kindness, and he kissed her forehead. Then, in front of the entire planet, he knelt down in front of them.

"Blayd! What courage it must have taken you to stand here, in front of us all, and tell us of your bold plan! That is the kind of courage that had made Pearl rise above the ashes of the plague to govern with wisdom in the worlds once more. And your plan, so creative! That is the kind of ingenuity and wisdom we will need once more to battle a curse we still have no idea from where it springs, or how to deal with it. I, for one, will give your suggestion great consideration, because,

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right now, I don't know what to do! To have only just regained the trust of dragons at the dawn of your life... and now to lose it..." he openly admitted tears in his eyes. Destiny reached up, and helped him wipe them away. "What is more precious to us, than the lives we touch, and that touch our own? What would I not surrender, to keep you, and the love of my deepest friends, little Destiny, and Darkwing, and Ironfang... Thank you, thank you Blayd, for having the courage to speak up today. Thank you for coming here and telling us your idea. I hope, I pray, that every wise soul on Pearl can have your kind of courage, and creativity, today."

They hugged, and the people clapped. Blayd couldn't help but grin at the support of his father, and how he'd put that old man in his place.

He walked from that area, a smile wider than the oceans of Ethphraim in his heart.

## Intruder

That night, Destiny woke with a growl.

It tore Blayd from his dreamless sleep, and set his emotions on edge. The night was dark, but someone was in the room with them. He looked out of the sanctity among her feathers to his bedroom in the palace quarters. No one was supposed to be here.

No one *could* be here, because the wards and guardians would never allow it. And those with authority above the guardians had no reason to be here.

His heart thundered with fear, and he wondered what was happening. He sensed a sequester nearby, and Destiny growled again, pressing herself up against him, protecting him with her life.

At his mental command the lights began to glow, “Show yourselves!” he demanded.

A girl’s voice huffed, “I was going to anyway.”

He blinked in the glowing light as enigma was swept away, and there saw two girls dressed for travel. It was princess’s best friend, ‘Orong’ was it? And the worst person in the world: the princess.

She had a wiseman’s staff, which explained the sequester that had made her mentally invisible to him. The staff was glowing rose



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magenta as was her color. She and her friend each had a sturdy back pack on, travel boots, and cloaks.

He didn't like the thought of what that might mean, and he had no idea why they were here.

But he kept his manners, and said nothing.

"Good. Glad to see you finally learned how to shut up," the princess said. "Blayd. I'm only going to say this once, and I don't want any silly answers. I need your help. Will you help me?"

"What?" he asked.

"Told you," her friend said.

The princess sighed with exasperation. "Look, dumb brain. Look. Ah! Fine, I'll explain it then. The long way or the short way."

"Short," he said, wanting her to get the point.

"You're coming with me," she stated.

He raised an eyebrow. She was going to be queen one day, but that didn't give her permission to boss him around like that. Destiny and he shared a look.

"And the long explanation?" Destiny asked.

"Ahh!" she said in frustration, taking an orb from one of the interspatial pockets of her vest. "I didn't really want to show you this, but you need to see it. I've been sitting in on every single torturous conference and meeting they've had since this whole thing began two weeks ago."

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“It started at least two weeks before that,” he told her.

She was silent.

“Anyway,” she then continued, “I think you have a right to know what your father really thinks about your speech today. He isn’t going to do it. None of them think it’s wise or even possible to seek out the help of the Giants, see for yourself.”

She showed him a summary of the meetings, and he learned probably more than he should. But she was right. His father still spoke well of him, still meant what he’d said about courage and creativity. But the words on the dais were more to placate him. It stung, a little. But he still loved his father, and wanted to respect his opinion even it was different to his own.

Even if it was wrong.

“So, they’re really not going to do it,” he admitted.

Destiny gasped.

The princess nodded.

“So,” he wondered, “why are you here then?” Though he was afraid he already knew.

“Because they’re wrong,” the princess told him. “They’re all wrong. Going to see the Giants is *exactly* what we need to do. I’ve seen it in a vision. I’ve confirmed it by the staff. This is only going to get worse, and we need to go *now*.”

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He looked at her, and still hated her. But right now, she was the only person in the galaxy that seemed willing to believe in him.

It was almost too impossible to imagine.

He looked over at Destiny, and she looked back at him with her deep blue eyes. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to be her rider, but he'd heard both his parents speak about how much it meant to them. He trembled at the thought of them loosing that, and of what that would mean to every one of the eight worlds if they did.

It didn't matter if the princess hated him. This was too important. He looked over at the annoying, self-impressed girl. This was too important to let her insufferability get in the way.

And she was all dressed up to leave right now.

"Fine," he said. "I'll get my things."

"You need to pack light!" she insisted.

He rolled his eyes where she could not see them, "I know that already. And I suppose you have thought about a way to get there?"

"We were hoping you were going to tell us that," her friend said.

He felt his anger rise, knowing they'd just offered him hope and then dashed it again. "So, what, you come up here all ready to go and admit you don't even know how?? You're just soo... gargh! I don't even know how! Look, I've plotted out the most likely course through to the center of the galaxy, but even on Starwing it would take almost a hundred years! I was hoping Dad had something... the Tarpaur?" he

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asked. The Taupaur was his best hope, a massive intersystem colony ship that was supposed to improve upon the one that brought humanity here in the first place.

Gayl shook her head, “Still no luck with the experiments, they cut funding last year.”

He didn’t know that, “Really? That’s disappointing. Can’t we use the Deberrin?”

Her friend disagreed this time, “They won’t give us permission to use the wormhole, and if they did it still wouldn’t get you close enough to the galactic center to get there in under a decade.”

He shook his head; this did not look hopeful.

“What about the Mahatma alignment?” the princess asked.

He scoffed. “I did think about that, but you still would need a half a year, and it might well be a one-way journey.”

“The what alignment?” Destiny asked.

“Mahatma,” Blayd explained. “An extremely fortuitous alignment of several of the governing black holes at the center of our and the near galaxies that presents a short lived ‘highway’ that runs exactly the way we need to go. It’s very lucky.”

“It’s more than luck, I say,” her friend stated.

Blayd continued. “But you’d still need to take countless hops between the black and gold threads in a cautionary half-state. You’d need to a light body, and none of us have dragons with that ability.”

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“What about with an archetype?” Gayl asked.

He stopped. Of the nine tools of men there existed but one archetype each. It was the perfect manifestation of the classes of industry and being. His father owned one, the staff, the ideal and flawless expression of all that it meant to hold the staff; the office of community and healing. Each world typically held only one archetype, and it was well known they chose their wielders, and not the other way around. The nine archetypes had been brought by humanity when it first arrived in this private corner of the galaxy. To wield an archetype was to become famous, and sometimes decades went by without a worthy wielder.

“You... I knew you were an artisan, but I didn’t know you had an archetype,” he said, feeling rather astonished.

“I... don’t”, she admitted, and he wished he could just hit her. “But I know where to ask. We’re going to the white orb at Chalcedonah.”

“Wait... what, you’re going to break into Chalcedonah, steal their archetype, and hope it accepts you, then leave on a journey that still could take the better part of your life on the frail hope the Giants are willing, or even able to, help you? They, I can’t believe I’m saying this, they haven’t been seen in over ten thousand years...”

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She didn't pause, "I will not be a queen of the dead. *I* know what must be done to save *my* people, to help all the worlds. *I* will heal the bond between dragons and men if it *kills me* to do so."

"Or, to put it simply, 'Yes'," her friend said with a cheeky grin.

He shook his head, "Even if you don't have a dragon of your own?"

She paused, the look of pain crossing her face reminding him of how he'd once used similar words to hurt her. "Yes."

For the first time in his life, he began to find her courage and determination... admirable. "OK. We've got to try then."

"'OK?' her friend teased them, the one from Sanmarellis. "You speaking Ethphraimese already?"

He was too busy packing to smile.

Destiny slid up to him, "You sure?" she asked.

"We've got to try," he whispered. "If nothing else has worked so far, then this might be the only thing that will. Besides, I've got an idea. If we can get the archetype I think the princess is talking about we might be able to shave quite a bit of time off our journey. If I'm right."

She nodded, and got ready to fly. Dragons didn't need to pack anything. "So, when do we leave," she asked.

Suddenly, a loud alarm sounded. Dragons took to the sky within moments. "What is this about?"

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“Something is wrong...” the princess said. “Oh, they’re calling for me at the council. Not yet, we can’t leave yet. Wait until they’re distracted again. Stay close, stay close to me.”

## The visitors

If anyone was suspicious about the way Blayd of the Celtwyld was suddenly hanging out with the crown princess, no one said anything. They were too busy looking at the massive noble dragons that were approaching Pearl along the golden threads. They arrived in only heartbeats, and with great diplomacy flew low in the sky toward Mount Nelwyn peak, where the great conclave of the dragons lay.

“Where are they from?” Orong asked.

“I don’t know,” Blayd answered as they ran along in the dark night, joined moments later by a royal escort of elite dragonriders. They swept up the princess, and Blayd rode with Destiny. But with the added weight of the girl of Thiaz, his young dragon was not quite able to keep up.

“Hurry, Destiny,” the princess’s friend urged her. “We have to find out what’s happening!”

Destiny struggled diligently. Blayd knew it wasn’t enough. “Shelter us in the upper city,” he told her. “We’ll scry from there.”

“You think you can scry from all that far away? And what about the wards and interdictions?” the girl asked.



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“Oh,” Destiny huffed, turning in her course, and beginning to glide down towards the upper city. “Don’t worry, my boy has learned some very clever things.”

The girl was silent, but Destiny’s faith and honesty made him glow with pride.

Fifty breaths later they were hiding themselves in a tower. He didn’t need a dragon orb to scry; he’d learned long ago how to do it with his own. Scrying was one of the rare times when his senses didn’t go crazy, so he spent much longer practicing it than most.

They knelt on the floor, Destiny curling around them for a little privacy. The girl sat much closer than she needed to. “How are you going to do this?”

“Easy. Look, I can patch you in as well. I learned a little secret from my mother, using the teachers. She made a place that only I can use, for when there’s an emergency.”

“You don’t suppose she has one for the captains as well?” the girl asked.

He looked up, he’d never thought she might have hidden places for others as well, but it made sense even if it did make him feel surprising jealous, “I suppose so.”

Their mind’s vision took them to the high towers, up to the conclave itself. There, Darkwing stood, his wings wide to welcome the

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strangers. They were circling the caldera of the old volcano, preparing to land.

“*Shah!* You did that quickly!” she said with a broad grin.

He smiled to himself.

The girl spotted the princess. “Can you get a message to Gayl?” she asked.

He nodded, moving their vision in behind the throne they had set up for her. There, twenty or more elite soldiers of the world of Pearl stood, fully armed. It was a wonder they hadn’t hidden the princess, perhaps his father had sensed there was no danger to her, and told them not to?

*Blayd, Orong, is that you?* Gayl asked.

*Shah, twice!* Orong, the girl he was with, said again in surprise.  
*You found us quick!*

*Simple, you’re not being very subtle.*

*I was **trying** to get your attention,* Blayd complained.

*Let me help, here, use the auditory receptors on my headband.*  
She told them.

*Why don’t we just use your orb?* Orong asked her, probably trying to sound a little educated. The orb was much more thorough at recording and assimilating information.

*That would be too obvious,* Blayd told her.

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*Indeed*, the princess agreed. Perhaps the first time she'd ever agreed with him on anything. Ever!

He tried not to feel too smug about that.

A thunderous growl emitted from Darkwing, gathering everyone's attention. A powerful sequester went up over the mountain, and it took some serious effort, but Blayd was able to maintain his scrying, perhaps due to the princess's efforts and authority.

The foreign noble dragons landed. Blayd could see now that they each wore a bronze helmet on both dragon and rider. The dragons were simply huge, no match for the patron Darkwing of course, but still easily outclassing the average dragon several times over. Even the legendary dragon, redeemed prison Ironfang, would have been hard pressed to take any of them on one to one. They were clearly noble dragons, great leaders from whatever world they had come from. They must have travelled an incredible distance. Their bonded humanoids were lithe, with elongated limbs and strange, stone-like skin. They sat tall in their saddles, and simultaneously saluted with dignity.

With a gasp Blayd saw what each of the riders bore. They had matching armor on, similar in form to the ancient riders of old, but they were holding archetypes. *One each*. Blayd trembled, wondering how it was possible that another race would meet them with such an enormous display of power! Their leader held a diadem, similar to the princess, yet tremendously more powerful even to match the diadem of Thiaz

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itself. The second being had a staff, similar in color yet different in style to his father's archetype. Both glowed white in the presence of their brother staff. The third held an orb, small and white, yet thrumming with wisdom and power, just like the orb of Chalcedonah.

Blayd gulped down his nervousness. That other races existed was sensational enough, but that they still held all the powers of the archetypes, and the trust of dragon kind, meant they were truly powerful indeed.

The first looked around, not a trace of nervousness. With a nod he greeted the assembled warriors of Pearl. Then as he stood, the second rider waved his staff, and teleported him to the ground. He bowed low, placing both hands on his chest.

King Caspina was there now, and motioned for Blayd's father to greet the travelers.

Rayn stood before the strange warrior, his staff glowing brightly, and spoke, "Welcome to Pearl."

The being replied in a strange language none of them could understand.

Except his father, of course, "I was about to suggest the same thing. Yes, the trusting ritual."

The foreign warrior with the staff stepped forward to stand in front of his father, and together they performed a trusting ritual. Both staves lit up, and the men pulled them away swiftly.

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His father explained, “The archetypes are one of the same entity. They are striving to re-fuse, and I believe it would be dangerous to bring them to close together, or to have them touch each other; especially now in the full height of their powers. However, the foreign dragon riders have passed the ritual. They are safe to be trusted, for the time being.”

The king nodded, and the foreign priest walked back to his dragon, looking a little concerned.

Rayn offered the foreign warrior with the diadem a blessing, which he received, and immediately began to speak their language. “Citizens of the seven lights, whom we call the Settemun! I call myself blessed to be in your sight this day! We are Erioth, citizens of the far Well-spring, the land from whence you first passed through over eight thousand revolutions ago! We are infinitely pleased to see you, humanity, still standing.”

Caspina indicated Rayn should continue on their behalf, “We come through great pain, to buy peace this day. Four thousand revolutions spent in plague, yet indeed we still live.”

“But you aren’t in peace, are you?” the warrior claimed, his jaw tight and fist clenched. “Or we wouldn’t have risked so much to be here today.”

His father was silent. “Speak on,” he offered, the air in the room growing tense.

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The warrior paused, perhaps expecting his father to be insulted by his words, but he was not. “We come not in peace, but in war. That you have mastered the plague you brought upon yourself we are grateful for. But this ... new trouble... affects us all.”

“Your dragons are being cursed too, aren’t they?” The princess interrupted the entire meeting.

The being took a step forward, though his father didn’t let him proceed any further. The warrior bowed even lower than before, “Yes, indeed, beautiful young princess. The bond is dying among us as well.”

Blayd felt, rather than saw, the tremendous fear and pity well up in the young princess. But she did not speak. It surprised him, a little, that she could actually have compassion for such complete strangers.

“What do you mean?” Rayn said, still seeming very wary with the being who had just announced he had come with warlike intentions.

The warrior stood back, and looked at Rayn of the Celtwyld as if they were two adversaries who already reached a deeper understanding. “Know this, bold priest, that we would not have it this way. But it is your cause, and *ignorance*, that provokes us.” Here he began to shout, “Your ‘curse’ is spreading!”

The assembled warriors gasped.

The foreign warrior shouted, “By terms of the Indelible Treaty, we cannot interfere with your internal operations in any way! But know this, we Erioth will not sit idly by while the bond between our dragons

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and ourselves slips away from our grasp, and our citizens are turned to idolatry and riot! Either you root out these vermin among you, or we will!”

Rayn just stood there, not appearing threatened in any way. Warriors all around the room, however, brandished swords, and dragons roared. Even Darkwing emitted a threatening growl so deep and so loud the mountain shook.

Caspina held up his hand for silence, and the assembled warriors obliged him in an instant. When he spoke, his calm voice held a distinct, yet subtle, threat. “I cannot believe, after eight thousand years, *this* is how you greet us?”

The foreign priest answered, “We have given you sufficient time to contact us, but not in four thousand cycles have we heard from you! Once the plague was dealt with we expected some contact, but yet nothing. It is clear to us that you are now a decadent and fallen people. You are failing in your role, in the purpose for which you first came to this bountiful area of our shared galaxy.”

King Caspina grew red with rage. “I will NOT be threatened in my own conclave! We will NOT become slaves again to foreign powers!” The assembled warriors roared.

“Then do *something*!” the foreign warrior shouted. “Resolve this problem NOW, before it spreads to the entire galaxy!”

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The assembled warriors almost rushed forward, eager to slay any who would bring a message of war. The foreign warrior's diadem lit up, and it gave them pause to think. All knew what powers the archetype of the elemental diadem held, and none were keen to see a mountain torn up into the sky without pity or pause.

The princess stood, hoping to stay any coming violence. To her apparent surprise everyone fell silent. While not officially the queen, the fact that she would be the queen in four years' time gave her enormous influence and prestige.

And then, much to the horror and trial of her royal guard, she strode down off the throne and walked right towards the warriors, two honor guard with drawn swords going with her.

From her eyes, Blayd and Destiny got their first real good look at the alien warrior. He was aging, with a strong build and commanding expression. His body was hairless, and his stature tall. But his eyes seemed tired, as though he was under a great strain, or tired of living a life of war.

The princess, not even half his stature, walked right to within his arm's reach. "We're doing *everything* we can!" she almost squeaked in frustration, but her voice was clear, and bold. "Everything we can think of! Don't you realize this horror bleeds away in our hearts, keeping from us our sleep, haunting every waking thought? *How* can you come here and threaten us? If you have some power, some clue as to what we



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can do, will would give away *anything* to hear it! For to live without our dragons is to die.”

He sighed, and got down on one knee till her head was equal in height to his. The guards relaxed a touch. “As have we. But the bond is breaking as of seven of your days ago. We divined the cause was among you. Now, our only protection is the helm which bonds us to our dragons, but even now we feel it weakening among us. My people sent me with this missive, for I would not have war either.”

“Then please, I beg you of my people, let us study the helm and build our own! With this tool, we will be of a better courage to root out this curse from among us.”

He turned, and looked at his dragon, who shook his head. The warrior sighed again, as though he already knew. “We cannot, we cannot risk removing the helm and, of a truth, we are not permitted to share such wisdom with you at this time by our people. We are only here to deliver this message.”

She was silent, but within her heart boiled rage and frustration. It was clear she almost slapped him. But her efforts to control her rage turned to tears, and she pressed her wrists to her eyes to stop from crying in front of them all. “Then you are no friends to us,” she told him, and turning on her heels strode away. When she sat on the throne she spoke again, “If this is all any you have to say, then be gone, and

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do not expect us to show you any greater kindness than you have shown us today, should you ever dare return to threaten our people.”



### 4 Sunfire and Princess Gayl

The man shook his head, as if he expected it. Turning, he prepared to mount his dragon.

Blayd’s father, Rayn of the Celtwyld, spoke, “Are you sure you want this?”

The warrior paused, and spoke softly as if only Rayn would hear, “We have no other choice.”

“No other choice than war? Tell your people their own fear limits their options.”

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“Fear?” the warrior turned. “No, it is you who will *know* fear, when the twenty million wings we have stationed at the edge of your cluster of worlds descends to impose peace and order. The warriors of Erioth have never known fear, not in all the time you were hiding from a disease you made yourself!”

“No,” Rayn said, his voice soft, his eyes downcast. “Not fear of war, fear that patience may yet prove a more powerful weapon.”

The warrior looked at him with a puzzled expression, then shaking his head once more, turned and mounted his dragon. The three of them saluted again, though it made the warriors shout with anger and derision. Then the foreigners took to the sky, and taking hold of the golden threads, disappeared into the space above the clouds.

The conclave was in an uproar.

Orong was crying.

“Father,” the princess Gayl said, “I go to my room to pray.”

He nodded. Taking a priest’s arm, she had him teleport her right to where Blayd, Destiny, and the girl were hiding. The princess threw her arms around her friend and wept. “Go”, she told the priest, “I will be fine.”

He nodded.

And the princess stopped crying almost the instant he left. “This is perfect timing,” she muttered.

## Chalcedonah

Blayd found he had nothing to say about the strange and sudden change in the princess's behavior. *Perfect timing?* What on Pearl did she mean? And could she really fake-cry on demand like that?

"Blayd," the future queen ordered. "Have your dragon take us to Chalcedonah immediately."

He choked. He knew what she was planning, but was momentarily distracted that she still thought she could order him around.

"Look," she said, like an adult. "We don't have time for this. Take me. Now."

"I don't understand," Awoth said.

But Blayd did, "We're going to Chalcedonah to find where the archetype of movement and travel is, so we can steal it."

She gasped.

"You shouldn't need to speak such out loud," the princess chided him.

"But," Awoth protested, the smiling visage disappeared beneath a terrible frown. "How, I don't understand... what about me?"

"You stay here," the princess said without apology. "Keep people from asking questions. Unless we get a day's head start on our journey

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they will come after us, and they will make me come back. We're going on a long journey, this seer and I. And you need to stay here."

The girl blubbered in tears, hugging the princess fiercely. Whatever she said was lost in the other's hair, but it sounded like, "Be careful, I'm going to miss you too much!" or something.

He rolled his eyes. They didn't have time for this.

"Who will take care of you?" Awoth asked him.

"Destiny will," the princess answered.

"No, I won't, I can't!" the little dragon protested. "I'll be lucky if I can carry you between the worlds at all!"

The princess was about to argue when Blayd pulled out his orb and another stone. "Don't worry, I have Peyoth here. I've created a hologram, and he'll take care of us."

The answer must have satisfied the girls, because they both said nothing, and then Awoth changed the topic. "How am I supposed to stop them asking?"

"Just act natural. If anyone asked, tell them I'm praying."

She nodded.

The princess took off her sash, rolling it into a ball, and removing a handful of something pale. It looked like cheese. "I've prepared everything we need for a long journey," she seemed to promise Awoth. "We'll be fine, if we can get a head start. All right? You need to make sure--"

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She cut her off, “Well, just make sure you find Mintsy, she’s on Chalcedonah right now. If you take her with you, she can use her father’s dragon. I’m sure they won’t mind.”

The princess nodded, and without bowing or even an invitation sat on Destiny, who slithered into launching position without question. “We’ll be fine Awoth. Stop crying.”

“It’s just.... I can’t...”

Blayd shook his head. If she kept crying like this a healer would arrive and start asking questions.

Better to go now. He slipped onto his dragon’s back, making sure the princess slid further down and not he. “Go,” he told Awoth.

“Blayd,” the princess asked, drawing her staff from thin air. “Can you make some duplicates of us to fool the scrying orbs and guards? I’ll sequester our exit as best I can.” He nodded, and complied.

A breath later there was a mighty push against the ground, and then he felt the tug that was a dragon pulling on the invisible lines of power between the worlds, the “golden threads”. He thought only for a moment about how the matter in their bodies was changed by the event horizon to allow them to move faster than even light, relatively speaking. Pondering the miracle, he took a moment to glance downwards at the rapidly retreating vista.

His world. His home. It was disappearing, perhaps forever. There was a silent moment inside, and he was interested to find he did not

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feel afraid, just a little sad for those who were staying behind, and even more for those who would soon find out they'd left without saying goodbye. He wondered if this was how the great warriors of the past had felt, as the moment his mother had left to claim her dragon alone, or when his father had faced down the plague single handed.

But he had no time to ponder this, as the ground was soon covered in the clouds that blanketed and protected his world since forever, and in the next moment they were gone.

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Chalcedonah was known, rightly so, as the world of fire. It had no oceans, but it did rain around the mountains. The rest of the landscape was bloodtorn and battle-scared, and a world whose enormous tidal pull with the red gas giant it orbited refused to let it settle. It was a bold venture of their ancestors to settle this fertile and volatile land, and it had almost proved their undoing millennia ago when the plague had weakened them. But by the grace of the Divine, and the gifts of Pearl, they had reunited men and dragons, and formed a powerful and stable world government, and a strong interplanetary military.

So it was a gift of the divine that they were able to slip silently among the large stone vessels that protected their sky to arrive at the

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university nearest the conclave. The city around was growing rapidly, much faster than most planetary government centers, as the people of Chalcedonah recovered from the war with the Dragonmen and strove to reclaim their place among the seven worlds.

The city was huge, with large stone monoliths now strengthened against the daily earthquakes. Huge pillars of alabaster and onyx lead towards a large mezzanine, where men and dragons rested, sharing in each other's company and in each other's wisdom. But the object of their search was the archives, deep underground.

"I can feel the strength of the archetype from here," Gayl muttered.

"Really?" Blayd said, a little surprised. That she was a gifted artificer was well established, but to sense an archetype from this distance was still a little implausible.

It felt like she nodded. "There, in the prime auditorium. Thank the Chalcedonan for openly sharing their gifts."

They tried to appear inconspicuous, removing the invisibility but remaining sequestered. The princess wove an illusion around her using her own orb, seeming like a young man now. Blayd was quite impressed, it was a solid effort. But just to be sure, she drew a wide brimmed hat from her sash. It covered her eyes quite effectively.

They landed at the front doors, a width wide and ten widths high, decorated with borders of clear quartz. Even he could appreciate the



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exterior design ambitions of the most tectonically active world of the local.

They were admitted to the entrance, where a white clad scholar approached them. Blayd felt his nervousness rise.

*Let me talk to her,* the princess told him.

He had no problem with that.

“Hello youth,” the young scholar whispered, “have you come to see the museum?”

“Actually,” the princess said. Her voice was modified, but Blayd was not impressed. All the basics of vocal transformations were there, but he thought such a voice would have come from a much older boy. It was a ridiculous mistake to make. “My brother and my dragon here wanted to gaze in the orb, if that’s all right.”

Blayd choked out loud, and glared at her. Her hand shot out, and bumped against his to tell him to be quiet.

The scholar just smiled.

“Children! Are you sure...”

The nervousness rose again. Blayd knew their disguise wouldn’t last, and as soon as this scholar got a message out to Pearl the elite would be here in heartbeats to “rescue” their crown princess.

And their mission would be over before it had begun.

“I, uh,” the princess stuttered.

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“Sorry,” Blayd interjected. “But she’s really *my* dragon. My sister, I mean brother here, just... our parents don’t know we’re here, but we really have some important questions for the orb!”

“Homework really,” Gayl muttered.

“Yes, homework!”

The scholar did not look convinced, and folded her arms. “Now young people. You can’t cheat on your studies-”

Gayl interrupted, “It’s not cheating, they asked us a riddle for supper, and if we can figure it out. I’m sure they’d be glad to know we used the orb to help us answer it!”

The scholar laughed, “A challenge is it! Very well, let me see if I can help. Why don’t you tell me the riddle, and I will answer it for you!”

The princess stuttered, and the nudged him. “All right, go on brother. Tell her the riddle.”

Blayd huffed. He was put on the spot. A riddle? Right now? That this scholar could not resolve? That he’d made up *right now*?

He stuttered, and began to share the first thoughts that popped into his head.

*Ringing lights, blinding sounds,*

*Singing music through the ground.*

*Blind sensation, deaf to heat,*

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*Chorus leading to defeat.*

*Seeing silence, hearing night,*

*Take the measure of my plight.*

*Only when sensations cease,*

*Only in such, do I find peace.*

*What am I?*

Gayl turned around, and looked shocked. So did the scholar. He thought it was obvious that he'd made the whole thing up. The woman's mouth opened and closed a few times, then she turned to a colleague. "Hey, hear this," she told him, repeating the whole riddle flawlessly.

Gayl sighed, "You did too well," she told him.

He feared they would never see the orb, at least, not in time. He began to wonder if perhaps they shouldn't have asked permission of their parents first.

But then, he knew, they would have never gotten it.

The scholar who had just been called was clearly impressed, and called over another two colleagues. The princess began to back away, "We'll have to try another way," she said.

Suddenly a voice called, "Blayd?"

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It was Mintsi. She walked over, her head cocked to one side, her eyes on the ground. Yet she was smiling broadly, “What are you doing here, prince of the white Pearl?”

He stuttered, not sure what to say. Mintsi had never spoken to him before, now she was rushing up to him all happy to see him, Tourmarelle style. That, and he was supposed to be here in secret anyway.

But then he saw Mintsi’s expression turn to one of shock and horror as she laid eyes on Gayl, clearly piercing the illusion instantly. Immediately she looked away.

“P-” she began.

Gayl hushed her. “Don’t! We’re hiding. We need to get to the orb.”

Mintsi looked confused, and frightened. She paused, clearly a dozen thoughts running through her head. “They’ll catch you.”

“No,” the princess disagreed, “they won’t.”

Again, Mintsi seemed to be thinking, now avoiding all eye contact for some reason. “I have a boat. I will call it. They will know as soon as you touch the orb.”

The princess nodded.

Mintsi called to the fascinated scholars, now forming a small circle of interested individuals, “They’re with me,” she said, not

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looking at anyone, and grabbing the princess by the arm pulled her towards room with the orb.

“Yes, daughter of the high priest of Tourmarelle,” the scholar nodded, looking deeply suspicious.

They hurried into the inner chamber, where some priests performed a simple purification ritual. He gave them veils to cover their eyes and to protect them from seeing what they should not, except for Destiny of course, she was a dragon.

Then they entered the room.

To Blayd, the sensation was one of great power and knowledge, almost holiness. The room was blindingly white by the sheer power of the archetype. Blayd felt his own orb resonating almost in simple happiness at being in the presence of its truest form. The room was cool, and scholars from all over the seven worlds stood about, gazing into a living pool of wisdom that was the Orb.

None dared speak.

Blayd looked over at the princess, who hadn't even noticed her illusion had slipped from her.

She was nervous.

But they didn't have time. He was about to nudge her on when she reached up, and took the veil from her closed eyes. Her breathing was rapid.

Only a fool did what she was about to do.

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But then again, they were on a fool's errand.

As swift as she could, she spun around, and looked at the white orb, unprotected.

There was a sudden pulse of white light, and an alarm sounded in the hearts of all present. A breath later, the princess cried out. She fell backwards, and Mintsi rushed forwards to press the veil to her face once more.

A scholar ran forwards, looking panicked, "Children, you-"

She didn't finish. Gayl pulled her wand from her sash and thrust it out at the woman, throwing her backwards towards the wall. It might have ended her if a guard hadn't been quick enough to save her. The diadem on the princesses brow lit up, and a cyclone of air exploded into life around them, holding everyone back.

Mintsi wasted no time. She pointed at the roof, and a large section of it suddenly shattered. In flew the wooden hull of her father's polished starship. In less than a heartbeat it rested beside them. Destiny threw the princess inside. Blayd leapt up, Mintsi following.

But the guards were very fast. One of them with a staff pulled her down so that Mintsi couldn't get on the boat at all. Even with all their powers, they were still only young. He didn't know how they would get away.

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Again, the princess seemed to be one step ahead. She had already removed her staff. He heard her whisper, begging a favor of the world's spirit, "Chalcedonah."

Suddenly the ground shook, and the entire room fell away at least two paces. Stone creaked and in places split all over the museum. Every available hand had their work full trying to save their own lives and the sacred place they loved.

It was all the time they needed.

"Go!" Mintsi shouted from the ground.

"Sorry," the princess apologized.

Destiny had the controls of the ship, and they were already well and truly out the exit before anyone could stop them. He wrapped the light around them, and the princess set the sequester. They were out of the reach of the formidable forces of Chalcedonah only a blink before it was too late.

"Did... that hurt."

She nodded.

But it would be worth if it had worked.

"To where?" Destiny asked.

"Ethphraim," the princess answered.

Blayd sighed with relief, and hoped her headache would not last too many days.

## The land of blue and dirt

“Dirt,” Destiny laughed. “That’s what they call their planet.  
*Dirt.*”

“Maybe that’s why they never clean it up,” the princess muttered.

Blayd said nothing. It was pretty tactless of the future queen to insult a world like that; he thought she should know better. But he knew what she meant. A world covered in more water than land, with great orbs of water in their own solar system. They could do a much better job at looking after it all.

And maybe if they didn’t keep so many secrets from their own people it would have helped in that objective.

The princess seemed to guess his thoughts, though he wasn’t trying to hide them either. “They claim political and civil unrest if the truth about the dragons is revealed. You should have seen the complete mess of society their one-hour war with the dragonmen created! Now their leaders assure me they are attempting managed change, with ‘new discoveries’ being announced. But they are a deeply suspicious people; they know their people will not trust their own leaders even if they told them the complete truth.”

Blayd shook his head, hoping they weren’t really *that* bad. Or, at the very least, not all of them.



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The princess took the controls, and guided the invisible ship towards the place of the hidden legendary 'boot.' He thought once more how it didn't seem a very noble tool, like the sword or headband. But it was, still, a tool necessary for the advancement of humanity. That it stayed under one's feet made it no less useful. He looked down, seeing the princesses own tall boots, gifted by her father's family of Thiaz. They would speed her travel, bless her efforts in trade of either knowledge or money. Boots were... useful.

He looked out at the vast city the people of Ethphraim had insisted on building, wide and spiraling with few parks and too many roads for their unnecessary iron carriages. If only they believed in the powers of teleportation, they were simple enough! But they were too unfamiliar and thus, suspicious of the science the teachers taught them. They had real trouble believing science that was powerful, accurate, and four thousand years older than anything they had experienced. It made him sad their science had made them so secure and short sighted.

They approached a large mezzanine, surrounded by several buildings of different shapes and sizes. The stone looked artificial, not grown as it should be. To the far end of the mezzanine a giant statue of a bearded man in a tall hat sat, seeming very serious, but it was clear it was only for decoration. It couldn't come to life at all.

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A simple thought knocked on Blayd's consciousness, coming from his orb. He relayed its message, "The guardians of Ethphraim know we are here."

The princess thought about this, "Is that a problem?"

"I don't... I hope not," he said.

"What about Chalcedonah?"

"I am sure they don't know *where* we are now either. They probably don't know who we were, or what we wanted, they were only trying to help and don't understand why we attacked them. I'd rather not have to explain."

"At least they would see we are trying to do something!" she muttered. "Maybe the council will start doing and stop talking!"

He wanted to say, *That's Thiaz's primary complaint against Pearl's dealing with the plague of Sanmarellis; that we are too quick to act and slow to think.* But instead, because he knew she wasn't interested in listening to what he had to say, he said nothing.

"Do you know where the archetype is?" he asked her.

"That building there," she said, pointing.

Destiny guided them down. They left the boat hovering over the entrance. None of them were concerned about leaving it in open view: The ignorance of the Ethphraim was truly legendary. Even so, he kept the light wrapped around it, and she sequestered it with her staff once more.

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“Why don’t we just tare our way in?” Destiny asked.

“I asked. Ethphraim himself will not allow it. I’m lucky he didn’t tell my parents,” Gayl replied.

Blayd was confused, “World’s don’t usually worry about that, they prefer to be neutral.”

“Don’t you think I know that!” she shot back, glaring at him.

He just looked at her, lost for words. He was just trying to be helpful.

“We need to be careful,” she said. “I’ll sequester the dragon, you make us look like locals. All right?”

“All right,” he agreed, knowing right now that succeeding, and succeeding quickly, was more important than having her make sense.

They stepped down, Destiny slithering down with them.

He looked at the natives clothes; strange, but generally sensible for the climate. He immediately decided it was more important to weave a proper hologram than risk a simple illusion. He placed himself in long pants, blue as was the most common, with a button less shirt that had the phrase; ‘I am with this t-shirt’ written on it in the local dialect.

He placed her in the most similar outfit he could find, for females. Except the shorts were so small they almost didn’t fit, and her t-shirt so short it didn’t cover her belly.

Immediately she slapped him, “How dare you uncover me!”

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**Figure 5** How dare you uncover me!

Destiny slithered between them, none of the people walking into the building seeming bothered, though one had laughed at the slap. Of course, none of the faithless locals could see the dragon behind the sequester.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that’s what they’re wearing!” he protested.

She glowered with anger, but looked around. With a grimace she appeared to agree, and shoved him in the chest instead. “If you tell anyone about this, I’ll...”

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She shook her fist, and he had to step back. He wasn't sure she'd finish the sentence with 'put you to death' because, while she wasn't yet queen, she still probably could.

It made also feel just a little afraid; he had been trying to help. To be perfectly honest, he thought she looked quite good in the outfit of the women of Ethphraim, but he wasn't about to admit that out loud.

Gayl covered her belly with a forearm and marched on. They walked through the doors, and found they had to press through a metal grate. The princess set it off, and a light began to shine from the top of the gate. Two men in uniforms approached.

She looked nervous, like she was about to start a fight. Destiny hovered unnoticed in the air above them.

Desperately he watched his orb. It had been the electromagnetic resonance with the metal in her hidden shield and blade. He didn't want them to know about the pocket dimension where she was keeping all her tools, they simply wouldn't understand.

Quickly he worked, cancelling out the resonance with everything except her headband. They waved small black wands all over her, a small beeping sound indicating they had found the metal in her headband.

"Nice bling," one of them told the princess.

She simply nodded, and with a wave the security guard told them to move on.

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They all breathed a great sigh of relief.

“We need to get down,” the princess told him. “It’s in a research facility deep below.”

He nodded, “I wish I had my mother’s gift.”

“We have plenty of our own,” she said, and pulled out her orb. “I’m accessing the information vessels of this building. It looks like they have some kind of vertical shaft with a large box for carrying visitors. We should be able to use it.”

He found it only heartbeats after she had. Not to be outdone, he quickly noted there were heavily encrypted passwords, as well as door requiring special keys in the shapes of cards, and a device that appeared to recognize the shape of one’s iris, of all things. It would be difficult, but not impossible, to bypass them all.

And they had so little time.

They marched their way towards the shafts, coming around a corner to where several silver doors were located, when a young child of Ethphraim unexpectedly screamed.

“What is it?” the woman she was with asked in concern.

“A snake, a flying snake!” she shouted. She looked about six, with curly hair and pale skin.

The woman looked around in alarm, several times her eyes darting across the area where Destiny was flying. “Where, oh Jasmin, I don’t see any flying snakes.”

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Blayd looked up at Destiny. The little girl, Jasmine, had her eyes fixed right on her.

Somehow, this little girl from backward Ethphraim had pierced both the illusion and the sequester without apparent effort. “There, right there!” she squealed.

Destiny fled.

“Look,” the little girl said. “It’s gone around the corner.” She was clutching up to the woman’s leg, but sounded a little less afraid.

“Don’t be silly, Jasmine, there aren’t any such things as flying snakes and whispering shadows.”

“Yes, there are,” she muttered.

The woman shook her head. A triangle of light lit up on the wall, and the woman made as if she were to approach the doors.

And Jasmine fixed her eyes on them. She stared at their clothes, and Blayd didn’t check to know she was probably seeing right through to their real clothes. But she said nothing.

The princess spoke, “She can help us.” She pulled her staff from her robes and Jasmine gasped. Striking it on the ground she knew the woman who kept Jasmine would no longer be aware of them, but just in case, the princess also slowed the apparent movement of time down using her headband. With a tender smile, she walked up to the little girl who hid behind her mother.

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“Greetings, they call you Jasmine?” she said, holding out her hand.

The mother acted like she was not concerned about princess Gayl at all.

Jasmine hid behind the woman, burying her face in her dress, “Your clothes are weird,” she said.

Princess Gayl laughed, “Well, I think your clothes are strange too. Tell me, Jasmine, would you like to meet our dragon?”

Her head popped out from the woman’s side, and she gasped. “The flying snake is yours!”

The princess smiled, “Not exactly, she is more a friend really. His friend especially,” she said, indicating towards him. “And she’d not dangerous at all, not to children like you. Can we introduce you? Would you like to greet her?”

With her face once more buried in the woman’s clothing, Jasmine nodded fiercely.

At his request, Destiny slithered around the corner.

As soon as Jasmine saw her, she hid again.

Destiny flew up, and put her head under on Blayd’s hand. He stoked it, and the little girl just stood there.

“Would you like to touch my dragon?” he asked.



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She didn't say anything, but took tiny little steps, edging her way around the woman who still appeared oblivious to everything going on around her.

Destiny slithered closer, her forked tongue flicking out to taste the air around the little girl. "I like her," she said.

"What did she say?" Jasmine asked.

"She likes you," Blayd translated.

With the princess's help, the shy little girl began to at first gently, and then with reckless abandon pat Destiny all over. They all laughed.

"It's a dragon, a real dragon!" she said. "I've seen one before, but it had legs."

Destiny slithered back, there was no way the little girl could tell how much she, too, wished she had legs. It was a great privilege to be a serpentine, she would never deny that, but floating with an armament of sharp claws like Farwing once had was still something he knew Destiny wished for, but would never have told anyone.

"Why... why can't mummy see them?" Jasmine asked.

Gayl answered, "You have a special gift, child. No one is supposed to be able to see us at all."

"You're *angels!*" Jasmine gasped.

"No, but we are from another world," the princess told her.

Jasmine looked like she didn't know what to believe, or think.

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“One day, everyone will know about dragons,” the princess promised her.

*But it will take change for that to happen,* Blayd thought, and that gave him an idea.

“Here,” he said, offering little Jasmine his orb. “What do you see?”

The princess didn’t look pleased. She knew it was a toolmaster test, to see if the orb resonated with the young girl’s mind and personality. But she also knew they hadn’t really asked permission of her, her mother, or even the people of Ethphraim.

Jasmine stared, then gasped. “Wait here,” she commanded them, and ran off.

Instantly the mother became aware again, and time slipped back into normal. “Jasmine, what are you doing girl!” without thinking she ran around Destiny and after the child. Blayd and Gayl ran after her.

A moment later they watched as Jasmin ran up to a security guard and collided with him quite deliberately. Her mother came quickly after, scolding her and apologizing excessively to the guard. Clutching her daughter by the hand, she returned to the silver doors.

They opened, and at Jasmin’s invitation, they all got in.

“Oh, that’s a nice dog you’ve got there, is he a seeing eye dog?” the mother asked, apparently needing to see Destiny as some kind of other animal through the veil of the sequester.

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No one answered, and the woman looked ahead as though she'd forgotten she'd asked the question.

Jasmin pulled on Blayd's shirt, and looking down, she opened up his hand and pressed a small card into it. She'd stolen it off the guard.

"You'll need this," she whispered.

"Thank you!" the princess replied, and hugged the little girl.

Blayd was touched. The princess, always the first to boss him around, or to have some hidden agenda, had actually been really gentle and kind towards this little girl. What was even more impressive, he realized, was that she had seen her for the help she could be, and not as a threat. It made him puzzled, but glad.

But he was still never going to tell her that.

Still, he didn't know if the little girl was a future orb bearer, or if she had a dragon talent. And he suspected he might not find out any time soon.

The box they were in stopped, and Jasmine got off with her mother, "Goodbye dragon!" she said with a huge grin.

"Oh, Jasmine!" the mother huffed in exasperation.

Blayd smiled, not only was she one of the sweetest children he'd ever met, but she was about to change her entire world when they learned to see what she could see.

The silver door closed.

"Now what?" Destiny asked.

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Checking her orb, the princess went to press the lowest button on the panel beside the door. It refused to light up.

“There’s a password, or key, required,” she said, gazing in her orb.

“Try the card?” Destiny suggested.

Princess Gayl looked too busy, so Blayd did it for her. He swiped the card through the reader and it beeped.

Gayl looked at him, pressed the lowest button which lit up immediately, and the doors began to shut. With a derisive huff she nodded her head, and the little room began to descend.

“That wasn’t so hard,” he said, teasing her.

“Hrumph,” she replied.

“I think we’re going to do this.”

“I hope so,” she muttered. “The last thing we need is-”

As the doors swung open Blayd caught his breath. It wasn’t a wall of armored guards, or some dastardly trap of the Ethphraim. It was even worse – someone they knew.

Gayl’s only friend on Ethphraim, Rebecca, stood there, a cloak around her shoulders, her arms folded and her visage incredulous. “Well, well, well, imagine finding you two here,” she said, sounding very unimpressed.

## Rebecca

Clearly, the shock of seeing her friend there, unexpected, drove the princess to an unprecedented silence.

“Well!” Rebecca almost shouted.

Gayl ran to press her hand across her friend’s mouth, “Becky, please don’t! Don’t say our names! Shh, you have to shh!”

“I can shh, missy!” she said, throwing the princess’ hand away from her mouth. “What are you doing on our world! I know you’re not here with permission! And what’s this fuss within the orbs this past hour?”

“How did you find us?” Blayd asked, hoping for answers, but also hoping the princess would get her act together sooner rather than later. Blayd noticed with relief that it was beginning to look like the guards were just passing by, and not with Rebecca at all.

“How? You Pearlians really don’t think much of us do you! Just because most people don’t know about the other worlds or the dragons doesn’t mean we’re all ignorant! I can use the robe you know. And when someone walks in with a bleeding great sequester all over them and then slows time down ... well I guess I get a little curious! I couldn’t see you on the screens, so I just followed where the greatest chaos went and it brought me right to you! Now, I want to know exactly

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what you're doing on my world, and what you think you're going to do!"

Finally, Gayl spoke. "Rebecca. You know the bond is dying. Not even an hour ago a trio of messengers from outside the system arrived."

Rebecca's eyes grew wide, "You mean, other humans? From outside the eight worlds?"

"No," Destiny explained, "but humanoid. And let me tell you, they weren't happy."

Gayl waved him to silence, "Indeed, not at all! They threatened war if we didn't solve the problem with the bond right now. They blamed it all on us and we don't even know what's caused it! They're coming--"

"Wait," Rebecca insisted. "War? On us? Again?"

The princess nodded.

Rebecca's lip tightened, and her expression grew grim. "What do you need?"

The princess stepped closer, "I think it's better if we don't tell you. Can you help us?"

"Gladly, but where is your honor guard?"

"They don't believe me," Gayl said.

Blayd saw real regret in her eyes, and it made him feel just a tiny bit sorry for the ambitious young woman.

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Rebecca still seemed dubious, so Blayd took a gamble, “We need you to take us to the archetype.”

Gayl spun around, eyes angry. She was about to blurt something cruel out when Rebecca saved him, possibly even his life once more. “Come with me.”

The princess forgot him immediately.

Rebecca spoke as they walked, “You can’t believe your luck having me here today, though I suppose you’d find your own way in without me. My father is visiting this facility, and brought me here to practice with some of the other apprentices. We don’t tell them everything we learn from the teachers, but it’s still worth it.”

They came to a door, and donning her cloak’s hood, Rebecca walked effortlessly through it. A moment later, it opened.

“Oh, Becky, you made that look so easy!” the princess complimented her.

Rebecca shrugged. “One day, I will claim my own dragon.”

He said nothing. If it hadn’t happened yet, it probably wasn’t going to happen at all. Even Ethphraim was now holding to the tradition of having a bonded human meet a dragon while it was still in the egg. Rebecca was at least the same age as they were, twelve years old.

They made it past another door, and then stopped. At Rebecca’s instruction and with the staff’s help they tricked two guards into deserting the next post. “I don’t think there’s much point in keeping up

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the illusion now,” she told them. “You’ll have to sequester every door, and that’s too much effort. Just make sure that dragon stays hidden. You’d better walk.”

Blayd was impressed; this Rebecca was a cool thinker under high demands.

They used the card on the next door, and then a device popped out from the side of the door.

“Iris recognition,” Rebecca said.

“You got this?” the princess asked him.

He’d been preparing. Holding up his orb, he projected an illusion of what the door expected to see. A moment later it clicked open.

They were in a large underground facility. They passed down another corridor, till the area opened out into a huge cavern. They passed through without incident, though dozens of so called ‘scientists’ – the scholars of Ethphraim in their precious white coats moved about the room studying various instruments, including some armor of the dragon riders.

Blayd huffed. With the teachers and the diadem available they could be making hundreds of such suits every day. But they did not, at least, not that he could see. They still had to understand everything in their own, limited terms, instead of asking those with a more perfect knowledge to reveal it to them. It would be a long time till Ethphraim caught up to the other worlds.



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Next, they came to a massive iron door. To his surprise, this one was warded, and that with some skill.

Rebecca was about to try and phase through it, when he stopped her. “Won’t work,” he said. “The door has an alarm.”

She stopped, and simply waited to find out what to do next, not wasting a moment in self-chagrin or fear.

*And she had nice dimples,* he couldn’t help noticing.

Unexpectedly, Destiny slapped him on his ankle. He looked over to see her smiling.

She’d noticed him admiring Rebecca.

He blushed so hard it was impossible to look up.

Princess Gayl had her hands on her hips. “Remove the warding then,” she told him.

He regained his composure, “No point. Whoever did this was not local to Ethphraim. They knew what they were doing.”

Becky gave an indignant huff.

Gayl sighed, “So, we can’t bypass it, or unlock it. You realize this leave us with only one option, don’t you?”

He didn’t. He was trying to figure out what she meant. There had to be more options, they couldn’t-

Suddenly the gem on her brow glowed a brilliant silver-white light.

## Twilight of the Giants

He tried to jump out of harm's way, but Destiny was much faster. She curled around him and Rebecca and pulled them to safety as the iron door, at least three grown men in width, exploded outwards as though a massive stone had fallen into water. The steel solidified again as soon as it was out of the way, glittering as metal raindrops fell all throughout the room. It left the princess standing unharmed in the middle of an open doorway.

“Hey, looks like they weren't expecting *that!*” She announced. She stood tall, trying to appear unphased, though the effort of breaking such a warded door must have drained her terribly.

A scientist shrieked, and a moment later red lights started blaring and an alarm glowed all around them.

“Go!” Rebecca shouted.

The four of them, including a dragon, raced inside what appeared to be a vault like storage area. The walls almost glowed with the powerful wards on this place. Within steel encrusted doors, sealed with powerful runes unknown to him, objects resonated powerful and often unfamiliar auras. He noted several full suits of Dragon Rider armor, each and every tool of men, and the skull of what must have once been a patron dragon.

And there, at the far end, beyond another sealed door, was the object of their visit. Resonating with almost indignant power sat the archetypal boots themselves, their aura surrounding and penetrating

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this entire globe, making the people within cunning in trade, curious in science, adventurous in exploration. The archetype had been on this world for over six hundred years, yet Blayd could not help but wonder if the people here had any idea.

The princess tried to tare the door down, but it resisted her. Blayd worked at cancelling the runes and putting the metal into a resonance she would recognize, but it was still a precious breath or two before the door opened.

Two breaths they did not have.

“Security is coming!” Rebecca shouted, taking up a defensive position in front of them, blocking their only exit.

With a scream Destiny simply leapt forwards and tore the door down with her jaws. She reached up to take the boots from where they stood, when suddenly a clear stone cylinder shot up from the wall, blocking her.

She ripped that apart in seconds, too.

Again, his stone called him, and before he’d even looked at it he realized the problem. The humans of Ethphraim had, inexplicably and with predicable violence, placed an enormous amount of explosive matter around the room, intending to incinerate any who tried to steal from their vault. The archetype would be fine, but everything else would be destroyed.

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It was a steady effort, but Blayd prevailed, and did them the favor of not destroying their own artefacts along with the crown princess of Pearl.

As soon as he had, Gayl telekinetically grabbed the boots from their pedestal. She sat on the floor and began throwing hers off.

“Stop them!” a voice roared from the door. It was the guardians of Ethphraim.

Blayd stood in front of the princess, wondering how on Dirt he was going to protect her.

Destiny, however, had many more options. She slithered up, hissing violently. A guard began attacking her with the infamous little black stones of Ethphraim, shot from a small device he held in his hand. They bounced harmlessly against Density’s dragon skin, and then ricocheted dangerously around the room.

Suddenly one of the princess’s boots sailed over his shoulder, past Destiny, and towards the enraged guard. “Keep them!” she shouted.

The guard looked at it, perplexed for just a moment. Then he apparently realized what was going on. “They’re stealing the archetype!”

He raced toward Destiny, and Blayd braced himself. Even with her dragon strength and reflexes Blayd feared the man would still get

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past. Destiny was small, and this man was clearly one of the most elite Ethphraim had to boast.

And there would be twenty more of them behind him.

Just as Destiny readied to swing her tail against him, the man inexplicably tripped.

The silhouette of Rebecca appeared in the corridor. She had somehow managed to partially materialize something in his way, tripping him. Sure enough, the corridor was filling with guards.

The man who fell turned without pausing, and pulling another weapon from his belt shot at Rebecca.

She gasped, and flared the edges of her cloak out wide. The small stones passed harmlessly through her, yet cracked as they hit the cloak, shattering into pieces. Blayd realized she was protecting the soldiers behind her from the fallen guard's angry attack.

A second later one of those guards tried to grab her from behind, but she curled up and disappeared and he fell right on top of the first guard.

Blayd felt the princess push on his back, shoving him on to his dragon.

Dozens of warriors were filling the corridor. They began to form a wall of weapons.

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“Sorry now,” the princess said, and calling on the power of her new shoes and combining it with the authorities of the staff, they became light and sped away.

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She'd taken them high above the facility. Alarms sounded and guards ran everywhere.

“We did it!” she breathed.

Blayd then saw something that stole his breath way, “Look,” he shouted.

Somehow, it appeared that little Jasmin had gotten into the parked starboat, and was riding it in lazy circles around the courtyard. Her mother was screaming in panic, shattering the sequester on the boat and the ecstatic little girl it carried. Dozens of people were pointing strange black rectangles at the incomprehensible scene. “There are dragons and talking shadows and boats for the sky!” the child cackled triumphantly.

“We’ve got bigger problems,” the princess said.

An instant later, riding in on a cyclone of fire, one of the rare dragons of Ethphraim arrived with its rider. He was angry, and what was worse, he was a noble. It roared a blood curling challenge, and charged the little boat.

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“We need to get out of here!” Blayd shouted.

“No, we have to help Jasmine!” Gayl roared.

Then they fell silent as the next heartbeat they both recognized the pull on the golden threads that was the approaching of dragons from another world.

To be precise, from Pearl.

Windfyrth and two other dragons appeared in the sky, rocketing down to land with such force as to shatter stone. The sky had grown dark with the noble dragon’s rage.

“How dare you steal from my installation!” He roared, and breathed liquid fire all over the little starboat.

With legendary skill, Lady Snow and the mighty ambassador to Ethphraim spun aside the enraged nobles’ breath, but not entirely. Within an instant the little boat had erupted into flames, and Jasmin’s panicked screams could be heard. The noble looked confused.

“We’ve GOT to help her!” Gayl insisted.

“No!” Blayd replied. “This is only the beginning. If we don’t get our message to the Giants, everyone will ... will...”

He could not bring himself to say it. He could only stare in the princess’s eyes as they filled with tears.

They glanced down. The starboat crashed into the ground, shattering stone in its wake. A lone dragon raced towards it, presumably to rescue whomever was within, probably assuming it was

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the princess herself. Windfyrth and Snow parried the beaked fire wyvern's terrifying rage with nothing more than bamboo rods and a shield hat, holding their own for the time being, while the second dragon tried to sneak around and flank their enraged opponent.

Gayl said nothing, and activating the boots instructed Destiny to take them to the furthest settlements of the local worlds: Northpoint.

They fled chaos in complete silence.



## Northpoint

*One hour*, General Jayd realized. *Even less.*

One hour, since three warriors from another race of humanoids from among the stars had arrived for the first time in eight thousand years. Less than an hour, since those warriors on their noble dragons had threatened the peace of the eight worlds for the third time in less than thirteen years. Less than an hour, since the crown princess had abducted her oldest son.

Warriors and scholars swarmed around her, each attending to the preparations for an impending war against a powerful and unknown foe. They were surrounded by the most skilled warriors, fiercest dragons and deepest knowledge of humanity. But for all their glory, for all their power, her son was out of her reach. He was gone, and she didn't know where.

Her husband appeared, and caught her gaze. He stood, leaning on his staff, as though he still had all the time in the world.

She glared at him angrily. "How can you be so calm at a time like this? You are a prophet; prophecy, if you have learned any skill."

He smiled at her. "You will live to hold your son again."

She forced the tears from her eyes, wanting only to pound him on his unyielding chest in retribution for all Divinity was asking them

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to suffer through once more. Had her life known only suffering and trial?

“Well, what do you think we should do?” the general asked the prophet.

“I believe we’re doing all we should. I think we should yield to the foreign power, and demonstrate the irresistible power of patience.”

“While they plunder our people and slay our warriors, as last time? No, husband. No one in the eight worlds will suffer that once more.”

His brow furrowed. “I know, and for that reason alone, we must prepare for war.”

She paused, choking down her frustration. “We’re doing that. So why are you here?”

He looked in her eyes. “I go to pray with the wise ones. You need to move the extra reserves to Thiaz, have them perform extra sky rounds. When our enemy comes they will have power of the threads. We need to use the portals and the skyboats, if we have any hope of holding our own.”

“You think they will try to siege us?” she asked. “Starve our planets, own our skies. Threaten our children with nightmares as they ride across the night!”

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“I hope so,” he replied. “For then they will be too busy to attack us. What of the king?”

“He still mourns. None can make him speak,” she replied, and their gaze turned to the man, seeming older by far than he should. Caspina sat, slouched and unkempt in his throne. He spoke to no one, but with a sniffle dried a tear from his eye.

Rayn sighed, “We cannot fight a war without, that is un-won within.”

“I know,” General Jayd replied. Yet again her anger rose. “Just what does his daughter think, bearing our son away to a fool’s mission to visit beings unseen since before the beginning of recorded history?”

Rayn shrugged, “It is their time. They are doing what they can. And we must do our part.”

That made her angrier still, “And wait till we die of old age? You say I will hold my son once more, perhaps, before he or I die.”

He tried to place a hand in comfort, but she turned away from him.

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*It looks pleasant enough,* Blayd thought.

They were approaching Northpoint, the official furthest outpost of human civilization before the divide that marked an area of

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unpopulated space. The divide itself took a good season to traverse by normal means, but there was the limit of human-controlled space. Northpoint was supposed to be inhabited by a single family of three hundred or so individuals, who had claimed the outpost from their ancestors from Sanmarellis once the plague struck.

The archetype had sped their travel greatly. Their pursuers, if there were any, would be an hour behind them at best.

The meteoroid on which Northpoint sat was not much bigger than an island, with rough-hewn outcroppings of metal and stone forged into simple dwellings. What little trade saw itself to this isolated place gathered in the only market, made up of foragers or adventurers too foolhardy to keep their distance from the darkness beyond. The residents themselves mined the area and their lonely brown dwarf star for gravity, wandering in through the system millions of years ago, capturing the meteoroid that was now its only companion sometime in the unimaginable past. It was now a cold, lonely and desolate rock. Its only virtue, perhaps, was the orbmaster who dwelt here, keeping watch over the space without for over a thousand years.

*And most of it in stasis*, princess Gayl reminded him.

*They're requesting identities*, Blayd told her as his orb thrummed knowledge into him.

*Gatherers, from the Celtwyld*, she told him.

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Blayd smiled; it was almost true. Young people of his home tribe, newly made adults, would often travel to other towns and places to “gather” life experience. The only hole in their story was that they were by no means adults, and any orb bearer worth anything would already know that.

*Then let us hope we do not meet him,* Destiny guessed his thoughts.

Gayl agreed.

They landed at a stone platform, crudely made out yet effective. Its atmosphered surface allowing the princess to release her atmospheric control on the sphere of air that always surrounded them. Blayd looked out at the simple yet haphazard structures that made up Northpoint. It was clear function was preferred over form in almost all cases. They were met by a single guard wearing armor, spear drawn. He pulled back his visor as they landed, clearly indicating he was not threatened by them.

He looked at them closely.

Blayd gulped. They had been careful to choose their disguises wisely this time, changing as little as possible, aging themselves just a touch. But he still couldn't tell if the provincial guard, possibly the only one on this lonely rock, would pierce their illusion and recognize them.

*Hail and well met,* the guard told them. *May I ask your business on Northpoint, little ones with... an even littler dragon.*

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Gayl stepped off Destiny's tired back with grace and ease. "Oh, just gathering, you know. I think we'd like some supplies before we head out. Maybe some rider armor, if you have any?"

He seemed amused by that, "And where is it, just may I inquire, you might be heading past Northpoint?"

Gayl stuttered, clearly she hadn't prepared for this question.

But Blayd was ready. "Ashen," he told them. It was a distant comet, flung away from Thiaz millions of years ago as it formed. It would make a plausible, if not curious, destination.

Clearly the guard was dubious, and shook his head. "Tourists! Come, you better meet my father."

*That wasn't what we wanted,* Gayl mourned.

*I know,* Blayd replied.

*Great save with Ashen,* she said in rare compliment.

*Thank you.*

*Your ability to navigate is the only reason I brought you on this trip,* she said, all hint of any genuine admiration or even gratitude already gone. *I hope you bring that quick thinking when we meet his father.*

Blayd was silent.

They were taken into a large biodome. Fitting within was a chaotic arrangement of plants and flowers held down by a haphazard arrangement of gravity. A few children ran in the area, but there were

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no tell-tale statues of the teachers to be found. There was a drake, an old half-dragon, that seemed to be sunning itself in the abundant ultraviolet light the dim sun emitted. It was sitting outside in the void of space, its long tail curling around the structure, one eye half open as though it enjoyed the movement of the children within.

The guard walked up to an old man, who was dancing with a little child about seven years old. Under his arm he tucked a rod, the half-staff. Not everyone had talent and dedication to use the tools, and often they were left to make do with what they could manage. The rod was such a tool. Much more primitive than a true staff, and just a little more dangerous. It was used to govern communities where true priests could not be found.

Blayd noticed Gayl's hands covering the opening to her sash. Rare items such as the pure and powerful tools she bore, especially the boots, could be coveted by primitive civilizations. They hoped the simple folk here didn't take Gayl and himself for granted, or for fools.

The old man looked up, and greeted them with a whole hearted smile. "Travelers! What an unexpected pleasure! To what do we owe this honor?"

"Gatherers," the young guard stated, pointing a thumb back at them.

The old man looked puzzled, "Really?" he stated, the young child pulling on his robes. Without looking he positioned the young girl so

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that she could stand on his feet, and there she swung on his outstretched arms, swinging slowly forwards and backwards so tilted her head upside down so she could catch a glimpse of the travelers.

He looked them up and down. “Gatherers then! Looking for experiences beyond what your own world can offer! What bold adventurers you are to come out to Northpoint then, but I must say I don’t blame you. We would be delighted to show you our market, or the drake that adopted us a few cycles back. But I suspect we don’t have much to amuse you well-travelled city folk that you haven’t already seen. Except perhaps the void – the view of nothing beyond the stars is unparalleled this side of the cluster!”

The princess bowed, just a little formally, “Good father, we are indeed impressed! But I’m afraid we cannot stay more than an hour. Our schedule is tight, and we need to get back to our camp before long. I only ask perhaps to purchase a suit of armor each for the journey out.”

He laughed, “You are bold youth indeed, thinking you can come all the way out here before checking if we had any supplies!”

The child looked at them upside down with bright purple eyes.

“Come,” the father stated, “let’s see what we outland folk can rustle up!”

He stomped the rod on the ground, and the drake roused itself as various individuals began to make themselves lively in the garden. It looked like they were preparing a feast.



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“Oh, we mustn’t,” the princess tried to explain. “Our schedule-”

Again, he laughed, “Oh, don’t worry. We’ll have you out of here before your hour is up, I assure you. But first we must suit you out in some armor for your long journey ahead. And then, perhaps, I think we will take you to see my wife.”

“Your wife? Of course,” the princess said, looking a little nervous about how much this man was filling their agenda.

“After all,” the old man said with a smile, “it would be rude not to, wouldn’t it, Princess Gayl of Pearl.”

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Blayd could not hide his nervousness, nor Gayl hers, as the chatty and friendly old man took them around to the market. He soon had many of his ‘sons’ fitting them out in various mismatched armor. They found a pre-plague suit of young female dragonrider’s armor, helm included, for the princess. But Blayd had to do with a mismatched suit of ill-fitting pieces. Given their secret was up, Gayl felt no shame in shaping them with her headband, and the locals were very impressed.

But it was difficult to eat the feast they’d hastily prepared, the drake gliding in the airless wilderness of space beyond the window. It seemed everyone had soon turned out to see the new visitors; and royalty at that!

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But Blayd and Gayl shared many glances, unsure if this man was simply stalling for time till their captors arrived. Blayd was just beginning to wonder if they would have to make a break for it when the old man looked at them sympathetically.

“Very well, anxious young ones. Let’s go meet the mother.”

The assembled crowd grew silent, as though they were about to be afforded an honor few of them knew, and Blayd had to wonder who this ‘mother’ was.

They walked up to a platform, which lifted them high above the meteoroid to the very top, where a bright light shone from a stone observatory. It was clear the father had no teleportary abilities, because they had to walk up stone steps to cross the remaining distance, and that through the void of space. But as soon as they entered the open stone archway air pressure asserted itself.

The second brightest light Blayd had ever seen floated in the middle of the large stone room. He heard Gayl gasp, and a moment later realized why. There, floating with surreal simplicity above the stone floor, was a transparent woman. Her long dress wafted around her as though she was deeply immersed in the ocean. She was a resplendent beauty, and the peace and tranquility surrounding her was tangible.

“An Etherian!” Destiny gasped.

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She had golden hair, and dark skin. Her eyes were bright, but not so bright as to be unbearable. She was, indeed, an Etherian – a semi corporeal race of beings, extremely rare, almost mythical. To meet one was an honor indeed. Blayd found himself bowing, just in case.

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Her tinkling laughter settled across the room, causing bright blue flashes in the corners of his eyes. She turned in the air to see him clearer. “Children,” she whispered with a humor similar to her husband’s, “are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I see no secrets are hidden from the Etherian,” Gayl muttered.

Again, she laughed, floating closer. The air sizzled with static electricity, and Blayd was worried her very presence would damage them. “Secrets? No. But any who come to Northpoint, bearing the archetype of the boots, pleading to travel yet further into deep space, are not simple tourists, are they?”

“No... we are not.”

“Then where are you going?” she asked.

“We...” Gayl looked over to him, as if asking permission for something. She sighed, and spoke anyway, “We are going to speak to the Giants.”

The father gasped, and even the Etherian looked surprised. “That... is a very long journey,” he said.

Gayl nodded, “Yes. But we have to. You would know the Erioth have threatened to invade if we don’t do something about the curse in the bond. I know the only ones with answers are the creators of the dragons themselves.”

“But...” the father began to protest.

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“I know!” Gayl said, “I know: no one knows if they’re still alive, of if they’ll care. Or even particularly where they are! But I know what I have to do to protect my people. And I’m going to see the Giants, with, or without, their permission.”

“That,” said the Etherian, “is very brave of you, young woman. Even given all your amazing gifts and powers, and the hand of the Divine which I sense upon you this day, your journey is brash. The path to the center of the galaxy is long, and treacherous. You will find many enemies on that path, and few friends. You carry great treasures with you, which many have coveted for countless eons. But know this, if you insist, you promise much more than peace for your own people. You stand to shake up every civilization and world you touch on your journey there.”

Here the mother’s words took on physical meaning, as she illustrated her thoughts in the air around her, “Every act is like a pebble in the pond, creating waves that swell out from a central point. If the lake is full, even the tiniest ripple can breach the boarders, creating a tiny rivulet that will spill over the edge. Each molecule of water, impossibly small to the eyes, has the power to carry the molecule behind it. Thus, a small rivulet may become a tiny stream, growing to become a mighty river, cutting through both ice and stone to break the dam and forever change the destinies of all before it. Are you sure, young princess, that you are ready to unleash such a flood?”

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To his surprise, he heard Gayl's voice choked up as though she was crying, "Oh, Mother! I can never be ready for such! I only know what I have to do now! I can't wait for others to save my people. I have to ride this flood, and break the dam or be broken against it! I am going to complete my mission, if I die in so doing. But... I cannot do it alone..."

"And neither do you, child," the Etherian called Mother said, tenderly wiping a tear away from the little princess's cheek. "Every hope and prayer of your people, of all peoples in this great galaxy who love peace and who love dragons, goes with you. And I feel the moment has arrived to involve the others," she looked at her husband, 'as the time of the neutrality of my people is no longer convenient. For this curse must spread and conquer us all if you do not succeed. So, you do not go alone, and not only with our prayers. Come, receive my blessing – young man, you may go first."

Without willing Blayd found himself stepping forward, and she placed a tender kiss on his forehead, her touch was like rose petals, her scent like mystery. "Forget your fears, clear your mind. Your challenges are given to strengthen you. Be creative, be wise. For all you need you already carry with you."

He felt the words penetrate deep inside his soul, till almost every fiber of his being truly believed them. He'd always known they were true, but now he *felt* them.

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“Stand princess,” she said, kissing Gayl. “Release your fears. You have never been abandoned, for the prayers and spirits of all those who have gone before go with you. They watch over you, and will never forget their love for you. You are protected, you are brave. You have everything you need to succeed already within you.”

Gayl was crying so hard by the time she stopped speaking he couldn't help but place his hand on her shoulder. To his surprise, she whirled around, and buried her face in his shoulder, sobs wracking her body. Even as a priestess, a healer, and even an artisan, it seemed, the princess needed healing as well.

Blayd was about to thank the spirit, when she spoke again, pressing past them to hover face to face with Destiny. “And you, the littlest one of all. Do not fear. Do not worry. You already have everything you need to complete this journey. You are strong, and large for your age, you will bare them well on your way. Open your heart to love, and open your mouth to speak – stop fearing there is no one interested in knowing your thoughts! But most of all, know this, no pure desire will ever be denied your dragon heart. None.”

“Really?” Destiny said, now in tears as well.

The Etherian floated around Destiny like water, “I promise.”

The little dragon, who wasn't all that little really, suddenly leapt up on Blayd and hugged him so tight he almost couldn't breathe,

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especially since Gayl was now squished up against him as well. “I knew it, I knew it!” His dragon grinned, but explained no more.

“Mother, I-” Gayl began, but a sudden silence in the semi corporeal being stopped her.

“Do you swear your people will never harm me, or mine?” She suddenly whispered in desperation. While no fear marred the occasion, a dangerous, warlike manner had suddenly settled on the Etherian.

“I... do!” Gayl promised, “Neither you, nor all you possess. And if any of the other worlds mar you in any way, let them answer to my displeasure.”

“Oh, good then,” her husband spoke. “Because I think the time of your visit is over.”

“Already? I-” then they both felt it, the gentle tug on a silent string that meant dragons were approaching. Very fast dragons.

“Go, go!” The father roared, “I will hold them off!”

“No, I’m not ready!” Gayl shouted.

The mother laid a hand on her face, looking into her eyes. Blayd knew not even the princess could hold on to her lie in the face of such compassion.

They mounted on Destiny, who took to the air immediately. She seemed scarcely held back with the weight of their new armor, perhaps empowered by the importance of their mission. She opened her wings and pressed against the air of the temple, and rocketed out into the void.



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A breath later a dark brown, shimmering field enveloped Northpoint, and a heartbeat later a dragon burst on it. Green and purple sparks exploded into space, and a dragon roared.

*Go, go!* Gayl begged Destiny.

The dragon and his rider seemed to hear. They looked over, and caught a glimpse of them. With rising panic Blayd saw the green and purple light smear towards them, the gift of the mighty Starwing who could become light and travel on pure energy. But the colored light seemed to simply follow after them, slowly gaining instead of enveloping them in an instant. Blayd realized Destiny had caught hold of the golden thread of a faraway star only just in time. But even that was not enough to outrun the scholar Godnor and his mighty dragon.

With a terrified yell Gayl kicked her boots against Destiny's flank, adding the authority of the archetypes to the dragon's flight.

And in an instant, Godnor and Starwing disappeared behind them into the blackness of the void behind.

## Darkrim

*The locals call it Darkrim, Blayd explained as they looked down at the large interplanetary space dock now in stationary orbit around a blue gas giant. Ambassadors from Thiaz came through the area twenty years ago. It seems they got all the information they felt they needed, and moved on quickly.*

*Why so quick.*

*Because Darkrim is a prison colony, Blayd said. Or at least, it used to be.*

They coasted in on an invisible golden thread towards what appeared to be a landing platform. No one stopped to check for their details. A hand full of rough looking, ununiformed local workers were loading and unloading various starships, most of them made of metal hulls. They were furred, with cat-like features, including with hunter eyes and overbearing brows. It made them look perpetually angry.

They floated in on Destiny's back. There was no another dragon in sight, but no one seemed to pay them any particular interest. A few hardened soldiers pointed in their direction and laughed, but no one seemed to be interested in them. After a few tense breaths, they decided they could relax, take a look around, and perhaps find rest and a place to water Destiny. Thread travelling was taxing for any life form, and

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the loss of hydrogen ions quite common. She would need a drink of water before going further.

*I don't like the look of these,* Destiny muttered. *They look angry, like they don't even want to be here. And where are their dragons?*

“Quiet, Destiny,” Gayl chided her. “Don’t waste energy being afraid. We’ll be fine. Look, let’s just rest up a bit, then we’ll leave as soon as we can.”

“Any idea where we might be going?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes, “That’s what *you’re* for!” she reminded him.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, reaching for his orb.

“Not here!” she chided him again. “We don’t know anything about these people! We need to be careful.”

He nodded, “Better sequester your boots then.”

She looked down, and seemed annoyed at herself. Quickly she weaved around herself a simple illusion, covering the powerful energy signatures of her entire outfit of tools, including one archetype. She covered everything, except her cloak. Her shifting sword became a bracelet, ready to flick to life in an instant. Her shield covered her back, and her other tools lay hidden in her sash. It made him wish he’d brought something other than his orb. All he had except for the armor and his travel gear was a little knife his father had given him. There was a lot of history to that knife, and he kept it for pride and to keep

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him close to his parents, now so far away. But it was no tool for war, not if they got into any real trouble.

And against full grown adult cat-aliens, ready for battle and hardened by crime, what was there that they could, realistically do? He only had to hope most of the people between them and the Giants were either very kind, or too primitive to stop them. He wasn't sure where the people of Darkrim stood on that continuum.

But he could guess it wasn't good.

*Let's just get her a drink and get out of here.*

Gayl nodded.

With their pursuers at least a day behind them by now, at least according to his calculations, they were making a fine head start. But with war looming at home there wasn't really a moment to waste.

They walked over the platform, grateful most people seemed to completely ignore them. They came to a large building with swinging wooden doors. It appeared to be a tavern or town hall of some sort. Carefully they pushed the doors open.

Out wafted the sense of baked food, noxious herbs being burnt, and probably alcohol. Almost everyone in the room turned, fell silent, and looked at them with distrust written on their faces.

Destiny pulled her head back suddenly, *I am not going in there!* She promised.

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“We have to,” Blayd told her. “We need information, and I need to know about the next system if I can!”

“I don’t think they’ll let us,” Gayl replied. “Didn’t you notice, only adults.”

“Oh, then that is a problem.”

“Oh, oh, why didn’t we bring a grownup!” Destiny moaned, curling up into a sad little dragon ball of scales and feathers.

“Wait a second, yes we did!” Blayd remembered.

He grabbed their hand, or in Destiny’s case a wing claw, and pulled them towards a smelly little alleyway beside the tavern. Hiding behind a carton of refuse, smelling worse than anything on Ethphraim, he pulled out both his orb and the hologram crystal.

“Let’s hope this works!” he said.

“Hope? I thought you said you have it down?” Gayl whispered at him, her voice angry.

“I... may have exaggerated how ready the program is.”

“Oh!” Gayl shouted.

But he didn’t have time for her problems right now. He was lost in the curiosity of what he could create. He’d given quite a bit of thought to what had gone wrong since last time, and now he was sure he’d mastered the insynchrities and aberrations.

With a deep breath in, he let his mind enter the orb. He could feel the crystal warming up, then hovering, then emitting the silent sounds

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that would become matter at his command. He saw the symbols of bones, the memory of muscles, the resonance of the internal organs which would serve to house the externity he was attempting to create.

Just then his sense of smell was assaulted by a crude waft of noxious fumes as someone opened up a nearby window and threw out a bucket of foul-smelling refuse. Bright, distracting sparks shattered across his vision at the critical moment, a sensation like worms crawling up his arms. He wanted to vomit.

Without his mental concentration the image of the hologram began to crack. It was falling apart. His one and only chance to forge the sentience of a past scholar into a semi living form was fading. He struggled against the flowing forces, desperately trying to correct the cascading equations. But he was losing.

Suddenly he felt a warm breath, and a tangible sense of power, flowing through him. It was Destiny, breathing faith itself into him. The equations tumbled back into order, the lines of power correcting themselves in spite of him. He'd never seen such power, or raw intellect, emitted in a dragon's breath before. Somehow, a genetic memory must have surfaced from her ancestors, who perhaps had forged such beings before, and healed his failing hologram at the critical moment.

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The formula stood resonate, and the project was complete. There, standing proudly right before them all, was Peyoth, ancient scholar, pure gentleman, and lifelong carer for Blayd of the Celtwyld.

Gayl squealed, “I knew you’d do it! Thank you, thank you Destiny!”

Blayd sat back on his heels, and Destiny rubbed her nose against him. She seemed tired, drawn out by her exertions. They looked up, and saw his old butler standing in front of them both.

The old man smiled at him. “I knew you could do it one day!”

With a cry of gratitude, Blayd flung himself into the old man’s arms. Choking back tears of relief he muttered, “I’m so glad you’re here!”

“So am I!” Peyoth uttered, “Now, let’s see if we can get your dragon some water!”

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This time, everyone stopped. Peyoth shoved the doors to the tavern wide open and just stood there, hands on hips glaring at them all.

For a long moment, no one spoke,

Peyoth raised his head, speaking the local language since Blayd had managed to contact the local obelisk for the correct phrases and

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terms, as he did everywhere he went. “So, is this the usual way of greeting a thirsty old man and his companions!”

The residents muttered, and went back to their dinners. Some music started up, played by a harpist in the corner. A young, female bartender spoke out, “Eye, greybeard! We don’t get many human visitors out here at Darkrim, and fer good reason! So tell us, what be yer business.”

“My business,” he said striding into the room with all eyes on him, “is my own,” and he winked. The older patrons nodded in agreement. “But can we trouble you for some water.”

“Water?” the bartender coughed in jest, “be high in price in this town, less ye count spit!” and patrons laughed.

Destiny cringed, and Blayd held her. They stood against the wall, pressed up against some low benches where patrons could drink and stare at those that passed along the street. The princess stood by him, close, but not too close. She was hiding her nervousness, if she had any, very well.

Peyoth motioned to the barkeep, and she leaned forward. He whispered, “We can pay you...” and he allowed one of the priceless golden nuggets to roll around in his fingers.

The barkeep laughed, and with a broad grin showed him almost all her teeth were replaced with golden one’s.

He fell silent.



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The princess reached into her sash, ready to produce some new currency. Perhaps she had brought gems, or maybe some other rare item. Uranium was popular, and relatively safe to carry. But they had no idea what these people valued more than gold. Apart from water, that was.

“Reminds me of a funny story I once heard,” Peyoth muttered.

Suddenly the room fell entirely silent. Peyoth turned, and looked at them both.

Gayl turned to face him too. Could they really value a story more than gold?

It appeared they did. Peyoth told a funny one about a man with a golden tooth, then a serious one about a maid who’d spun straw into gold. By then, the entire inn was hanging on his every word. Casually, he mentioned he was getting a little thirsty, and a dozen amber mugs were handed in his direction. Being a hologram it was not the kind of nourishment his body needed, so he simply held one and pretended to drink, mentioning almost off hand that “the dragon” would be getting thirsty too. Within moments a large barrel was being rolled towards them, and after it was paid for by several patrons, opened up.

Destiny buried her head in the barrel, and drank it all. With a burp that brought riotous laughter from the guests, she lay gratefully down.

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Peyoth started on another story, and then another. People were soon pressing themselves to get into the inn, and he was in no time the toast of the town. Apparently, they had never heard his stories before, and he bore himself with a dignity that many of them were soon unconsciously imitating.

By this time Blayd, Gayl and Destiny moved to sit high up on the balcony looking down on the scene. He must have drifted off, for the next thing he knew they were shouting.

“Tell us another, tell us another!”

Peyoth drank again, and raised his glass to speak, when suddenly the barkeep held up her hand. He fell silent, as did the assembled throng.

She leaded forward, and whispered something hurriedly in his ear. He looked up at them, and Blayd could tell from that look that trouble was coming.

He roused the princess, napping open mouthed against the wall. “Time to go.”

“What? Already?” then she seemed to snap out of her daze, and jumped straight up. The barkeep was yelling at everyone to get back to business, story time was over. Peyoth was trying to make his way through the grateful crowd, shaking hands along the way.

*Trouble*, Peyoth told him through the orb that had made him, which was connected to his dragon rider helm always. *Local authorities*

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*have been contacted by a small fleet of riders off the boarder of Darkrim. They're looking for two young fugitives and, apparently, a winged serpentine.*

*What, already!?* the princess protested.

Blayd couldn't wait. He jumped on Destiny's back before she had the chance to get up. Thankfully the princess had the sense to follow him. They swooped down into the room, and Blayd held out his orb. Obediently, the body of Peyoth folded up into his crystal. The assembled crowd were quite shocked.

But none more so than when Destiny made her escape through a hole in the wall. There wasn't a hole there before. She just made one with her body.

Wood was sent shattering in all directions, and the citizens of Darkrim cheered.

"That's downright weird," Gayl said.

"Why are they cheering?" Destiny asked.

"No time!" Blayd said to them. "The riders are almost here!"

*Well, you do seem a bit hasty, my boy,* the mind of Peyoth spoke to his. *They are actually a good hour away.*

*How is that even possible?* Gayl wondered out loud.

Blayd looked down at the cheering citizens and broken mess he'd just made. For a moment he was embarrassed, then he figured out what do to:

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They fled.

## Scatterpoint

They took as many leaps as they could, stopping only for air at low density gas giants when absolutely necessary. Because of the boots, and the fact that he'd memorized almost every star system in the galaxy without ever intending to, their flight was impressively swift. In only a few hours they'd covered more than a years' worth of regular travel.

So by then, Destiny was beginning to tire, at least in body. *I wonder why music is beautiful, and why words make sense? And have you ever wondered why I am me, and if I'm really real? And why-*

Peyoth, still inside the crystal, cut her off. *I think, good master, it might be a good time to let the dragon rest.*

*Oh, I'm not tired. I'm feeling quite alive actually.*

*No, Blayd agreed, you're exhausted. I can feel it.*

Destiny's flood of questions ceased. *How can you **feel** it, boy?*

He wasn't sure how actually. Maybe he had been exaggerating. The purple sparks that often flowed down her scales had been growing dimmer, and her main was less pronounced.

*You won't stop talking.* Gayl told her.

*Oh, Destiny said, that's just because that glowing lady told me to. I never really thought much about my voice. About using my voice. My voooice. But it's nice. I've actually got a lot to say but it's not*

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*always easy to say. I've been too afraid to speak out loud but it's nice. It's niiiice.* She said, as though it was a whole new word to her.

Blayd had to wonder what was going on inside his best friend.

He was grateful for the dragon armor. Stars rushed by them at their impossible speeds as they crossed great expanses of space. Crashing through interstellar nebula, or ramming into the wake field of a solar system, was sometimes painful for Destiny travelling much faster than even light could. He had to be careful. But this was new territory, and he had no time to figure out a proper course. It was dangerous work, and if not for the dragon armor their bodies might have frozen hours ago, even with the field keeping the air close around them.

He was munching on a bite of cheese the princess had provided, when he finally saw what he was looking for. Cegnesis – a white spectral, mainstream star right with a planet in the liquid water zone for habitable life. Even if it didn't have an oxygenated atmosphere, which the princess could deal with anyway using her headband, at least they could use it to rest. Especially if they found a cave or something.

Within moments they were riding towards a planet in its early stages. Broad seas covered its surface, invisible microbes incapable of processing oxygen breeding serenely on its surface. They rode along a coastline until they found some cliffs where a deep cave was visible. It went for some distance into the rock, hollowed out over millennia by

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the action of the small tides this planet experienced. It would still be millions of years before complex, multicellular life such as trees would survive on the planet.

Destiny slid into the cavern, lit now by Blayd's orb held high. They rested on a graveled beach inside the cave, Gayl pulling out her staff to commune with the young world's spirit. They'd need permission if they wanted to drink the water. A moment later her headband glowed, making the air within breathable, and she released the power of her bracelet. His ears popped slightly as the pressure normalized, then there was a heavy thump as Destiny threw herself on the ground.

"Now we sleep?" she asked the princess.

"Yes, sleep on. I'll keep the place lit and warmed."

Blayd sat down, and reformed Peyoth. Soon the old man was fixing up a dinner for them all, though Destiny was already snoring. Blayd made himself busy by pulling his bedroll and pillow from his own sash. Rather than levitating, he brushed aside stones and gravel to set out a bed. Gayl floated her orb near her head, gently flowing with restful, almost hypnotic colors. It made him wonder if she always slept with the light on. He preferred sensory numbness. There was no other way for him to get to sleep.

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He lay down, and it took a few moments for him to realize Gayl was still sitting up, looking into the fire. He looked at her, wondering if he should say something.

“Ah, you all right, princess?”

She gave a shuddering sigh, and wiped her eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

He didn’t believe her. He wondered what she could be thinking, wondering if this whole adventure wasn’t working out how she’d expected. They’d met two of her friends, and neither of them were with her now. Just a boy she hated, and a dragon she seemed to be just a little jealous of. Perhaps she was having second thoughts about their ability to achieve this, about her own abilities too.

“You know,” he said, trying to be helpful, “Lady Snow was only two years older than you when she set out to do what you’re doing.”

Peyoth stopped what he was doing and looked up at them.

The princess glared at him, her eyes glowing with anger. “Wh-what does that have to do with anything?” her voice angry.

“It’s just, I was thinking ... you seemed sad.”

She grunted, “Why did I bring you! Honestly.”

“Because you knew there was no one else with my talents and skills?” He tried to answer her question honestly, though he wasn’t sure why she was asking it if she it was an answer she already knew.

She shook her head, but smiled.



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“I wish we could have brought one of your friends along,” he said.

“Shut up, Blayd,” she said, and took to staring into her orb, probably studying the planet.

He just shook his head at her, and tried to pretend it didn’t hurt that he had no idea how to get her to make sense.

They ate their dinner in silence, and with little prodding from Peyoth, turned over to go sleep. Destiny was well and truly asleep by now, and the old man saved some food for her. Blayd allowed his orb to still his senses until he too began to doze, dreaming of a world breaking apart, and floating ladies.

## Secrets

He slept for eight hours, waking well rested and ready. Destiny was already flitting around the cave, having already eaten.

“Any news?” Blayd asked Peyoth.

“None at all,” the old man replied. He had taken the entire night shift, and being a hologram, that would be easy for him. Even so, Blayd knew he’d have to recharge the crystal soon. The orb could do it, but the princesses’ headband would be quicker.

“Blayd, about time!” Gayl said. “Get up. Any word on our pursuers?”

He checked the orb. Nothing. “They must be travelling sequestered. But I still don’t think they would be very near-”

“Oh, you saw how close Godnor and Starwing came! I did a quick calculation. I don’t know how they got too close, but if we extrapolate their potential speed, they may only be an hour or two behind us.”

“That’s impossible,” Blayd protested. “The boots I can explain, but even if you turn an entire dragon and his rider into energy that wouldn’t explain how they could travel so fast as us, it’s just not possible!”

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“You’re smart, Blayd. I’ll give you that. But you don’t know everything.”

He knew that was true.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get going.”

\*\*\*

That night, they rested on a desolate asteroid flung from its home star millennia ago, Gayl’s bracelet making sure they had enough air and gravity while Peyoth set the meal.

Blayd was entirely distracted, learning what more he could of the bond, when he realized he was listening to some soft music.

He looked up, and it was Gayl, playing on her harp. She was humming a counter melody as she played. Her face was calm, her posture excellent. The music was actually quite skilled, and filled with the healing and unifying powers of the tool. He checked, she’s been at it for 17 minutes already. Ethphraim ‘minutes’ were very useful, almost everyone was using them now. The Celtwyld never did have minutes.

He held his breath, unintentionally. She’d never played her harp, not for just him. But it wasn’t just for him, it was probably just for herself. But he and Destiny were the only ones here to hear it.

On cue his dragon friend gave him a sideways grin and a knowing smile.

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He smiled to himself. Apparently some witless sycophant had paid more than a thousand coin florens for a front seat at a recital she'd given this year. He did not deny the irony of a free concern, just for them.

There was a brief pause in the music, then she repeated the motif she'd just ran. for some imperceivable reason it did not meet her exacting requirements, and she tutted audibly. Then she ran it again, and slower. Something was amiss in the harmonies and it kind of hurt, like sandpaper along his tongue and hips.

Blayd cringed.

Then Destiny did something she was not known to often do. She stood up for him, "Ahh, M'lady? Mayhap you man claim a more commodious opportunity to rehearse your formidable talents, other than during the rest devotions?"

Gayl glared at her, then clicked her tongue in derision and set aside her harp. She looked like she was going to say something, something like, *Well when do you expect me to practice around here*, but then set to actually thinking about it.

Instead, she picked her harp back up, and continued her peaceful playing. After a moment, she spoke, "Dathor's run. Very challenging. But it stimulates the lateral intricular hypothalamus in both species. It's almost a cadence you need to feel, not play." She strummed some more. "It's very difficult."

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Blayd has something to add to that, “That’s what the hyperonic field eletrostimulation does too! You can –” his voice faded as Gayl, and Destiny, both glared at him. After a moment he dared speak again, “Well, thank you for the music, Gayl. It’s very nice.”

She seemed very proud of herself, wiggling her hips and head at the compliment, a satisfied smile on her face. “We’ve a long journey. There’s a lot to learn about each other, on this trip.”

Blayd and Destiny shared a glance. Destiny seemed to know he didn’t want to know about her or anyone, really. And Blayd was afraid it might be another veiled attempt to fix him, and make him something she could like.

“A daring thought,” Destiny agreed. “To know a living being. What do you risk, princess of Pearl, in getting to know my boy?”

Gayl stared at her, probably thinking, *Risk? besides my whole world and civilization and crown and family? Those... but he does too.* She put down her harp.

Dim flashes at her high-pitched voice again as Gayl turned to speak to him. “I’ll tell you a secret,” she smirked. “If you promise not to tell *anyone*.”

He pondered that. Were some secrets only his to keep? How many others had she told this ‘one off’ secret to? What kind of secret would she dare tell only him? None likely. No, this would be a low level risk, something girls did to each other all the time, and he would

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probably need to play the game on her terms, occasionally. “Sure, I promise.”

“No, seriously, if you tell anyone I will kill you.”

“You can’t kill me,” he protested. “Just because you’re queen. You’re not allowed to.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what we can get away with.”

He chose to not answer that. It sounded too much like a genuine threat.

“You speak like a true Thiuzian nobility,” Destiny chastised her, with a kind grin.

Yet Gayl was grinning to herself, as though it really was just some sort of game among girlfriends. Did she treat the others like this? “It’s not easy. They’re always telling me. You know, I have to act more ‘Celtwyld’ – always running off and doing things. They’d like this adventure, tell me it’s very ‘Pearl’ thing to do. Bossing other people around and making things happen *right now*. Very Celtwyld. They’d like this... they’ll likely talk about it for generations, even if we never return.”

He huffed. That was not a promising concept either.

“I’m not like my father,” she protested.

He was not convinced, and let it show. But listening to her, he’d already realized, was the price required of going on this mission in the first place. As she’d pointed out, this would not be the last time he’d

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have to do it; he was sure. Such a long journey to get to the galactic center. He could have to endure her whole life story by then, multiple times. But he stilled his thoughts, she was already speaking again.

“He never even raised me. I think in the last year he’s only spoken four words to me. Only four. No, I was raised by nurses and uncles and nannies. All Perlian. All locals. I’m not like my dad. I hardly know him at all.”

He did not know that. “I think... that’s sad,” Blayd admitted.

She sighed, “So what I have to tell you – you have to really promise not to tell anyone.”

He huffed. Destiny rose to his defense, “He’s already promised. His word should be enough for you,” she stated.

Gayl huffed. “All right then. I have a confession to make, if you like... I am an artisan, right? Master of every tool? Well... lies. I’m not. I hate the blade.”

“You ... hate the blade?” Blayd was shocked. “I’ve seen what you can do with it... you came equal first in the summer tournament last year; how can you say you *hate* it!”

“Bah! What’s the point of cutting a man in half when you can make his head explode by sheer will? The blade’s not so useful. Master tells me I cannot yet see it, that I am not yet ‘one with the blade’.”

“I can’t get one to even move properly, and you’re cutting up stone with it!”

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“Yeah, I suppose there is that. But I don’t *like* the blade. I’m supposed to, but I just don’t *get* it!”

Blayd shook his head. “That is interesting.”

She looked bothered by that reply, for some reason, but did not pursue it. “Now you,” Gayl told him.

His face must have betrayed his shock.

“I told you a secret. Now you have to tell me one of your own.”

Blayd was angry, how could she trick him into this? “I never agreed to those terms.”

Destiny even hissed, like his displeasure was her own.

Gayl glanced at her, not seeming threatened. “Yes, I suppose there is that.” She turned half around, “Well, seeming we’re going to likely die here, naw, it’s OK. You don’t have to talk.” And she turned away.

Blayd looked at the back of her head. Destiny glanced at him. But there *were* things that bothered him. Perhaps it was time to let someone else close?

He cleared his throat. “I... I don’t understand Piagon’s theorem.”

She spun around, “What?!”

He couldn’t defend himself fast enough, “I mean I *get* it, but the third axiom really is in contradiction with the first under extreme high-pressure situations. And-”

She scoffed, “It works, doesn’t it?”



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He held his hands up, “Yes, under almost all conditions.”

She huffed. “Of all the suffering and confusion of mortal life, and you pick a mathematical equation to go all angsty over.”

He looked at her for a while, “Well... it’s a very important equation.”

She shook her head. “All right, you’re an orb wielder to the core I suppose.”

“We live a very privileged life,” Destiny defended him. “Every basic need taken care of; kind, attentive parents. Life is very good.”

Gayl glanced back at Destiny, then turned to him and looked at him intently. “I suppose it doesn’t bother you that you have no human friends,” she said to him, almost as if it was a sincere question.

He wanted to be offended at that. He knew he was supposed to be upset by that. But Destiny was in arm’s reach. His hologram was a thought away. And he even had an annoying princess for company. Truth – pure and simple – he was anything but friendless in this occasionally indifferent life.

Besides, the ‘noise’ kept people away. Too much light or motion or sound and the world began to spin and prick and char. Being alone, with quietness, was the nicest place to be.

She seemed to guess his thoughts. “Well... at least I always knew where to find you.”

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“Why,” Destiny grinned, “having spoken to us but three times in seven years, did you always like to know where my boy could be found?”

Gayl took her time in answering, “I just needed to look for you,” she said to Destiny, and said nothing more for the rest of the day.

### War begins

Rayn looked out at the hundred, million wings of the invaders. *Impressive*, he thought.

Again, the three nobles with their archetypes approached. Rayn felt the surging rage of his soldiers pressing against him to kill them as soon as they were close enough. But he ignored it.

Sunfire was the first to speak. “By the Indelible Treaty, you are found want of your duty, and it is removed from you.”

A surging power slammed into Rayn from the rider, but he shoved it away.

The other dragon riders looked surprised.

Rayn spoke. “Sunfire, you’re wasting our time when we should be joining our powers. As you can clearly see - Divinity does not justify your cause this day.”

The alien pondered before replying, “Well, we shall see whose cause is divinely appointed before this day is out.”

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“I sorrow in that you are correct,” he replied.

They removed to rejoin their forces.

Jayd looked over at him. “Who makes the first move?”

“They consider entering our space their divinely appointed right, and we consider it as a divinely appointed provocation worthy of their deaths. The war has already begun.”

\*\*\*

Sunfire watched the opposing army with caution. The forces with him were outnumbered, and they did not have a home ground advantage. But his were more elite, and better prepared. This would not be the first empire that had fallen to their right.

“Enter their atmospheres,” he commanded, and the battle began.

\*\*\*

Rayn knew of the plot as soon as it was put into plan, so he was ready. It was a strange sensation, as if the archetype held no allegiance, but told him itself of their enemies’ plans made in its presence. It was a disconcerting thought that it might do the same against him.

“They begin,” he announced.

## The plant

They had barely gone a few systems in the next day when Destiny shouted out with pain. They were thrown from the thread they were almost torn apart quark by quark, but somehow she managed to keep them alive.

Gayl stood, and Blayd looked down to see Destiny's eyes wide with panic and fear.

“What is it!” he begged.

She tucked in and pulled at her leg, where a strange rope appeared to have stretched out from a large asteroid she was using to travel along.

“What is that!” he shouted.

Gayl clambered to look down. Destiny was crying out in immense pain, her leg seeming to convulse involuntarily.

“Get it off!” Blayd screamed.

Gayl shot lightning at it from the headband, striking it. By some demonry it appeared unaffected.

Blayd was at his orb a moment later, studying the ropes structure realized it was some form of inter-astral plant. He rapidly studied its anatomy, looking for some weakness.

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He heard Destiny cry out, and a hear beat later three more threads had shot out from the asteroid to wrap themselves around his dragon. Gayl barely had a moment to draw the artefact of the dragonriders shield from its hidden place within her arm, and used it to erect a forcefield strong enough to keep the tendrils from grabbing them as well.

The plant-like cords suddenly tightened, and Destiny's cries became truly frantic. She was thrusting and twisting all over in a desperate attempt to free herself from the pain filled tendrils, and it seemed she had entirely forgotten about her riders. He had to clutch on with both hands to prevent falling off.

"Look!" Gayl said.

He turned, and noticed the asteroid properly for the first time now. It was instead a strange collection of smaller asteroids all held together by the spider like tentacles of the massive plant. It had huge, withered white flowers all along the surface. They had three petals each, and each petal was rimmed with incredibly pointy spines, just perfect for crushing the life out of any hapless dragon that got caught in its tendrils. One particularly large flower turned to face them and opened up its spiny maw, a fluid substance like slime extruding from its surface.

He screamed.

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Destiny had her eyes shut, and her convulsions were slowly weakening, which was simultaneously a great relief and terrifying happening.

Gayl was on the tendril in an instant, but it resisted her sword swipes resolutely. He felt a sudden tug as she then simultaneously operated the shield and headband. She used the shield to strengthen the force field around them even as more tendrils tried to wrap themselves around them. It couldn't seem to stop the one that was already on Destiny's ankle, but it was preventing the others. At the same time she was using the headband to create a plume of super-hot gasses at the base of the sphere, not to harm the plant since that didn't seem possible, but in order to create a powerful jet stream on their sphere that pulled against the meteoroid with enormous strength.

Blayd looked at her in amazement, momentarily stunned at her skill. Operating any tool was impressive. Operating two at a time almost unheard of. Operating two *different* tools at their *full capacity* at the same time?

*Legendary.*

She squealed in frustration, "We're not breaking away!"

He hated himself for losing his focus, and went immediately to studying the plant once more. It had a curious, metallic signature that made it appear artificial. But the electron resonance wasn't difficult to

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place once he'd run a scan over the protein structures in its cellular matrix. The program would only take a few moments to compile.

Gayl screamed, intensifying her plasma. They seemed to pull away from the plant for a moment, but not enough. Destiny was completely silent. He looked up and saw with horror just how close they'd been pulled towards the plant. The dread flower was reaching out towards them, seeming to suck the life and hope from him. He knew if they ever found their way into the flower, they would never be able to burst out again. Not with all their technology.

“Blayd!” Gayl begged. She was doing all she could.

There was a silent ping inside his mind as the program finally was ready. He held out his orb, “the sword!” If she could only touch her sword to the orb, it would alter it at the nanoscopic level to deal with the vines at optimum efficiency.

She looked at him, momentarily considering her options. With grim determination she turned back to the space plant and began to conjure a huge fireball. It swelled and grew. Then, with her only remaining free hand she pulled out the blade of the dragon riders.

He knew what she was planning, and couldn't help but cringe.

In the very moment that she released the super-heated fireball of plasma, she swung her sword against the orb. Blayd was sure he was about to lose a finger to the impossibly sharpened blade, but her aim was miraculous. He was shoved violently against Destiny's back, but

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again Gayl seemed to have anticipated the sudden acceleration and used it to continue her swing downwards and towards the tendril. The program would only require a nanosecond to transfer and thus transform the blade.

The tendrils snapped with a single swipe.

With a jolting thrust they broke free of the plant at just the last heartbeat. He could almost feel the shockwave as the flower snapped closed without them, almost sense its bitter disappointment and hunger. They rocketed out into space, poisoned tendrils flailing after them. After a few breaths they were well and truly out of range of the plant's grasp.

"Here, don this!" Gayl shouted, handing him the bracelet which kept the air around them.

He put it on without question.

She ripped out her staff, and threw him aside. She placed it on Destiny's head and closed her eyes. "Breath," she commanded.

And Destiny breathed; a mechanical, soulless breath.

Blayd looked in his sphere. Within heartbeats he had located each and every molecule that was at fault. It was a specific poison, designed to block, and then lyse, the nerve cells. She was dying.

"I don't-" Gayl complained.

"Here!" Blayd shouted, shoving his orb up against her staff, knowing the information could be transferred directly to her mind



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instantly. The staff glowed brightly, and then Gayl resumed her work. Within moments Destiny shut her eyes and breathed deeply in on her own.

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

Blayd coughed back his tears, only dimly aware that he had been crying. He stroked his dragon affectionately. “That was close.”

“A little too close,” Destiny replied with a weak smile, “I don’t know if I can get a hold of the threads anymore.”

He shared a concerned look with Gayl, who was standing wiping the sweat from her own brow. If Destiny could not get a hold of the threads, they were stuck out here, potentially forever. At least until someone found them, which could mean their pursuers, and that might be a month away. He wasn’t sure how they’d survive that long in floating emptiness for all that time.

“What do we do now?” he wondered out loud.

“Come on Destiny! I’m sure you can make it! Just head somewhere close. Blayd, you know where we are. Find us somewhere safe.”

Having memorized every star and system in the galaxy had its advantages. “Yes, Bismuth system is close. Head for one of the outer dwarf planets, should be unpopulated. It’ll have solid water but we can melt that. You’ll be able to rest.”

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Destiny nodded, and he pointed. Her body took on the familiar spiral it always did when travelling by thread. She bowed her head and shut her eyes fiercely. There was a gentle lurch, then a solid one. Then nothing.

“Come on Destiny, come on,” Gayl encouraged her.

Blayd just lay down, and let her feel his heartbeat against her scales. She lay there, soaking in his affection for a moment more, and then...

BANG! They lurched along a thread more painfully than he'd ever known. Within a breath they were hurtling towards an orange star, and a moment later veered off towards the outer rim of ice planetoids. They shot towards it with dangerous speed.

“Look out, we're going to miss it!” Gayl shouted.

But Blayd was far more worried about what would happen if they struck it directly. They were heading in much too quickly, and the next second Destiny's head slunk down.

### Ice planet

Blayd looked down at the ice planet as it was speeding past and was surprised to find millions of lights along its surface. It was anything but unpopulated.

A second later there was the familiar pull as another dragon, or being, caught hold of the thread they were on. Even as they shot past

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the planet and Destiny's unconscious fingers uncurled from their grasp, another dragon joined them in the night sky.

It was a dragon and her rider. The dragon had several feathered antennae on her head from which her teenage rider clung. Within a breath they pulled alongside, and caught Destiny safely.

"Phew!" Gayl said.

But Blayd was too unsure about this new rider to say anything at all. The little girl spoke, saying something in a language he didn't know. Quickly he accessed her local obelisk, fortunately they had one, and he told her.

"Can you help us? We are fleeing a space plant and my dragon was wounded!"

The girl looked at them sideways, "You are not a rider then? What are you doing with a dragon?"

"Please," Gayl said, "our world is in trouble. Will you help us?"

"Of course!" the girl said. The dragon nodded, as if she wanted to say something but was too shy to. "And place your dragon on Breeze's back here. We will carry you in."

Within moments they were riding towards the ice planet once more. It was so far away from the orange sun it just looked like a bright star. The planetoid itself was large for an inner ice world, yet still not large enough to host much of its own atmosphere naturally. But the

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residents seemed to have taken care of that with a large energy field projected from their planet's surface.

The dragon called Breeze floated skillfully down. The girl, who looked about their age, hurried down her dragon's neck to look at Destiny.

"She's been poisoned by Garkwarts," she told them.

"We know," Blayd snapped, a little too short tempered even for his liking.

She didn't seem fussed, "I'm Astrid. We sensed you falling and came out here to help. I'm the only dragon rider on my world, you know."

"You live here?" Gayl asked, clearly a little surprised by the fact.

"Yes, where do you live?"

"I, well, it's just that you live on an ice planet, why don't you live somewhere warmer?"

"We have our reasons," she said with a grim smile.

He looked out towards the glimmering energy field. Inside, there were farms, and dozens of houses all packed together in tight groups. There were no dragons, but the beasts within were strange indeed. With shaggy fur and long snouts, none looked like the animals Blayd had seen before. His curiosity momentarily distracted him from his dragon's situation.

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He noticed a major looking citadel in the middle of the strange planetoid. The gravity here was still very weak, so it was a bit distracting.

Astrid opened Destiny's closed eyes, and Blayd almost jumped up to throw her away, but Gayl stopped him.

"She knows what she's doing," Gayl said firmly.

Blayd's mouth felt try, though he had to check twice to make sure it was real, but was too bothered to ponder why it was suddenly dry.

Astrid shrugged. "You'd think. Being the only dragon rider on world makes me the regional expert. But I'm not. Breeze, what do you think?"

The shy dragon only shook her head.

Gayl sighed, and pulling out her wand, began to study Destiny intently. Soon, she was able to project some images into the air for Astrid to see. "You see, there's damage to the encoding codons. She'll die in three days if we don't get her medical help soon."

Astrid nodded. "Come, Breeze, let us carry her to the medicarium."

Carefully the dragon picked up Destiny, which would not have been very easy, and then carried the three of them as well.

"Your dragon is very strong," Gayl observed.

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Astrid just beamed a delighted grin. “So, Outers! You look like people, what race are you? Why is your skin so pale? And all that hair, does it get in the way? Oh, are you a mated pair?”

“Ahh,” Blayd tried and failed to get a single word in.

“We are NOT,” Gayl replied, perhaps a bit too forcefully. “Astrid, please, let us just get to the hospital, the medicarium.”

“Oh, you don’t want the hospital. That’s for people like me. You need the medicarium. We use it for zoological and xenological research.”

There was a pause, “Will we be safe?” Gayl asked.

Blayd wondered why she’d ask that.

“Hmm?” Astrid grinned again, “Of course! We don’t get many visitors to ‘Outer’ here. But my people know about dragons.”

*Be careful*, Gayl suddenly warned him quite forcefully. *Use your orb. Make sure we have a fast exit at all times, if you know what I mean.*

He did not know what she meant, but he began to look anyway.

*It means*, Peyoth explained from inside the orb, *that your princess is worried that the nice people of Astrid here might want to turn you into experiments, if they are a little too curious about dragons and outsiders.*

That made him very, very cautious. His mouth went even dryer than before. Was this fear?

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They made their way over to the citadel, and it was clear they were making quite a bit of a stir as they went. People were stopping in the street and pointing. But it seemed to do the trick, the medicarium looked ready for them when they arrived.

A tall looking female of Astrid's species was at the door, while others loaded Destiny onto a trolley of some kind, and fussed over her. Blayd was momentarily impressed by the depth of their study and research, but not every door was open at this point. At least they knew about dragons.

"We'll have to take her into recovery," the lady told them.

Blayd nodded.

She looked at him quizzically. "You do have some means to pay for this treatment, don't you?" she asked.

He looked over at Gayl.

"We are humble travelers, dependent on your mercy," she replied.

The lady seemed displeased. "The treatment is quite significant. Perhaps if you allowed us to study her life code?"

Blayd interrupted, "We assumed you would." Dragons almost all had the same life code, it was how they were made. There were some regional variations, which could occasionally be interesting. But it helped to correct for errors in the duplication of their genome. Variation

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was found in how the genes recoded themselves in each bonding, it was part of the unfathomable genius of their creation.

Gayl shushed him, far too late. But the following negotiation was lost on him. Something about staying the night, advanced treatment, weeks of healing. It did not sound very encouraging.

“Well, you do seem quite in the rush, don’t you,” the lady observed.

Gayl began to make a fragile excuse.

“We’re going to use a rare conjunction of stellar objects to visit the builders of the dragons, the giants,” he informed them.

That made Gayl angry. *Blayd! You can’t keep telling people that!*

He shrugged. *They’ll know, soon enough.*

Gayl began to chastise him, but the lady soon stopped her. “So, they are not just rumors then?”

They fell silent, but Blayd felt vindicated.

The lady spoke again. “Something is happening to the bond. It isn’t publicly known yet, though we have very few dragons compared to other races. There was a war a while back. Now, I digress. But there has been a subtle and not-too-positive shift in the psychic field of most bondings. If you know something, you should tell us.”

They were silent.

“Please,” the lady continued.



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Gayl sighed. “We think it might be dying. We don’t know why, but on behalf of our people we are desperate to see the Giants. Only they can help us now.”

The lady seemed deeply distressed. “You two are too young! Why would your people send you? But you do seem wise for ones so young... This is terrible news for us. May I assure you that the tenuous hold the dragonriders have on the authority in our people ... this would be a disaster.”

“And that is why we must hurry,” Gayl replied.

The lady appeared to send some message via the wand in her hand.

It gave Blayd hope, perhaps they could be back on their path with a good night’s rest.

“You two don’t look very well rested either, I might add.”

“We are happy to stay here.”

The lady seemed to think a moment, “Then, perhaps, you might like to take Astrid with you? She would do well to see the Giants I think.”

Blayd was about to reply when Gayl shushed him, and Peyoth agreed. “We would be honored, if she can keep up!”

The lady smiled. “It may give our people an hour of hope. If that is all we have to get to the bomb shelters again... oh...” and she walked quickly away.

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*Those boots are too precious to let other people know you have them,* Peyoth told him, sternly.

It bothered Blayd, since the lady was being quite nice. But he knew politics and such were not his strong point, so he let it be.

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They rested that night at Astrid's place. It seemed well suited to a dragon rider, with a high perch and plenty of wing space. It seemed Gayl liked it too, and she talked with Astrid for hours. People might not have been Blayd's strong point, but he recognized the subtle and persistent way Gayl tried to talk her out of coming along.

*The boots are made for one,* Peyoth reminded him.

*Perhaps she can borrow theirs?* He asked.

Peyoth kept his thoughts to himself about that, though he did cryptically mumble a quote to himself, *'There was war a little while back.'*

Astrid's mother was not quite sure of what to do with the hologram, but got chatting to him nicely enough, and they made dinner together. This gave Blayd the chance to stare into his orb, which took a bit to get through their unusual way of organization information, but it was enough. Then he updated several details about the local star clusters they'd been though, and was sure to give a detailed account of

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the terrible plant. Within moments the orb had found a specific dragon antibody which would have protected them effectively, if they'd known about it. At least Destiny would be safe now.

If felt wrong, very wrong, to be laying down to sleep without her. It took him an hour, or more. Eventually Peyoth surrendered his energy to create a subtle illusion of her sleeping nearby, and Blayd was grateful. It did the trick.

### The abduction

He was woken at some random point later by violent shouting and the sound of broken glass. It took him several seconds to disentangle his senses from what was illusory, and what was real. And when he realized the forceful tugging on his arm dragging him to his feet was all too real, well, it was too late to resist.

“What are you doing!” he heard Gayl scream.

It broke him out of his sleep in an instant. Peyoth was nowhere to be seen, his orb still hidden in his sash. He looked around a room, far too brightly lit.

There were several of Astrid's people, dressed in grey and black as if for war. They had short rods that were clearly primitive pulse

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guns, and masks that no doubt protected them from the blinding light. There were about eight of them, and one dragon.

It was small, somewhat bronze, no bigger than a person. She was stuck to the wall, then stood up, and turned completely into a humanoid of Astrid's species. *A shifter?* Blayd was impressed. He'd not heard of someone managing something as specific as a humanoid before.

He reached out to Peyoth, who was busy with something.

A movement with cinnamon caught his eye. Gayl was being held between two muscular warriors. She thrashed against them, and it made Blayd confused. Why would the heir apparent, training in martial arts some older than entire civilizations, engage in a tactic so obviously futile?

He tried to rub his eyes, but found both his arms held by the intruders.

"Tactic!" the dragon creature muttered. She was quite an attractive humanoid for their species. "9 tools, just like us. Just as we predicted."

Blayd glared at her, and she smiled at him. An unkind, victorious smile.

"What are you doing," Gayl again demanded.

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The humanoid turned to face her, but kept her feet planted. “Oh, don’t worry princess, I will not harm him. Matter of fact, you’re both free to leave as soon as this is over. But, I’m afraid, your dragon is not.”

“What!” Gayl screeched.

The woman moaned in frustration. “Have some decorum, princess! It’s not like you’re about to die in the most horrible manner or anything! Keep it together, child!” the chastisement was somewhat brutal, and Blayd had the distinct impression that there was some telepathy involved. The dragon was trying to ... break... the princess. Or, at least, render her too distraught to focus.

As he expected, the tactic was useless against the princess. “I warn you, dragon. You and your people. This is uncivilized. This is a poor way to treat your guests. Let us go, and we may forget this social disgrace.”

The woman dragon looked surprised, then laughed.

Gayl just continued, “Force us to reclaim our dragon, and we may sew death upon your world such as to have you beg for our forgiveness.”

This time the dragon woman laughed out loud, “You hear this? You hear this don’t you? Such a threat by one so small!” She bent her head down to Gayl’s face. “Such bold words.” She stood up straight. “Let me make this clear. We would not do this, unless it was absolutely necessary. We’re sorry, but we’re a little low on dragons at this time.”

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Her voice became sober, sincere. “Our government is about to fall, and as uncouth as this is, we cannot allow a single dragon to go unbonded when it can be used to make such a difference!”

At that, Blayd blood turned to fire, his mind a cold rage. Without any conscious effort, he began to fight the best way he could; with his mind.

She may, or may not, have still been speaking. “We will force your dragon to bond to us, then turn you over to the orphanage.”

Gayl responded, “We are on a quest, the difference we will make will save the *whole galaxy*, even your world. Have you no measure of this phyrnic victory you seek! Give us our dragon or you will lose them all! You cannot keep us here against our will – it is immoral.”

Blayd waited, for just an instant. He wanted to see what the dragon woman would say. But it was not likely a very wise thing. She was not the one in charge. He did not know who was in charge. But he had to reach them.

The woman almost seemed to reconsider her words. “We’ve noticed, don’t you think? But the interrofaction is from half a galaxy away. We don’t feel very threatened.”

“Then let us help you with that,” Blayd replied, and nodded at Gayl.

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And just as the woman turned to face her, Gayl struck. The air thrust away her guards and his, and in the very same motion she brought out her sword and struck the woman against her neck and chest. It was a killing blow, but as may be expected, even shifted dragon skin is unnaturally strong.

But the woman, for her part, acted like being wounded was a dramatically unnatural experience for her. She fell to the floor, seeming dazed, and when she touched her wound and saw her blood, she screamed.

Blayd didn't need to touch his orb to use it, but he did. Gayl kept the wind around him while he worked.

And everything he then did, he regretted. But he had to get his dragon back, or even they would die. Their computer systems were still primitive. They had not had the benefit of seven worlds battling each other for millennia. The cascading flood of sympathetic, evolving, computer viruses devastated their system within a single breath, covering their world in chaos. Powersources died, information systems shut down, or began to lie. He targeted public transport, economy and businesses. Even the hospitals. But by the second breath the entire world was his.

And, in that, he wasn't really sure what to do with it.

Gayl was pretty busy at the moment. The initial stunning of the guards was only temporary, they were the elite after all. But she stood

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at his feet, spinning around in the air, staff and shield in hand. Their weapons could not harm him. Someone tried to shoot through the wall at his back but still she sensed it, and using the cloak made them air. She took out her wand and pointed it at the sniper several leagues away. Then she laughed.

Desperately Blayd reached out for his dragon, desperately wishing they were bonded and he might just know where she was.

Peyoth had already found her. She was already halfway to their world. He'd shut down the ship, was leaking the atmosphere since the battle began. Their primitive systems were no match for him. Destiny was safe, for now.

An alarm sounded in his orb. There was some ground-based planetary weapon aiming the vast distance of space towards... him.

*So, they cannot stop us, they try to kill us?* Blayd told his friends.

Gayl tried to reply but he missed it.

He only took an instant to study their systems. The solution was quickly apparent. The device was a laser, so it would vaporize this entire mountainside soon. It was a very expensive piece of equipment. but it took an enormous amount of energy. Cities worth. And all that energy would create heat. And that heat needed somewhere to go.

So, before they'd even had the chance to aim it properly, he'd removed every safety protocol. They tried to shut it down, but he was



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already ready. The resulting explosion would have killed several of them. It was a very high probably that it killed several of them.

Blayd felt his heart thundering in his chest. He was breathing slow and steady. His skin was hot, his muscles filled with energy. He was... he knew this... he was angry.

When he spoke, he did not care who heard. It was probably most of their entire world. *Shame on you*, he condemned them. *We only came here to help you, and you stole my dragon!* unintentionally, he sent them an image of the ship, of the prison, of his dragon.

In a moment of blinding rage, he let his anger surge. There were blackouts all across their world. He tried to limit the explosions to a few unpopulated areas, but it was hard.

He felt a tug at his shirt.

He looked down, and saw Gayl. In her eyes, there was an infinite pleading. A sorrow. He tried to breath. There were tears on his face.

Gayl then spoke, “We came in peace. We came to help you, and protect you. But you stole his dragon. Are you sure you still deserve them?”

Blayd could feel the stunning horror of those words shake the group mind of the people to their very souls, and he had to smile. Yes, she’d found a way to reach them when he could not.

He felt their ship turning around.

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“No,” a voice called. It was the shifter dragon. She was standing up, her wound healing slowly, though the flesh was still red and sore. “You don’t understand, we need her.”

Gayl turned her staff into a blade. “Lies. What you want is not his dragon, but political leverage. And you will not have it!”

The shifter turned into her dragon form. She was bronze, and very fierce. “I will not allow you will not condemn our world with this theft!”

Gayl scoffed, “And we will not allow you to condemn your world by taking our dragon!” And she charged.

Whatever clever defenses the dragon had prepared, she was not prepared for a master prodigy.

Now it was his turn to protect her. He turned to face the warriors, who looked confused. Then they seemed to remember who they were, and they began to charge. It looked like they’d lost their pulse guns, or that Gayl had cut them all apart. But they were still skilled warriors.

But not nearly skilled enough for his rage. Nightmares felled several, and semi corporeal monsters wounded several more. And then, when he grew tired of their persistence, he electrocuted them all with a bioelectricity specially calibrated to cause them paralyzing pain. Blayd was enjoying himself.

But there was a war to win.

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He turned back, and glanced at the battle between the princess and the dragon. They were fairly evenly matched, but Gayl kept on coming up with new tools for a task. She broke the bones in the dragon's hand with her wand. She moved faster than light. She could disappear from space entirely, or summon shadowed horrors from the place between worlds. And then, in a move Blayd was careful to remember, as the dragon fell to her side Gayl took out her staff and struck her upside on the face. It was more than a very painful assault, it was a powerfully demoralizing psychic attack.

Blayd felt the horror among the people as he, unintentionally, broadcast the dragon's defeat. It broke them. She was apparently someone quite famous. Very powerful. Legendary.

And a foreign princess had humbled her.

The fight left the guards as well.

Blayd felt Destiny's ship returning to them. He felt Astrid's dragon tearing apart the hull. Destiny quickly broke away, and together they raced back.

The ground shuddered as Destiny returned. He shouted his joy, but it came out all wrong. There was too much pain, and fear. It sounded like a roar.

And Destiny matched it with her own. The ground shuddered as she landed and wrapped herself around him. He was crying. She was crying. She brought her face towards the sky, and with another roar let

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out so much lightning it reached the top of the sky, and space itself twisted forever above the little home.

And the bronze dragon cowered on the ground, one hand covering her face. Slowly, she turned back into a humanoid.

“I told you they’d win,” Astrid said.

The dragon woman knelt, “I am defeated.”

“That,” Gayl said, breathing heavily, “Is a poor apology.”

The dragon woman looked at him, “Please, release us,”

He glared at her, all the pain and anger of a moment ago still filling his mind and paralyzing his heart. Had he... hurt them?

“You seek peace?” Gayl stated, weapons raised.

“We do,” the dragon replied.

With a wave of her hand, Gayl dismissed all her formidable curses she’d laid on the guards. Some were weeping. She’d made a big mess of them. Then she turned towards Blayd, and nodded.

For a moment he didn’t know what she wanted, or, rather, didn’t want to know what she wanted. He buried his face in Destiny’s feathers. *They’d hurt her.* They’d almost taken her away from him. He was about to lose her forever!

It broke him in ways he didn’t know he could. He fell to the ground, and he screamed. There was no way he was going to let them do that again. It would be easier to die. It would be easier to let them

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all die than risk they ever try to take her away again. What had they done?

“We came to help!” he screamed, his face buried in her feathers. “We only came to help!” he sobbed twice, then it stopped.

He felt Gayl walk up, but then Destiny moved, and Gayl stopped.

He felt a soft nudge on his shoulder.

He looked, and then he saw Destiny’s face. She didn’t look wounded. But she was sad. Was she sad at him? Yes, she was sad at him. Or, for him. “I’m OK,” she promised. “I’m OK now. We can get away now. We can go now, my boy.”

He gripped her face with all his force. Was this a bonding? It was a bond. How he was lost without her, so completely! And he knew her death was his own. He would never live without her.

“It’s OK. We’re OK,” she promised him.

He held her, and then, because she’d want it, he began to release all his programs. It was not an easy thing to do. It would be years before they repaired it all. The kind of chaos he’d unleashed was never, truly, repaired. It would be a mark within their teachers for the rest of their world.

“They will not forget us,” he promised Destiny, as if he meant they would never try that again, but the words didn’t come out that way.

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Destiny stood. Blayd was still working. There were things he could put back before the programs deleted themselves. Peyoth was back in his orb, watching silently and carefully. Gayl still had her sword drawn.

The dragon woman spoke, "Please, take Astrid with you. It is the least--"

"No," Gayl replied. "You need her to sort out your own mess here." She then looked over at Astrid, and finally spoke the truth, "She would only slow us down."

The dragon looked like she might even try to insist, but Astrid nodded. Some soldier tried to help the dragon, and she needed help to stand. "I see you have fought dragons before," she muttered to Gayl, a friendly smile playing upon her lips.

Gayl did not lower her weapon, "More times than I care to count."

The dragon woman's smile died. "Well, you have bested me, and brought untold destruction to my world. I suppose the least we can do is offer you dinner."

Gayl looked at him, but neither of them needed the other to speak their mind. "No, though I thank you for your hospitality, though late it be. We'd best be going."

Blayd was beginning to feel a bit tired as the situation clearly went from threat to non-threat. His arms were convulsing, but Peyoth

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steadied his biochemistry from within the orb. Blayd looked at the woman dragon, at the scattered and shattered warriors. At the twisting space above in the air, and the fragile world so far away it was less than a dim star, which had tried to steal his dragon and incinerate him where he stood. He shook his head. He didn't know what to think. He pitied them. Then he hated them. Then he pitied them again.

Destiny bent down and he almost reflexively stood on her.

Gayl floated up like some sort of demigod. "Let this be forgotten, our first painful meeting, and hope for a better moment next time our two powerful, noble, inspiring kin meet."

"Yes, indeed," the woman dragon spoke. She looked angry, and hurt. But most of all she looked worried. What had she just lost? It was more than a single dragon.

Blayd then hated *her*. He gripped destiny's scales till his fingers hurt. Would they do the universe a favor to destroy her right now.

Then he felt ugly, and hateful, and sick. Tears stung his eyes.

The dragon woman noticed. She looked up at him. She took a step closer, but Destiny took a step away.

The dragon woman looked ashamed. Then she spoke, and it was quiet, and believably sincere. "I'm sorry I tried to steal your dragon, young man. Please, forgive me."

He did not answer.

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And Destiny, thankfully, did not expect him too, but with an invisible flurry of power went to the threads from ground level, which was impressively skilled of her.

And they were out of that solar system in less than an instant.

### Feedback

At least an hour passed in silence. Destiny was still tired, he could tell from the lights under her skin. “Take an hour, there,” he said. Pointing to a system that held a safe planet.

They ate fish and bread, and tried to not talk about what had just happened.

Eventually Gayl brought it up. “I had no idea what you were capable of,” she told him.

He thought about it, distracted by the ochre lines forming in his vision every time he listened to a stick he was running through the sand. “Neither did I.”

“Well!” She announced, “We will NOT be going back there again!”

“Suits me,” Blayd replied. He tried to put the chaos out of his mind, the trouble he was causing. The damage he’d done. It made him feel sick, and weak. He would have destroyed all technology on their world to get his dragon back. There was no limit... “I’m not a monster,” he announced.



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Gayl took her time to answer. “You had no time to be subtle, and their whole galaxy is in danger!”

He felt angry at her, and turned away.

She thought some more. “You really were amazing! I’ve never seen, that was like, hundreds of lines-”

She was still saying things that annoyed him. He could not tell she knew.

Then she got angry, “I don’t know what you want me to say Blayd!” and waved her hands wide in the air.

He was still too angry, “I don’t want you to say anything,” he admitted, and meant it. Silence would be nice now.

So what Destiny had to say really got him thinking, “No, you don’t.”

They both looked at her.

Destiny was just swaying in the air, resting well. “Gayl is one of the smartest, most devoted, and clever people you know, Blayd. You will always want to know her opinion.”

He looked the princess. She was clever, and the only other human on this quest. And insanely talented with every tool. And kind of pretty too. She was just staring back at him. “Then, what do I want, Destiny?”

She slithered past him. “You want her to listen. Blayd.” She turned towards Gayl in the air, “No fixing. No old stories. Hear his feelings.”

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“Oh,” Gayl replied. “Boys need that too?”

Destiny nodded.

Gayl looked at him. Then she went, and watched the waves with him for at least five minutes. “We almost lost your dragon,” she said.

Destiny lay beside him, and despite himself, the tears started again. For quite some time there was just silence. “What did I do...” he wondered.

Gayl took a breath, but then said nothing.

He wondered what he wanted to say anyway. A sigh shuddered from his chest. “I think I really hurt them.”

Destiny nudged him.

Gayl was silent, but nodded, the hilt of her stone-severing blade a thought away. She had hurt people too. But nowhere nearly as many. “We sure made them think twice before capturing guests and stealing their dragons!” she concluded.

He had to laugh; it was true.

“Now what?” Blayd asked, looking at his orb, he did not know why.

Peyoth replied from the orb, “We move on. Mistakes were made, by everyone. Terrible mistakes. But we only have now. And right now, we need to save the universe!”

Blayd sighed, deeply. *This is not an absolute. But it is a chance to try again.* He told them.

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Gayl nodded, and stood up athletically. “Agreed! You’re a very scary boy, when you want to be Blayd. But they brought that upon themselves and I have nothing I regret. What a story it will make one day! Come, we must away! To the Giants!”

“To the giants!” Destiny shouted and she cheered.

“Yay... the giants,” he mumbled.

But he could not hide his grin.

## You promised us victory

Sunfire threw his helmet to the floor, and fell heavily upon the couch.

“The battle has wearied you?” his high priest observed.

Sunfire sighed. “Cambion is wounded, and will need a night to recover.”

“The nobles of Thiaz were really *that* successful?” the priest mocked.

Sunfire scoffed, but did not reply.

The priest continued. “For the most part, they keep to the ancient ways – we challenge a dragon for its territory, or they for ours. It is rider for rider.”

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Sunfire scowled. “They are holding their own quite well. They know this is just the appetizers of war – we test their strengths and their resolve, they test ours. It is, as yet, a stalemate.” He sat up to glare at the older being. “You promised us victory, old priest.”

The priest settled down in his self-assuredness. “You will see.”

## The Leviathan

They flew on through the void of space for more two days without interruption when Destiny gave a small, ‘Huh?’ noise.

“What happened?” Blayd asked.

“I don’t understand”, Destiny muttered, “the thread just switched destination on me? Can they do that? Of course they can, I-”

“We’re being tracked!” The princess yelled in alarm. “Get us out of here Destiny, get us out!”

But apparently, it was already too late. Suddenly, along the golden thread, two enormous creatures appeared. They were floating and ethereal, like enormous space whales. Enormous... carnivorous... space whales. Somehow, they forced Destiny to continue to grip on the golden thread and despite her struggles, guided her towards the dusty red dot that was a massive stellar nursery. Destiny squealed with frustration.

“Easy girl,” Gayl consoled her.

Blayd had to agree, there seemed to be little they could do anyway, and he wasn’t about to provoke one by attacking.

With an emotion somewhere between awe and fear Blayd looked over at the space whales, only they were not really whales. Their skin was pocked and coarse, and they had large wafting tentacles growing

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from their heads. They seemed to emit an aura of calmness, despite their size and immense power over dragons. Within moments the outside stars began to dim against the darkening light of the nebula, where only a few bright blue stars that could be seen against the blue emptiness of space.

“What are they?” Gayl muttered.

“The leviathan”, Destiny replied, her voice trembling.

He fell silent. The leviathan. The only naturally occurring space born species capable of preying on dragons. And they did, millennia ago. Till the alliance with the humans drove them to the point of extinction... or so it was thought.

And Blayd thought that this could mean nothing but bad things.

“Where do you think they are taking us?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Gayl replied, “though they promise us no harm.”

Blayd thought for a moment, “Why can’t I hear them?”

“They’re using the headband,” Gayl replied, tapping her forehead.

Blayd nodded. It was uncommon, but not impossible that naturally telepathic species would use the headband.

After several minutes their hurried flight along the thread began to slow, and they found themselves deep inside the nebula. It was almost impossible to see the stars outside, except the local ones which were blindingly bright. Even so, it wasn’t thick, not like the clouds of

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water were on their home world. But the distances in space were so vast that what little dust was there still blocked the light from most of the other stars beyond.

Rising from the vast distance a number of other leviathan soon joined them. They were encircled on every direction. Destiny coughed with relief when they allowed her to let go of the thread. They were riding in darkness, surrounded by massive space carnivorous whales that prowled around them softly. Their enormous presence bespoke an ancient wisdom, but it was clear they were not to be trifled with. They were powerful, and strange.

*Travelers*, a voice suddenly spoke.

The three of them turned to find another Leviathan floating directly toward them. She was larger than the others, with great fins of gossamer silk flying from her flanks. She had glowing pink highlights around her, and space itself seemed to bend in reverence at her presence. She looked so different from the others, indeed they all looked so different from one another, that it was impossible to tell if they were all the same species or not.

*We're listening*. Gayl replied.

The leviathan stopped her approach, and twisted so that she could look at them first from six eyes on one side of her head, then the other. *Forgive me, I did not realize you were children. But you are not*

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*welcome here; for you are the portents of dire news.* Her voice sounded angry, but not at them. At... something.

*No, forgive us,* Gayl said, bowing low, *if we have trespassed your domain or offended you in any way.*

The giant leviathan seemed to sigh, a sad, long sound. *Do you think such a trite matter could truly bother us? Who own nothing and belong instead to the universe? No, this does not trouble us. I am Gigantatoan, and we are the Leviathan; travelers of eternity. Here among the stars we are born, and live our lives so much longer than your own. We watch the birth, life, and death of many stars in our time, and of these we sing. But of late a terrifying resonance is stretching out from younder way, from the place where you come. It started not too long ago.*



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And from this, Blayd was immediately aware, he could tell she named a time from two days before any on Pearl were aware of the bonding problem.

*And with it, a sickness.*

He pondered their enormous forms, their incomprehensible power. Their mastery over space and time and dragons. What were these mysterious beings? To him, in that moment, in the throne of their power, they seemed majestic, beyond description, and intelligent, beyond comprehension.

*We are dying.*

Gayl gasped. *No, say it isn't true!*

There was a mournful cry from all the leviathan, as they echoed the speaker's thoughts, *Oh child, it is! We are dying! Older than the stars, our lives are being cut short! Our vision is fading, our songs are failing. We cannot flee, for there is nowhere we can go.*

*What do you mean?* Blayd asked. *If this "sound", as you call it, started at our place surely you can just get further away?*

*And for what? To delay the inevitable? Do you not understand? The sound has no end to its reach. It resonates with time itself to touch the very barriers of eternity.*

*How is that possible?* Gayl asked, turning toward him. *We only noticed it two weeks ago, and it's been growing since then. That would seem to imply it is spreading out from a central point.*

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*Central? No. This is a resonance that impeaches all existence. It is true, it is growing in its effect. But its sound is unmeasured. There is no where we can go to escape.*

*Do you know what it is? I mean, can you help us?*

*Help? No. We don't know how. In fact, for help is the very cause which we have brought you here, to the place where none have come before. Please... you must save us!*

Again, the chorus of baleful howls sounded from the space whales, this time a tangible pain washed over him. They were terrified, like mice caught in a trap awaiting death, yet knowing there was nowhere they could go.

*We are trying*, Blayd began. He saw Gayl turn to him, begging him to stay silent. But he wanted too much to tell them. *We are travelling to the hall of the Giants, that created that first made the dragons.*

*Yes. The Giants. We have had dealings with them before*, the leviathan said, and didn't seem too pleased about that fact.

Destiny cringed.

*We are trying. We are hoping the Giants can tell us what is going on, and what can be done about it.* Blayd said.

The leviathan thought for a moment, as though conversing with her friends. *Of the path within we know little. We cannot help you.* She made as though she would turn away.

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*Wait!* Gayl begged. *Wait, please.*

She turned back.

Gayl continued, *Perhaps, there is a way. Do you know of any short cuts? I mean, faster points of travel between here and, well, the center of the galaxy.*

The ancient leviathan pondered for a moment, *Have you not watched out? Do you truly only look at your own night sky?* Here, she began to transmit images to Blayd's mind. He wasn't sure how she was doing that, but it seemed to involve the orb somehow. It was as if she, as if they all, were every bit as wise as the noblest of dragons. *See, your coming to us is most precipitous. Your arrival was foreseen. Look beyond, if you have any knowledge. See outside the confines of your own galactic cluster...*

Blayd's mind boggled at the vast amount of information she spun into him. In one instant, any pride he had in memorizing the entire galaxies stellar population was blown away. She was showing him the entire universal cluster as visible by the reckoning of light, stretching on from the beginning of time. For every star in their galaxy she showed him a thousand galaxies like his own. The knowledge was incomprehensibly large, but it did not overwhelm him, or make him afraid. It was glorious. He had no way of knowing how she could comprehend all this, or where she had learned it.

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But her message was clear, bluntly so. A rare confluence of galaxies in their near cluster... a deepening of the zero-point energies for millions of millions of light years in every direction... a rare, unrepeatable alignment of the black threads that serendipitously lead right between the heart of humanity, to the center of the galaxy.

*This...* he muttered.

“This will speed our journey from months, to days!” Destiny squealed with delight.

*Thank you, thank you!* He said.

*We only ask that you save us... our kind has no age. We must not die in this now...*

The leviathan parted, and Blayd grew serious. Inside his mind, and inside his sphere, he could feel himself already making all the necessary calculations. This was the revelation they needed. Destiny seemed to share his enthusiasm.

“What’s going on?” Gayl asked.

“We’re going to take a little shortcut.” Density said, and with that, took hold of a rare black thread using the archetype of the boots, and they rocketed out into the vastness of space much faster than any dragon had ever travelled before.

“What was that! Was that what she was saying?”

Blayd wondered what she meant.

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Gayl looked hurt, and saddened. “I could make no sense of what she was showing us. I would have been better to see nothing.”

“So,” Destiny mused in the narrow pocket of air Gayl’s wrist band sustained around them. “The leviathan of legend. One of the few species to ever put my own to shame. I would have like to have stayed longer... maybe... *bitten* a few.”

“Is that what your memories show you?” Blayd asked.

She nodded, “Galefirst, my 25<sup>th</sup> great grandmother, battled them out at Ethphraim’s borders in the second millennia. Oh, she would be blown away to see is have a sensible conversation with that Gigantatoan one there! Oh, how she *hated* them!” And Destiny laughed.

Blayd wasn’t sure what was funny about that, but Gayl smiled. “Well, when we next see one, I’ll let you take a nice chunk out of one of them, eh Destiny? A little something for Grandma!”

The two shared a bit of a giggle.

But Blayd was uncomfortable with that arrangement. “As... long as we’re not too busy with other things.” He observed, hoping they would see the sense of not biting things. Surely, that was not the girls’ default arrangement?

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### The loss

*I did not want war*, Rayn and Ironfang thought to themselves.

They waited in the skies of Pearl. The aliens and their dragons fought poorly in the atmosphere. But they were capable combatants, and they had many surprises.

*We need to hold back*, Ironfang consoled his worried thoughts.

Blayd knew it well. A dozen wings fought within the clouds. But this was just a sortie, a diversion. With a hundred million wings available in a breath along the golden threads, war was now a complex game of advantages and calculated losses.

But General Jayd was not known for her patience. *Beloved, move your wing in.*

Ironfang and Rayn charged ahead of their numbers with prescient fervor. A moment of opportunity had come up, most likely noted by the scholars. But he'd felt it too.

They hit the green alien dragon in its most vulnerable point – it's rider. The creature died without a warning, its dragon moments later from the trauma. Rayn would have taken a moment to mourn the death, but Ironfang was wiser. Swinging in the air they cut the sortie of twenty dragons clean in the middle, halving their enemies' chances to afflict them, and thus doing terrible damage against them.

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The chaos of war surrounded them, dragonfire and talent filling the air with mortal danger. Shifting blade met dragonscale, and pain filled every mind. It was dragon rider against dragon rider, as always; a one-to-one combat. But their surprise enjoining of the battle had unsettled their foes. They would soon retreat, or call for reinforcements.

Suddenly the sky began to darken, and they immediately knew what had happened. High in the air another dragon had arrived, and it was the orb wielding noble. And his sole target today was the life of Ironfang and his rider.

*It's a trap!* Stormbreath bellowed.

*No, it's an opportunity,* Jayd replied.

In only a few heartbeats the sky began to fill with lightning and cyclone. Rayn paused as some brief interference flared up in his mind.

*The orb wielder is trying to confuse all the orbs on Pearl.* Ironfang explained.

Together they charged the noble dragon and the wielder of his archetype. Rayn sensed, from Jayd's distraction, that the other nobles were busy attacking something important as well, which meant this particular problem needed to be solved here. And it needed to be solved now.

Together they danced the fire and lightning as a thousand other alien dragons arrived to support their noble.



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Rain stood on Ironfang's back, knowing it made them vulnerable. But he also could feel the swelling tide of the ten thousand dragons that were now flocking to this battle. Together they pressed on, Rayn throwing aside dragons as Ironfang deftly dodged their fire.

*You'd best do something to stop him,* Ironfang informed him.

Rayn knew it was true. If the orb wielder could somehow damage or influence their ability to communicate with each other through the stars, it was a terrible price indeed.

Rising the archetype of the staff, clarity was instantly restored to the orbs of Pearl, and he heard his wife cheer.

Rayn looked around. Ten thousand wings, all battling to help him reach the noble, and a thousand elite of the noble's empire battling to keep him safe. They were swiftly becoming two opposing swirling whirlwinds of world-threatening power.

But, he knew, that made their path longer.

*There is not enough time,* Ironfang agreed.

Suddenly, in deliverance, a huge planetary colonization vessel of Chalcedonah appeared in the cycle above the alien and his dragon. From its underside a portal opened, and a blinding light shone out.

*The archetype of Chalcedonah!* Blayd cheered.

In its blinding vision, all authority of the noble fled. Their orbs were free, and now the militarized vessels would be able to assist.

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“NO!” roared Ironfang, even before he could tell Rayn of the danger. “Get it back, get the orb of Chalcedonah back on their ship!”

Great cracks began to appear all along the underside of the planetary vessel, as if something was forcibly pulling the archetype towards the ground. Rayn looked downwards, and saw the scholar of the aliens holding his orb down by his heart, his other arm outstretched towards the orb of Chalcedonah.

“He’s taking the orb!” Ironfang informed everyone, and surged towards the alien high in the sky, dodging lightning and fire as they rode against the storm.

Suddenly the orb shattered from the spaceship, and plummeted down towards the alien scholar. In its descent it seemed to be shrinking, pulled inexorably towards the brother archetype in the scholar’s hand.

*They are but one, in two.* Ironfang mourned.

*And now they will be one again,* Rayn realized just how terrible their mistake had been.

*Go, go now!* Stormbreath roared from far beneath them.

Rayn looked down, and saw Godnor on his dragon, who was preparing to emit his full cyclonic powers against them.

*We’re going to speed up,* Rayn told Ironfang, portraying the image and all it meant to his dragon.

As a testament to his true warrior prowess, Ironfang, battling a dozen other dragons, partially folding his wings just as the cyclone

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struck him. It hit with such unimaginable force dragon bones broke at the impact, and Rayn, pressed to Ironfang's chain saddle, momentarily lost consciousness at the incredible acceleration. So he was not aware as Ironfang shot upwards through the maelstrom, driven apart by Stormwing's gift. He did not witness the terrifying moment the archetypes merged, forever denying his species their archetype of the orb till it be restored though rituals unknown. And he did not consciously notice the horrified instant of terror on the alien's face as Ironfang tore into him, ripping his entire body in half, and then biting down on his skull.

He only became aware as they were falling; dragons fell and allied racing to claim them. His arms hurt. His thoughts desperately trying to reassemble themselves. He saw the orb falling, watched helplessly as their enemies claimed it, and in fleeing droves they took hold of the golden threads and took it all away.

In their hasty retreat, Rayn knew the enraged of Pearl would inflict enormous damage on their numbers. *Take all the prisoners you can*, he reminded them.

*Rider, you need to rest.* Ironfang told him.

Rayn looked around, seeing the clouds all around returning with mystical haste to their proper place. He could not see the ground, but felt they still had at least a minute before he died colliding with it. And,

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in his death, so would his dragon. For Ironfang has lost the use of his wings, and he was badly wounded.

Blizzardwing and her brother, Hailstorm, took to the air beside him, looking battle weary yet offering their aid.

But Ironfang was proud. And Rayn was proud.

“’Tis just a broken wing,” Ironfang grimaced.

Rayn stood once more on his back, struggling to stay steady. Again, it was as if every wound in his mighty dragon’s body was being felt in his very own. Every muscle ached.

*This is not the day we die*, he informed them all. And, with a roar that shook the heavens, Rayn summoned all his faith and power into the exceptional act of healing dragon bones in breaths, not months.

They hit the ground a moment later, and they hit hard. Rayn was thrown to the ground but was able to use the staff’s telekinesis to land heavily on his feet. But they were safe.

“Well done, my rider,” Ironfang thanked him.

He walked up to press his forehead against his dragon’s. “No, thank you, thank you once again.”

Ironfang almost purred.

Norwich arrived. Stormbreath looked dazed, and sat down heavily. They brought him water immediately.

“Rayn!” The older man looked quite concerned. “Thank the divine!”

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“We lost the orb,” Rayn muttered.

“Yes, it would seem,” Norwich muttered. “The battle was a draw, though I think we still win on comparative death toll.” Norwich looked pleased.

Ironfang explained, his voice loud enough for all the hundreds of dragons circling in the air to hear. “We lost the orb of humanity, it is true. But they have lost their only wielder of the archetype of the staff, and it may be generations before they find another true wielder.”

Rayn knew it was true, and the dragons cheered. But he also knew they might find another wielder by tomorrow, or some other effective work-around.

But the staff told him otherwise.

“It is a draw, but the cost to both our empires is great.”

## Empathy

Blayd picked his way carefully around the rocks. This world was peaceful, and they only needed an hour. Great cities lined the horizon, still pristine after what had been clearly thousands of millennia without inhabitant. Where had they all gone? Their stay would be brief, and there was no way to tell. But it was plenty long enough to stretch quiet legs! The breeze hissed on his skin as it trickled past, the sun the taste of unsweetened caramel here.

Destiny swam close to him in the air, offering her support. They were on some natural land bridge between the cliffs and a pinnacle, reminiscent of the great Patron Darkwing's old abode, Dead Man's Fingers. But the dark blue sea here thundered below them, great sheets of water as high as the trees spraying up in the air beside them. To fall off now would mean death – except they had brought a dragon.

“Don't worry,” he said, “I got this.” It wasn't too hard; the challenge was minimal. But he still found he needed to concentrate every second on putting his feet in secure places and being sure his center of mass was balanced between them. After several paces he began to notice the warm sun on his face, slowly cooking his skin with invisible UV light, and the constant thunder of the nearby sea which, statistically, was *unlikely* to create a freak wave large enough to shatter

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the bridge and wash the humans out painfully across the rocks. This, of course, all needed to be filtered *out* of hisses that didn't exist, and tastes he wasn't experiencing.

"Be careful!" Gayl called to him. She was far more certain at the task; almost levitating with her staff in hand, balanced on the tiptoes of a single foot on slimy rocks.

Her advice annoyed him, deeply, but he thought about how he was supposed to reply. He intended to speak diplomatically, but his voice sounded annoyed, even to him. "What possible collaboration of factors gives you the impression that I am *not!*?"

She did not reply, and he waited. She looked bothered at his reply. "I just don't want you to fall down and get hurt."

He sighed. "I'm not responsible for how you feel. That's *your* choice." And he meant it, for her fears would not help him concentrate his mind on the task at hand. Which, while he wasn't very good at it, still commanded his full attention. Why was she asking him to focus on making *her* happy all the time?

She levitated over and floated next to him, conversing happily which would have taken an impressive amount of focus. "You do not think like... other people Blayd. I know you are a scholar, and they often think in more literal terms. So, when I am saying 'be careful', I'm not asking you to be responsible for how I feel."

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He stopped and looked at her. “Then what does ‘be careful’ mean?”

She thought for a moment, “Harming yourself would be deeply inconvenient for me, and potentially endanger our quest. Besides, I bear to you a certain kind of... compassion, since your parents are my mother’s first and best friends.”

“That does sound like a lot of feelings,” he pointed out.

She glared at him, then huffed – it seemed she could see his point.

“I guess I would prefer you were just honest with me,” Blayd said.

Destiny backed him up, “He cannot see through layers of meaning when he’s trying to focus on something physical.”

Blayd nodded. “If you’re feeling something about what I’m doing I’d rather you be honest. I guess... I’d rather you just said, ‘I’m nervous’, than ‘be careful’. I was, clearly, being careful. That was abundantly obvious. But if you say you are feeling nervous, I can say... ‘Destiny is near. I am being cautious. The danger I currently face is well within my parameters of management’.”

It looked like it took a moment or two to sink in. “I can talk like that, if you need me to. My math’s tutor talked like that. But will you concede to me one consideration? When next I speak in a way that offends you, speak instead to the emotion you feel is underwritten. So,



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when I say, ‘Be careful’, you can say, ‘Don’t worry’. I think I might like that.”

This time, he stared at her. What was the point of such a request? But then Destiny booped him with her nose, and smiled. And Blayd though, *Well, why not? Surely it is not too difficult a request.*

Destiny seemed to guess his thoughts, and grinned, “Empathy, in exchange for honesty.”

He nodded. It seemed a fair exchange.

Then Destiny muttered to herself, “Frankly I don’t think either of you gifted prodgies speak like people your age,” she complained, and floated around.

Moments from the past touched his stream of consciousness. “So... when... ago. When you wanted to fix Destiny because she hurt herself trying to form the first portals. You said ‘here let me help’. I guess you really were only trying to help.”

She looked at him. If her friends were here, he swore he could already hear her say, ‘What else did you think I was saying, Blayd!’ But, quite impressively, and maybe just a little endearingly, she was silent for long enough to actually think about what she wanted to say. “I was rude. I wanted to be the one who solved every problem. I was just a child Blayd. I am sorry.”

He almost fell over.

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Destiny was by his side in an instant, and he found he had to lean on her. For some reason, he was breathing very quickly now. She nudged him. He found himself so lost for words in the riot of feelings her words had provoked in him. He had no names for those kinds of feelings. Was it anger? Fear? Pain? Regret?

“All of them at once?” Destiny suggested. The look in her eyes gave him solace, and calm.

He had to swallow twice before he could speak. And when he did, threatening sobs tore at his words. “S... sorry... sorry?” he fell to his knees.

Destiny made a sound like she was really worried.

Visions of devastated worlds swum in his mind, a terrifying unconscious parallel between this silent world, and the one they might have just left behind. An utter inability to compare one regret to another; the foolish words of children, the attempted theft of one’s soul. But *she* was sorry. Somehow, the insufferable Princess of Pearl was sorry about how she’d treated him. And he had to believe, a part of him really wanted to believe, it was all about everything she’d said to him.

Even if she still upset him too often still.

Was it like this when his parents were in the crystal cave?

“Blayd?” the princess eventually asked.

He tried to wipe away his tears, but there were still new ones forming. “That’s all right. It is all right Gayl. You are right, we were

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just children. I know you could have helped but I just didn't want anyone near Destiny. Not at all! But you..."

He looked up at her, floating in the air, her face an image of compassion and confusion. Then he spoke, "Gayl, I'm sorry too. I'm sorry..." his voice choked, and he hit himself on the face. Why was this so much harder for him than for her! "I'm sorry I told you, 'at least I have both my parents'." A sob hit him, hard. Destiny squeezed him. His skin was burning, but no more sobs seemed to arrive. He found it hard to breathe and cry at the same time.

Gayl looked sorry, and kneeling down beside him put a hand on his shoulder. "Oh Blayd, poor Blayd." She rubbed him, and he held Destiny close. "Has this truly been troubling you so much? It doesn't matter. It's not a thing. I have already forgotten it."

That bothered him, but he did not know why. Was she not listening to him again?

Destiny again seemed to see through his confusion, "But, princess, do you hear his shame, and do you accept his apology?"

"Of course," she said, a little too loudly, and a little too quickly. She looked at him. "Blayd, please don't let this bother you." She looked at him long, then held out her arms. "Hug?"

He shook his head. He did not want a hug. He...

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*You want someone to hear you, to make the world safe when you need to confess you are feeling sorry, or afraid, or vulnerable.* Peyoth explained to them both.

Blayd nodded.

Gayl still looked confused. She stood. “I hear you. I hear you, Blayd. You are sorry. You are more sorry, you are more sorry than you knew you probably even knew.” Something suddenly seemed to touch her, and her voice broke. “You, at Astrid’s world. You don’t get to say you are sorry you are, but you are more sorry than you will ever have the power to say.” She brushed away a tear, and was silent for a respectful moment. Then she blurted out, “Well, that’s a LOT of sorry!”

It was probably made to lighten the mood, but no one laughed.

She sighed, then smiled. “I hear you. I chose to hear you, Blayd of the Celtwyld.”

Something broke inside, or some great was lifted out of his heart he never knew dwelt there. He smiled up at her, well, beamed.

She seemed a little amused. “Come, we’ve another ten before we must be off again. Walk with me, again,”

She reached out her hand, and he took it. Destiny helped him rise, and pushed him closer to the princess than he wanted to be.

He pushed away his tears. The feelings were subsiding. He wanted to talk about them. To analyze them. To fix them all for good. But feelings didn’t do that. They moved. They lived only while in

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motion. “That is why they are e-motions!” He burst out laughing at his own joke.

No one seemed to get it.

“Feelings come and go,” he tried to explain.

“That they do,” Gayl agreed.

He thought that was as close as getting them to understand him as he could probably accomplish at this time. He nodded.

She held his hand, and floating in the air, kept him stable while they walked along on unsteady stones over a deadly sea of thundering turmoil.

## The green men

“I need a drink,” Destiny told him.

He wasn't surprised. He'd noticed how little she'd had at breakfast, and travelling by thread always made the dragons thirsty. Gayl could probably make some, but it was always wiser to drink it instead, thanking the world that made it. Switching between gold and black threads was also very impressive work, and Destiny needed to rest.

He looked about the near galaxy, “From memory, there's a mid-range white mainstream over there,” he said pointing. “Probable life.”

“Oh, good,” said Gayl. “I could really use some pancakes.” She shifted in her seat. “And my butt hurts.”

He smiled at the irony. Save the universe, relieve a sore butt. It was really a much-of-a-muchness.

Gayl was looking in her orb. “How about that one?” she said.

He checked it out as well. “Some small planetary vessels in orbit, and plenty of advanced metals. Sure, it'll do. I wonder what passes for syrup?” He replied, suddenly thinking Gayl's suggestion of pancakes might actually have a bit of merit to it.

They circled the globe once. It was a pretty world, blue and green. The southern aurora's were particularly bright.

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“I got a small settlement, down there,” Gayl announced. “Hang on, let me check.” She manifested her staff, and after a moment proclaimed, “Well, we’re welcomed, so that’s a start.”

Blayd was doing some of his own observations. “Their obelisk doesn’t seem to be responding. I wonder what happened?”

Gayl shrugged. “Let’s all be... polite, though.”

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They set down a few seconds later outside of a large, isolated, rural town. She performed the welcoming ritual, and they started in towards the markets while Blayd muttered to himself about the chemistry of their world.

“Hmm,” he was saying. “Very low Nitrogen content, their DNA is noticeably different. Oh, this is fascinating!”

Gayl looked at him, lost in his orb. He stumbled along the dirt road, once or twice helped up by Destiny as if this was what they did all day, and stumbling along without watching the real world with his own eyes was the only thing he ever did. A part of her wanted to slap him out of it. A part of her envied him. Because he had somewhere to go when he wanted to get away from it all. He was... more free.

She looked out at the short green humanoids that were milling around the town, a few of them taking a curious look from their wagons

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and barrels. They did not look threatening. But there was a lot of staring going on.

*Easy now, she thought to herself, just... never seen humans before. We are from far away, after all.*

The rich scents of baked goods wafted through the air. The different amino acids were not likely to be a problem, but she asked Blayd anyway, to which Destiny replied.

“Don’t worry, my boy checked already.” She sniffed heavily. “All good. Nothing our bodies cannot handle!”

They began to walk into the quiet little town, people staring and keeping well away.

But Destiny kept on talking, “My boy, myyy boyyyy,” she sang to herself. “He is so clever, my boyyyy! He likes the stars and he makes paths, my boy! My boy, my boy!”

Suddenly, while Blayd was not watching, Destiny reared up in front of her face, glaring at her with her full seven meters of playful, powerful, dragon raw dragon will. “*My boyyy...*” She whispered; her brow furrowed in what was a clear threat.

In that one, powerful, instant Gayl was filled with the realization of just how small, alone, and vulnerable she was in front of this raw primordial beast. Her teeth were less than an arm’s width away, and if Destiny ever wanted to, she could have those teeth speared through her brain in less time than it took the signals of impending doom to reach



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her eyes. In one, terrifying, moment, she realized something she also realized she should have noticed twelve years ago – Blayd was valued by, and protected by, one of the most powerful, most dangerous, and most devoted creatures in existence.

But before the next breath, Destiny slid away to accompany ‘her boy’, floating along just a hand’s width above the ground like the world’s most devoted puppy. Blayd acted like he didn’t even notice, or care.

She realized she’d been holding her breath, and sighed.

But he had to care. Nothing that loyal could *possibly* be ignored, could it? No, he knew she was his dragon. He protected and fed and cared for her, and they learnt together, and they’d spent every waking hour together since before her hatching when he was only two years old. He slept amidst her feathered wings with more devotion than riders who had known each other from birth.

And that, she knew, was something very special. And it made Blayd seem, well, a *little* less annoying.

It took her a moment to catch a breath. Destiny... really loved him. And Destiny was not a creature it was wise to get on the bad side of.

*Oh, Divinity, she prayed. I really hope Destiny knows I **heard** her just now.*

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She followed along, like some kind of third wheel. How nice it must be to be *owned* by a dragon. But that would never be her gift. Not, well... Darkwing would never allow any dragon to receive a forced bonding, so her odds were, at best, astronomical.

And at least this way, if Blayd died, Destiny would only be normal sad. Losing a rider was a death sentence to a dragon. So, they were made to protect them fiercely, with every aspect of their being. And it made the dragon riders legends.

It looked like Blayd was walking them straight into the center of their village.

“We have a high concentration of complex carbohydrates I think we can afford to try.” He was saying, without lifting his eyes from his orb to look at the town around them.

The town of silent, staring... fear filled eyes...

“Ahh, Blayd,”

“Hmm?” he muttered, not stopping.

Gayl stopped, and thankfully, the ever-aware Destiny swung in front of Blayd to make him stop too. But he kept studying.

While she watched the town. A town full of clearly very nervous townsfolk, some of whom were looking decidedly... unfriendly. And most of whom were staring in great awe and fear at the blue and purple dragon levitating in the air above a talented young scholar's feet.

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A town itself, without a single picture, statue or motif of anything even remotely resembling a dragon.

“Blayd...”

“Yes!” he said, finally looking up from his orb.

“I don’t think they’ve ever seen a dragon before...”

“Oh,” he said, sounding most likely that the clear solution to this problem would be a simple introduction.

Gayl looked up as two, old, green women scurried out from a nearby building, looking like it sold all kinds of random things. And then they screamed, pointing at Destiny and jabbering frightened words in their strange, hateful tongue.

It seemed to wake the whole city up into a frenzy of panic. Small, green people ran screaming in all directions. Several of them seemed impressively uncoordinated; running into stalls, tripping on items, and colliding with each other.

“Well, I wish I had my father’s gift right now,” Blayd mused.

“You don’t need it, run!” she ordered them.

They ran back the way they came, but found it blocked by an old man with a stick. Destiny flew right over, but Gayl decided it was better to go another way than flatten the poor old fool.

“This way,” she ordered, and Blayd and his dragon followed her, trying to get around the little house and out next door.

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But next door was already blocked, this time by three green people with pitch forks.

At least, they *looked* like pitch forks.

“Not this way,” she changed her mind.

They ran back the way they came, Destiny complaining they could push past anyone they wanted. But within a few paces they were surrounded by a crowd of angry, frightened, farm-implement wielding commoners.

Someone thrust a spear towards her face, and on instinct, she drew her sword and shield from their realm.

The commoners pulled back, momentarily, in surprise.

“Ahh, Gayl,” Blayd began to lecture her.

“What!” she demanded.

“Why don’t you just use the sequester?”

It was such a good idea, she really felt like an idiot for not trying it first.

Just then a taller green man arrived, except he was wearing a hat, and wielding what looked like a musket.

All the other green men stood back.

He shouted something as he loaded his weapon. First, he gingerly poured in a black powder, and began to compress it with a stick. Then he shouted some more. Then he rolled in a large, iron ball and he shouted and pointed.

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Gayl sighed.

“I got this,” Destiny said, moving forwards.

“Oh, please, may I?” Gayl asked.

“As you wish,” Destiny replied, looking disappointed, then interested.

The man was pushing down his iron ball with the stick he’d drawn from his gun’s holster, shouting all the while. He lit a wick, and then he pointed at them and gave some sort of ultimatum, all the while the little wick was burning down towards his musket.

Everyone stood well away.

Gayl sighed, and decided to try some diplomacy. She swapped out the shield for her staff. “Good man green man,” she said, regretting her terrible attempt right there and then. Why couldn’t she conjure something graceful and loquacious, like her mother would have? Or even flattering and slightly flirtatious, like her father was once famous for. But, no, ‘You, Jane,’ was all she had.

In all fairness, it was no wonder that he then shot her.

Training with the blade was not her favorite past time, but she was good at it. And even the most basic sword master knew to use the sword for defense as much as for attack. It was the way of the sword to impose one’s will on the world, when all diplomacy had failed. Or, rather, when a new kind of diplomacy was called for.

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She knocked the ball high into the air, knowing full well where it should land. “Well then, Good man green man. I bid you good night,” and she bowed to him.



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A long moment later the iron ball wacked him squarely on his hat and knocking him entirely unconscious.

Most of the green men seemed to have lost interest in attacking by now.

She glanced back at Blayd. He was supposed to be impressed, but, instead, he just looked judgy.

“Just... use the sequester,” he told her, sounding flustered.

“Stupid boy,” she found herself muttering. Knowing how to act before your eyes told you was a skill not even the best sword wielders could master at times. But as if *he'd* know that.

She turned them invisible to their green eyes anyway. It wasn't easy to do, they were looking right at them in the middle of a battle fervor. But there were tricks to make it happen.

“Happy?” she demanded to know. At least she knew how impressive she'd just been. Awoth would love this story.

“What's this?” Destiny inquired, rushing forwards to cover her them both at knee level.

And old, green, woman approached – not one of the ones who had been screaming earlier. She looked calm and unruffled in a town of very flustered and ruffled townsfolk. In an act that was really quite impressive, she walked right up to them all, looked each of them right in their eyes, and asked what sounded like a very patient and sensible question.

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“All right, now I really-” Blayd began unhelpfully.

But linguistics was, in the absence of a true speaker, a gift of “The boots!” she realized.

The other towns folk looked confused, but the old lady clearly heard her.

The instant she thought of her really rather helpful archetypes covering her feet, she intuitively guessed the old woman’s intent.

“We just want to buy some food,” Gayl gestured to her mouth. There was no point hiding that the old woman, alone, has pieced the sequester. She must have been particularly faithful.

The old lady nodded and produced a large loaf of something like bread from the satchel at her hip. Then she asked a man nearby for something. He shook his head. So, the old lady marched up to him, slapped him on the top of his head repeatedly, and grabbed several baked fish out of his satchel with fierce indignity. Then she returned and handed them to her.

Gayl touched the food, and it all disappeared from the local’s view, which naturally created quite a stir.

Destiny began scoffing down the fish almost right away, while Blayd began to experiment with the bread – which was more than a little impolite.

“So thirsty,” Destiny muttered between mouthfuls.



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Gayl spied a barrel filled with water under a drainpipe. She pointed it out to the old lady, who nodded.

“I may?” Destiny seemed amazed.

Gayl nodded, smiling at the little dragon’s inconsistent ways.

Destiny swum over in the air, and splashed face first. She’d drunk half the barrel in a matter of seconds, which left the townfolks mooring with fear.

The old lady shut them all up in quick order. Then she went around, grabbing up all the sweets and baked fish the villages had on them. She stuffed them in her satchel. And then she handed the satchel to Gayl.

Blayd was refilling their water skins also. “This is enough to supply us, for a week!”

“Thank you, thank you, kind old woman,” Gayl said.

The old lady almost blushed, apparently apologizing for her people’s rudeness.

“Yes, there has been a bit of a misunderstanding.” Gayl admitted. She took out her wand, checking on the armored man. He would be fine, but a little bruised. With a wave, he woke up, startled and confused.

Gayl risked lowering the sequester, and the townfolk were impressed, and still very, very nervous.

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Blayd and Destiny were splashing each other like little children, completely unaware.

Gayl sighed.

“I suppose we must pay you,” Gayl realized. She reached into her sash to pull out a coin or two, something that would have been appropriate to pay for water and some fish back at home. Here, the coins were likely to become legend, if they even used coins.

Then she noticed the houses. They were not made of impressive futuristic metals; they were futuristic metal poles tied together with string and plaster. This was not an advanced race. This was a primitive people with no idea about space and dragons and probably even the divine.

*We have broken so many rules,* she mourned to herself. Civilizations like these were supposed to be left to develop on their own. So, whose were the spaceships in orbit? Did they even know they were there?

And if the creatures above the sky did know they were here, were they in even more trouble? It was beginning to look, more and more, that a quick and expedient exist was called for.

“We need to leave, now,” Gayl informed them.

“I know,” Blayd said, walking up, dripping wet. Like this had all been a walk in the park for him, or something. “Did you pay them?”

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Gayl offered the old lady the coins, and she quickly refused them. She had to wonder if this was some sort of cultural policy, but the old lady seemed very sincere.

*Still, Gayl reasoned, better to not be in their debt.*

She looked at the old lady. She appeared to have an overly large wooden spoon sticking out of her blouse, as if she'd been about to start baking when two aliens had walked carelessly into the center of town. She indicated to the spoon, and the old lady took it out with a smile, offering it to her.

But Gayl had no intention of taking it.

The gem at her brow glowed, and she watched the awe in the old woman's face. Again, it made her think of her mother, and how this was her favorite tool. She wondered if Blayd's parents would have had this same look on their faces the first time they'd seen the headband in action. And pondering those things, she turned most of the old lady's spoon into gold.

Not all of it, of course. It still had to be clearly the old wooden spoon. But most of it was gold now. A classy amount of gold.

*That'll give them something to talk about,* she thought to the others.

The townfolks gathered around, oohing and ahhing.

Blayd was on Destiny in the next breath. "Time to go!" he ordered.

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Gayl *might* have protested. She *liked* all the positive attention this was getting them. But Blayd was not wrong; because he'd foresaw that in the next instant the whole townsfolk rushed them, offering all kinds of food and implements and chatter. Eyes full of enthusiasm, and perhaps greed.

Gayl just laughed as Destiny slid under her and began to fly them away. "Goodbye, and thanks for all the fish!" she shouted.

And then they disappeared into the stars.

### Invitation to the final conflict

"They've sent a challenge," Jayd announced to the others.

The thousand warriors in the hall murmured with concern.

"Where," Fallen asked.

"Darkspace, by Necrim." Jayd replied.

The soldiers again muttered.

"A curious choice," Norwich mentioned.

"Curious indeed," Jayd pondered. "The space is entirely empty for millions of millions of leagues. There is no apparent advantage to such a choice, and no apparent disadvantage."

"Then they hope to lure us out there?" Norwich asked.

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“We can take them,” Fallen replied, thinking his dragon’s thoughts. “The darkness is our ally. And we have yet to show them the power of our Patron’s mastery. They have made a grave tactical error.”

“Priest?” Jayd asked her husband.

He was studying the floor. But she knew him well enough to know he’d heard her question. “I am sorry we have to fight... I think I will allow this, the Divine will allow this. There is something that needs to happen – something we are not yet aware of. But I think it to our advantage if we can... delay, as much as reasonable. Time is on our side, so we need to give Divinity all the time we can.”

Jayd looked around the room, the seven worlds all gathered here to air their opinions and share their burden. But the high priest had spoken, their cause of action was already decided.

She sat down. This conversation was going to go in one way only, but if they needed time, well, that was certainly something she could give them all.

So, she waited.

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“Why, master?” the priest wondered out loud.

“You said you liked my plan, it is a good plan,” Sunfire retorted.

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“A quick end to this war will bring about peace in the galaxy once again.”

“Then this is how we do it. Ever since we arrived here, right up until a good man died, my scholar... we’ve been able to track this anomaly towards the region of Darkspace. We don’t know where it is exactly, and we don’t dare send in scouts to such a distant territory. So, we’re going to bring their army to us, and be prepared to die one and all for this cause – to find out what is poisoning the bond, and to put an end to it.”

“So that is why,” the priest concluded. “You want their army to do the searching for us? Once they arrive in their millions, you are going to experiment with them – for as they fall to the power of the anomaly, you hope you can pinpoint its position.”

But the alien just smiled. Their enemies’ capabilities were many, but to confirm such a thought in the presence of their ancestral spirits would be paramount stupidity. “Perhaps, perhaps,” he agreed.

“Then we spread our forces thin, make them think we are hoping for a battle front millions of furlongs apart. It is a strange tactic, but they think us strange enough already. And we have no particular command of the threads in their space, which will make them cautious that we have some unseen threat. I think they will buy your ruse. But we’d best head there first, check out what we can, and begin the experiment.”

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Sunfire nodded. War was not his favorite past time – peace was. But he was good at war. Very good. Since bonding his dragon, they had become the most formidable tactical force in a hundred generations. If they'd wanted, the entire galaxy could be theirs.

*But what is to be gained by such a conquest?* His dragon Cambion reminded him. Yes, conquest was in his mind, but never in their heart. *Battles won by conquest were only kept through violence. While battle won to liberate the captive win eternal loyalty.*

He nodded at the thought, and agreed. He wondered how his wife was doing at home, and their young son, far too young to even see this terrible battle. Dragon versus dragon, the best kind of battle in the universe! But also, the most dangerous, and tragic. Worlds had died in dragon fire. This battle needed to be handled delicately if they were going to free the humans and the dragons from their own stupidity, eventually.

*Come, my dragon, we have much to do.*

## The date

Gayl looked at the star lines, momentarily sad that there was no way she could travel at this speed ever again. But they were speeding to catch up on a gold thread now, before a faraway conjunction was lost to them.

“That was a pretty impressive thing you did back there,” Blayd said, seated, unnaturally, in the rear position.

“So,” Gayl prompted. “What exactly was impressive to your eyes?”

Destiny snorted with derision at her, but she cautiously ignored it. After all, she wasn’t threatening ‘her boy’ in any way.

“Oh,” he muttered, as if coming out of some sort of daydream. “The transmutation.”

It made her blood boil, and for a moment she did entertain the thought of attacking the boy, emotionally. “Oh, just that? Not the sword work, or the master diplomacy? How about a sequester mid combat with full focus on the intent?”

He paused before replying, which made it a thousand times more infuriating because he’d clearly given it some thought, “You seem impressed enough for all of us.”

Destiny chortled.



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“Oh, stupid boy!”

There was sudden jolt as if Destiny were about to let go of the threads.

Gayl was quick to apologize, “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that!”

“That wasn’t me,” Gayl replied, unhappily.

Blayd checked the orb. “I don’t understand. There’s a rider somewhere along this thread. I think he’s trying to get our attention.”

Destiny huffed. “Well, I think it’s a very rude way to try and get my attention.”

But Gayl looked worried. “Do you think it could be Godnor, and any others?”

No one spoke. But Blayd noticed that whoever was moving along the threads was doing so very quickly. “They’re catching up,” he observed.

“Let’s see him keep up with this!” Destiny proclaimed, and over the next few moments swapped rapidly among random threads, producing a chaotic pattern of random flight. Soon, it seemed, she’d thrown off their pursuer.

“Well, that was-” Gayl began.

“Darn it!” Destiny protested.

In almost the same instant, Blayd observed the rider was still on their tail, “Closer, and closing in.”

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“Let’s see him deal with this,” Gayl boasted, and summoning a huge orb of energy from the cloak, shifted them all into a nearby dimension.

Destiny switched threads a few more times. But as soon as they were back on track, so was their pursuer.

“How?” Gayl protested.

“Well, they certainly are tenacious,” Destiny replied.

“Try there,” Blayd offered. “A protoplanetary nebula. It’s quite active, it should provide some cover.”

Destiny swung aside. They soon hid inside a gently forming planetary shard, something like a large asteroid.

Gayl looked over carefully, watching her staff. “He’s gone past us.”

Destiny sighed with relief.

“Not yet,” Blayd asked, not sure if they really were out of the sights of a hunter as capable as he’d been thus far.

Sure enough, not ten minutes later, he arrived. And he arrived in the planetary nebula.

“Cursed demoner,” Gayl hissed, and shifted them out again. Whatever place she was fond of using must have been coterminous with the main dimension.

They waited a dozen nervous breaths.

“Look!” Destiny said,

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Suddenly a dragon rider phased into their dimension not even twenty paces away from them. He was dressed in black, leather armor, and was clearly a cloak wielder, his red tool draped from broad shoulders. His dragon was a rare skink form, with thin skin but incomparable dexterity, all thirty meters of her hovering effortlessly in the near vacuum of the nebula. Inexplicably, they used a saddle and reins. He looked to have a long, golden knife at his hilt, and a dark mask covered his face.

For a moment, they just stood there, staring at each other.

Slowly, the man removed his mask. He looked young, not much older than they. But he was not a human. “You, travelers, have proven to be exceptional quarry!”

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Gayl was laughing, again. The silly young man was making some sort of poor joke she clearly felt obliged to laugh at. Then he took to juggling his three, large, silver knives with a modicum of proficiency. So when he dropped them, to her amusement, it looked more than a little staged.

But her laugh did seem sincere.

Blayd sat, ignored, tending to the dinner. It really wasn't necessary, since Peyoth was actually preparing the meal. But it gave

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him something to do while a self-obsessed teenager flirted with the princess.

Destiny hadn't moved from his side, not at all in the hour since he'd hunted them to this asteroid, and announced he wanted to ask them for lunch.

"You sure are not from around here!" he'd said, as if it explained things.



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“We are travelers,” Gayl had replied, the caution evident in her voice. “We are not staying long.”

“In that case,” the older boy replied, “You must have some stories to tell.” He and his dragon swung a little closer. “I hope you won’t mind sharing a meal with me? I collect stories like yours, you see. And if you will not be back again, well, I think it would make a good story to tell my family, one day.”

Cautiously they had agreed. Not only had he shown considerable capability in tracking them, but his dragon was noticeably more adult than Destiny.

*This is not a fight we should be willing to pick,* Gayl had declared. And thus, they opted for diplomacy.

Which, inevitably meant, Blayd was supposed to say nothing. He’d watched her talk this friendly boy around from approachable, to helpful. But his dragon kept his distance at the edge of the fragment, watching them cautiously from a red-rimmed eye.

*Ready to flee at a thought’s notice.* Destiny growled to Blayd though the headband.

*Easy, girl,* Blayd tried to calm her warrior spirit. *There doesn’t seem to be any immediate threat.*

*She tells him many stories, but we are yet to hear few of his own.* Destiny observed.

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Peyoth was silent, preparing the meal. But Blayd could tell he was watching to, and listening to all the young princess said.

“So, tell me, Graaduron,” the princess said with an inviting smile, “what of your family?”

The young hunter Graaduron turned to look at his dragon, as if seeking the courage to speak. “Well, if all I have told you is true, I have not told you all of it. I lost my parents when I was only three.”

Gayl gasped sincerely.

He smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about me, princess of a threatened empire. I was raised well by the faculty.”

“But three!” Gayl pitied him. “That’s just old enough to remember ... just enough.”

Graaduron smiled weakly. “Just enough. They were... kind. And wanted the best for me. But I bet they never thought I’d be a dragon rider!”

“Well done,” she hit his arm, and his black skink seemed to smile. “And are the dragons and their riders the heroes of your world as well?”

“Oh, heroes, and more!”

Curiously, his skink approached. “We are the rulers. As the word of the first dragon and their rider is heard, it is law.” She spoke in a cultured manner in a succinct, military manner.

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Graaduron nodded. “We take the bonding very seriously, ‘as one’, we must be. Only then can we, well, can any hope to ascend to the place of the first one day.”

Gayl nodded, seeming to consider how to phrase her next question. “And how is the next first chosen? Is there an election.”

“Oh,” the skink replied, “We have our ways.”

Graaduron nodded, speaking suddenly, “Contests, of virtue and ... goodness.”

“It sounds very noble.” Gayl nodded solemnly.

Blayd did not hide his sneer. She was lying. So was the rider. This was ‘stupid talk’ as he liked to call it – when no one said what they meant. It was... diplomacy.

“The food is prepared,” Peyoth announced.

Graaduron rushed forward to grab a bowl of fish soup, and started eating quickly.

Gayl just sort of glared at him. Then she took her own bowl, and allowing the staff to just hover there, she blessed the meal for them all.

Graaduron looked a little abashed. “Sorry, yeah... thanks, and all that.”

Gayl gave him a ‘you’re hopeless’ sort of smile. And went on chatting with him about dragons and empires and tools.

“Heartfire,” he finally named his dragon, “maybe you and the little one can get some light while we eat?”

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“Little one?” Destiny put her head up, and glared at him.

He held his hands up in defiance. “Sorry, so sorry! No, not little. But, um, Destiny, maybe since, I mean, we’re all eating here and don’t you dragons need to subsist on light.”

“Well, we can,” Destiny replied. Moving out as if to get some of the new light from the slowly emerging star at the heart of the nebula. Then she turned back, her face a hand’s width away from Blayd’s. Her face was written with concern, her brow knit together in worried feelings she could not simply feel to him.

“Stay close,” he begged her, patting her snout.

She slithered out through the air, and she and Heartfire went to bask in the light.

Graaduron was looking at him closely. “I hope you don’t mind... but... Blayd you seem to have a very unique bond with your dragon there.”

“He doesn’t have a bond at all,” Gayl treacherously told the boy he did not trust.

Blayd was furious. “If we don’t succeed on our quest soon. No one will.”

Now it was Gayl’s turn to glare at him.

“What now?” Graaduron replied. It was the first time he sounded even mildly concerned in the entire conversation. He looked over at Gayl.



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She sat back, and sighed. “Well, fellow traveler. We... there is some form of curse that we have detected back at home, in the far away. I wish I knew what it was.”

“You don’t think you brought it with you!” he looked worried.

She shook her head confidently. “No. Not possible. We merely have the incredible misfortune of it starting near us. Already I have told you about the threats the others bring. So now you know why.”

He did look concerned. “So, it’s not just a rumor then. We had prophets foretell, eons ago, of a time the bond would shatter between dragons and riders. In that hour chaos will descend on the people and they will rise... well, they will war with each other. If there is some power that can threaten the bond... woah... that’s super serious!”

“Have you no indications?” she asked.

“Nothing, nothing as yet that I’ve been told. Woah, this is portentous news! I need... no, Heartfire is wearied after the chase, as I suspect you must be. We should rest her, a few hours, I think. I will bring this news to the people as soon as I can. This is a fell portent indeed.”

And, to his credit, the young man seemed genuinely concerned.

Blayd finally found something he could like about the cocky boy. If he liked his people, if he feared for them, then they had something in common.

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“What can you tell me about this curse?” Graaduron asked, very politely.

Gayl waved her hand towards himself, still sipping on soup.

Blayd looked up, unsure within himself about what was safe to share. His research, which he'd been keeping up with the entire trip, was still so very far from complete. And how many secrets did this boy's strange race not yet hold, or were not yet prepared for? Blayd chided himself, now he was sounding like a Chalcedonan. If they needed help, Divinity would have him help.

“Please, Blayd,” Gayl said.

He was momentarily stunned by that. Had she just ... asked... nicely? Was it because they were in so much danger they needed all the help they could get? Or did she, as she'd said, respect his knowledge on the matter.

Blayd drew light above the fire into the basic codes of life for the bonding. Then he created from them the structures, unique to dragon brains, that could rewire them entirely to an equivalent parallelity of brain wave forms that were accessible outside or regular time, and thus, unencumbered by the illusions that were space and time.

“The problem is there,” Blayd instructed them both. “In the dissonant wave forms that are interfering with the bond between a dragon and their rider. It damages them both... I imagine it would be quite painful, especially if it happened in only a few breaths. An hour

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might be a wild understatement of how long the damage will linger in any civilization without the bond.”

Graaduron looked up at the dancing lights in apparent awe, “I have... no idea what you are talking about!” and he laughed rudely.

Blayd dismissed his lights.

“Hey, don’t be like that, youngling!” Graaduron protested.

To her credit, Gayl said nothing.

Graaduron spoke condescendingly, “Hey, tell you what, you put together a package of your thoughts right there. I’ll take them to the people, give you full credit. When the trouble comes, and if it comes, we’ll be better prepared. I know... we’ll I’m sorry I come across a bit rough. But I know my company for a single meal is poor compensation but, you do this. You do this, Blayd of the far away empire. They won’t forget you. They won’t forget the kindness humans have send them this day.”

Gayl nodded at him.

Blayd huffed. He knew what he was supposed to do. This guy was only trying to look out for his people. And kindness... and all his father had taught him: about what a humble man could do, and could achieve. It seemed an enormously important task to get hung up on, simply because the person asking for help was arrogant, rude, and insufferably flirtatious with someone he was not supposed to be anywhere even within arm’s reach of.

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But he nodded. And, taking out a small pebble, began to put inside it what he thought he needed. He could use a simple projection, so that if they lacked the knowledge of crystallomancy they could just shine a regular laser in, and depending on the angle, get out the images they needed. As for getting the language right, well, they'd need to find their own way around that. But he put the basics of the protocols in there – they were talking well enough together already with just the Northern Prophet's Prayer.

It took a good two hours, and the meal was done. Soon the dragons returned, seeming quite happy and content with their sun-meal. But Blayd was tired, and Destiny could immediately tell. So she curled him up in her wing, and they fell asleep almost right away, despite the constant chatting of the princess and the alien.

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*Sir, they're moving in!*

Rayn's heart sank to see the enormity of the forces arrayed against them.

*They brought their patrons, five in all!* Norwich said, unable to keep the fear from his thoughts.

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He felt Jayd's dispassionate consideration of their forces and powers. *Two less, and almost half the wings at twice the preparedness for battle. With their battleships I fear we are far too evenly matched.*

He knew it was true. And, again, he felt that waiting was their best option. The Divine had a plan, this had to be true.

There was the brief moment, the familiar tickle on his heart as Jayd and all the others checked in to see if he had some revelation to contribute. But he did not. 'Oh, my children! If you have any gift of the divine to help, now would be a good time to bring it.' He prayed.

### The date part 2

*Get up!* Peyoth roared as water splashed all over Blayd's face. *Graaduron has stolen the princess!*

How deeply he had been asleep, he did not know. But it must have been 'very', because even hearing those words they seemed to make no sense even after he'd untangled them from the senses which weren't.

Destiny was much faster. In that very breath, she had gathered him and their equipment.

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Blayd barely had time to decommission Peyoth's body before she'd rocketed out of the cavern with them all. He was still blinking in the wet confusion. "Who, what?"

*He's a cloak wielder! Peyoth tried to desperately explain. He snuck up on her while you slept from another dimension. He's taken the princess!*

Blayd wiped away the sleep as quickly as he could, trying to take access of the situation. Destiny was swinging a wild path through the planetary nebula, out towards a gathering planetary disc already glowing with heat.

*I knew we couldn't trust him!* Destiny scowled.

*Why do you think he took her, he had the data on the curse,* Blayd wanted to know.

*Why?* Destiny sneered. *For a trophy, of course. Bah, I see it now! Heartfire has the ability to subtly read and influence the minds of others. She tricked us into trusting him, and then when our guard was down, he stole her! Ahh, how horrible!*

*Trophy?*

*He's not a traveler,* Peyoth surmised. *He is a hunter.*

Blayd's heart stung. How had he let this happen? He'd known in his intuition that this young man was here to harm them. How?

*There's no time for regret!* Destiny demanded, somehow knowing his thoughts once more, or perhaps reading his sighs.

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Blayd focused his mind. So, a hunter. And the princess, a likely trophy. He smiled to himself – she would be no easy conquest for him and his allies, that was for sure. They would regret the day they took Gayl of the Celtwyld for their prisoner!

*I pity them, Blayd thought. I guess we'd better get Graaduron out of the mess he's got himself in to.*

Blayd looked out. It was clear whatever path Destiny was following was beginning to wane. What was it, a scent? No, the turbulence in the shifting nebula. He was hoping to lose them in the chaos.

*Stop taking the circuitous path, and go directly towards the planet.* Blayd told Destiny.

She only took a moment of thought before she obeyed him.

Chaos. Turbulence. The mathematics describe it were old, older than humanity itself. And it was one of the first things he'd learnt as a child. This was a small challenge.

But a planet, even a planet a hundred, million years from forming was still a very, very large thing.

Blayd poured all his strength into the orb, allowing it to compliment his own mental arithmetic. They overlaid a matrix over the shifting gasses. Yes, as clear as day, he found the path.

*There, there, Blayd exulted. Towards that doomed moonlet.*

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Destiny swung around, and by the golden threads was there in an instant. Within a breath they had honed in on the shimmering wake that was Graaduron's shifted form.

*He knows we've found him,* Destiny announced.

The wake disappeared.

Blayd paused. *Where would he have gone now?*

*So, the hunter has become the hunted,* Destiny sounded like she was eager for the challenge.

Blayd tried desperately to refind the lost track. But Graaduron and Heartfire were hiding much further away now. There were so many dimensions to check in! How he wished they were bonded, her dragon senses could guide him so well!

Destiny swam dangerously through the misty space. Her body became cold. Blayd found himself holding his breath. Then he found himself holding a hundred more. It was amazing how dragons could just shift realities like this.

Then he realized there was a way to help her. He could track her intent from the biochemical changes in her skin, using a resonant signal to try and track the other dragon, and led Destiny toward her. It was complicated maths, and he bent his whole will to the task.

*Remember to breathe,* Peyoth reminded him.

Suddenly Destiny lurched forwards. Using jaws made of materials humans had yet to describe, she somehow managed to grab



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Heartfire's neck, and pulled her, forcibly, into the primary dimension. The skink dragon shrieked, her sensitive skin no match for Destiny's far denser teeth. But then the black dragon struck out at Destiny, pushing her away. A brief bolt of lightning struck from Blayd's orb toward Graaduron, doing no apparent harm. On wings of light, the hunter swung away.

But, curiously, he did not fade away.

*Careful*, Destiny warned, breathing heavily. *He's going to make his stand.*

*Why does he not hide?* Blayd wondered.

*They realized you can track my saliva*, Destiny chuckled.

*I think you can take her*, Blayd said of the noticeably larger dragon.

Destiny paused. *Perhaps.*

Heartfire and Graaduron were heading right towards the surface of the burning moon, still not truly formed.

*He hopes to crush us in the birth of that world.*

*He may succeed, or slay the princess in the process.* Peyoth mourned. She seemed to be strapped to his saddle, and unconscious.

*I guess that is his play*, Destiny scowled. *Leave off the chase, or he kills himself and the princess with him.*

Blayd considered their options. He had almost no weapons, and none designed to battle an experienced cloak wielder. Gayl was unable

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to help, likely poisoned and restrained. Their captor had nothing to lose by her death and everything to gain with her abduction. This was no fair fight. There was no logic that could win this competition.

Blayd found himself pushing away unbidden tears.

*Come, bold warrior, Destiny said. Let us to the chase.*

It was just what he needed to hear. Doing everything in his power was all he could do to absolve himself for this oversight. Destiny sped up, claws retracted.

They swung about the huge hunks of dust in the near gravityless void, ever pulled towards the denser and hotter regions of the still forming moon. Heartfire dashed ahead, making full use of her natural dexterity. Then she twisted her tail around a hunk of poorly formed meteorite and threw it at them.

Destiny smashed it aside with her head.

*Ouch.* She announced. *Let's not do that again.*

Blayd concentrated on moving what he could from their path, but this was a task for the other tools. So he focused on trying to steer a clear path, but with two minds, it was difficult for him to point out where she needed to go, and she got it wrong more often than not.

It looked like Heartfire was pulling easily ahead.

“Come on Destiny!” Blayd shouted.

And then, in the next instant, Heartfire and her rider were gone.

*Shifted again, I suspect.* Peyoth mused.

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“Oh, oh, this is bad,” Destiny muttered. “They got too far away, I can’t find their scent!” She began to scurry around in the sky.

But it was a very large, very dusty, sky.

Blayd looked at their options. “To hunt a hunter,”

*Yes, young master?*

“As I see it, he has three choices.” Blayd was thinking. “He can continue further into the miasma, hoping we will not be fools enough to follow. He can try to head up into the outer atmosphere, hoping to make a quick escape as we flounder or pass by. Then he may simply continue along the moon’s surface, hoping to lose us.”

“I like that third option.” Destiny replied.

Blayd pondered, quietly. This hunter was no fool. But he was a coward – striking in the night after feigning to be their friend.

Blayd looked up into the sky. There was a giant meteorite heading slowly inwards, likely to join the moon in the next hour or so. “There,” Blayd proclaimed.

Destiny turned to see where he was pointing. She paused to think, then looked up. Then she looked down. *Bend the light around us*, she asked.

Blayd did as he was told. He could not sequester them. He could not move them into another reality. But he could make them effectively invisible. And he could hide their turbulence very effectively in this chaos.

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In the last instant of their invisibility, Destiny began to curve her wings down. As soon as they could no longer be seen, she grabbed hold of the messy tangle that were the golden threads this close to an unformed world, and shot slowly upwards. Passing effortless though the meteorite, she released her hold at the other side.

Blayd kept them hidden. Along the far end of the asteroid were several deep craters. One even looked like a cavern.

He didn't dare speak, but began to nudge destiny along in that direction. He pondered, almost for a minute then, that it might even be a useful thing to have a bit and bridle. But that made as much sense as if Destiny had tied something around his mouth to tell him where to go. The very thought was abhorrent.

The cavern was large, and they pressed themselves silently against the far wall. Then Destiny pulled away from the wall, and Blayd had to assume it was so their heartbeats were not obvious though the stone.

A hundred terrified, nervous heartbeats.

Blayd's mind fought against his spirit. *What if they had not come this way? What if he had already fled? What if he had already killed her, or done something far worse...*

The wait was a special sort of torment he didn't know existed.

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Suddenly Graaduron and Heartfire shimmered back into the primary dimension. He was drinking something desperately, while she nursed deep wounds along her neck.

Blayd watched for a moment, filled with an almost blinding rage and desire to hurt this young man. But he was a powerful, capable man. This would need to be dealt with effectively, not passionately.

Princess Gayl was there, hands and feet tied with strange string. She looked unconscious. Then she twitched, as if trying to feel if her sash was still there. It was not, but was tied around Graaduron's wrist.

But Blayd didn't have the patience for any further contemplation. Unleashing his best, most improvised projection yet, he sundered the string that constrained her.

Graaduron had his knife out in an instant, his cloak unfurled, ready to take them away. "Impressive." He grinned. "So, the hunter has become the hunted."

Both shuddered back into reality.

Neither dragon had moved. Blayd had the distinct impression that Heartfire was using all her powers to hold Destiny paralyzed, but that the task took so much of the evil dragon's powers that she, too, could barely move.

"And the hunter will become the dead, if he does not return my girl to me right now!" Blayd said, trying to sound mature. Trying to

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sound like his father. Trying, more than anything, to sound like anything other than what he did – a small, frightened, preteen.

Naturally, Graaduron just laughed. “Very well then, Blayd. A trade then. I have gold... look. I’m not going to harm her! We just... collect animals like yourselves once in a while. To admire. She’ll live like a queen on our worlds as well.”

It was Gayl’s voice who spoke next. “I’d rather DIE!” And, with that, she brought her sifting blade right down on Heartfire’s paralyzed tail.

Heartfire screamed in complete anguish, fire and stars exploding from her mouth, their own lives saved only by Gayl’s swift art with the headband.

Graaduron charged her, drawing another blade, but she was just so much faster. She met him head on, sword and staff deflecting his enraged attacks. Destiny flew overhead, pinning Heartfire’s body with her own, clamping her powerful jaws over the fragile dragon’s narrow neck.

Graaduron tried to push past Gayl, but she blocked the entire corridor with the light of her shield, shoving him away. As the staff levitated in the air, she pushed her hand back at Heartfire, wand forming as she did. Heartfire screamed again, and Destiny took to smashing the evil dragon’s head against the stone wall of the meteorite.

The hunter screamed in blind rage, and threw himself at her.

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And Gayl just stood there, gold hair blowing in the air that whirled about the cavern. Her eyes were lit up like fire, her face utterly fearless, even indignant.

He wanted to do something, he thought it was probably the time to do something, but her countenance convinced him in a glance that this was her battle. And she would prevail.

So Blayd, bravely, did nothing as Graaduron stabbed out with twin blades at Gayl's chest.

And almost fell right through, her body insubstantial as her cloak billowed behind her.

How he wished he'd been able to see the older boy's face as he faced a true master of the cloak.

And with a broad sweep of her arms, she cut his cloak in two at the collar, leaving him unharmed.

In one moment, Heartfire and Graaduron collapsed to the floor.

Graaduron knelt there, and Gayl stood back. "I would execute you for your deeds today. But your people need to know that two children bested you today. You are no match for the humans and their dragons. You will never be."

Graaduron just looked at his hands, and laughed his infuriating laugh once more. "As if I'll ever tell them that. You might as well kill me today, princess."

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“No,” she pronounced, and Blayd really couldn’t be more proud. How she was living the full measure of her teachings as rising queen. “You will. You think I did not see though your fair words? Your people are enslaved to the dragon riders. You war among yourselves constantly for power and prestige. You are everything you are not supposed to be: the dragons were a gift of peace to species such as our own. You live beneath your privilege. You will, forever and ever, unless something drastic happens.”

The defeated boy chuckled to himself. “And you think your coming is that... happening?”

“No,” she said emphatically. “We are just the portent. Your people have only days to prepare and you need to tell them, *now*. The bond is dying, and there is no corner of this galaxy, or perhaps of this whole universe, that it will not touch. You will tell them, and they will not listen. And then, as the fire begins to rage as your people throw off their oppressors, you will remember my words. And, perhaps, you will remember this scholar’s gift.”

She pointed right at Blayd, and Graaduron turned to look at him.

Blayd glared at the arrogant hunter’s ashen face. But he had no words for this, not like Gayl. All he had was the desire to smash this young ‘hunters’ face with his glass orb.

Destiny slithered silently through the air to stand behind him.



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Then Graaduron turned back to Gayl, and it looked like he was perhaps about to say something, when she kicked him in the face with her boot so hard it knocked him clean unconscious.

Peyoth chuckled. *Now that, my good girl, is an uncommon usage for the archetype of travel and trade.*

Gayl turned to glare at him fiercely. “Are you all right, Blayd?”

He leant back on Destiny’s stone-hard scales, suddenly thinking she was more than capable of levelling a few worlds if she needed to as well. “Yes.”

She nodded. “We’ve lost a lot of time on this. Let’s go.”

They did.

## The fight

By that evening, they were all exhausted. Gayl rested against his chest, and had for the past hour. Perhaps she was napping?

*Methinks, good master,* Peyoth suddenly interrupted his sleepy thoughts, *that we'd best get you young ones some rest.*

*No, no, I'm fine,* Destiny insisted.

Peyoth laughed. *You just lost your bearings for the third time this minute.*

Gayl stirred, and stretched. "Yes, indeed, some rest is wise."

Blayd gathered his orb, almost dropping it on Destiny in the process. He studied the stars but they already confirmed something he already knew – goldzone galactic standard in a near cluster. It was sure to have somewhere safe. They soon found a populated world, but avoided it, opting for the giant ice moon orbiting a great grey gas giant. The dragons there seemed to be content to ignore them, so they took their leave. Locating an ice cave, they made camp, covering the exit and keeping the air warm around them.

Destiny stretched out, and was dozing in moments. "Ice is nice," she muttered, and was asleep.

Blayd got out his blankets, and put himself among her feathers. She didn't stir, but seemed happy to have him there, curling in.

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He looked out at Gayl. She seemed a bit unsure of what to do with herself, and was just standing there.

“Why don’t you play your harp?” He asked.

She glowered at him, “I don’t do requests, stupid boy.” She replied, quite abruptly.

He huffed, and sat back. But her words *gnawed* at him. Had he been nothing but kind and polite the whole time? Had she just not been safe napping on his form? And, instead, this? He looked again. She had not moved. *What is going on in her head*, he wondered. She looked... bothered. “Is... everything all right?” he risked.

She huffed. “Just be quite.” She told him, and took out her orb.

His heartrate leapt, and skin ran cold. But he could sense neither. “Hey, that’s unfair!” he told her. “You can’t talk to me like that!”

She gave him a look that made him think she was talking to a child. “Just go to sleep,”

He glared at her. “You should not speak to me like that.”

Something seemed to have upset her. “Stupid boy! Look, just leave me alone! I don’t have to play for your if I don’t want to.”

He tried to be calm. “I never said you did. Whoever can tell you that you have to? I just was, you didn’t look happy. I suppose I should not have asked. Why should I not have asked?”

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She did not answer, but went to the cave entrance, looking out on a distant orange sun and gleaming orb. She said to space. “Just leave me alone.”

He was angry, he could recognize it now. And he was sad, and upset. What had happened? He looked at Peyoth, who shook his head as if to say ‘let it drop’.

But he didn’t. “What did I do wrong? I didn’t do anything wrong. You don’t get to treat me like this, you-”

She screamed. Whirling around, she screamed, “SHUT UP BLAYD!” her eyes gleamed with rage as if with a white fire.

Her expression hurt him, more than her words had.

And he glared back. A week ago, he would have ignored it all. But they’d come so far, and they had so far yet to go. She... should not treat him like this. “You don’t get to be rude.”

“Rude?” She asked rhetorically. “So, when you walked out of all our conversations, when you didn’t even bother turning up to the counsel of the Bright Night, or your mother’s *birthdays*. YOU get to be rude. But, no, as soon as I’m a little flustered you just won’t shut up about it!”

Blayd had never thought that to be rudeness. He looked at Peyoth, who simply nodded in agreement with the princess. Blayd wasn’t sure what to say, only that he was sure he’d never win a raw

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argument with Gayl. “I, ah, well... at least I didn’t intend to be rude, unlike you!”

She huffed, getting angry and seeming to enjoy it. “GO, hide in your dragon’s feather while you let everyone else cook, and clean, and sort out the world without you!”

That made him very angry. Angry, just the way she always did. “Oh, well... that’s all. That’s what I was *supposed* to be doing, Gayl!”

Then she got tearful, and he had no idea what was going on. “Yes, and *I do*. With a father who never hears me. I’ve been raised by your father more than my own! And still, all they want is a soulless, perfect princess. I can never live up to my mother’s reputation! She still has the highest kill rate of the entire war. Artisan indeed! They don’t even *know* me!”

He was then very confused as she screamed, and curled her arms around her knees and crowned into a ball on the ground. “All I do is work. I try so hard. All I do is work for them all. But they don’t even know me.”

Blayd just looked at the angry young girl. There was nothing he could make sense of right now, but he was certain of one thing – she had told no one of this. No one at all. Probably not even herself. This was quest... stuff.

He tried listening, “You feel like no one knows the real you?”

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She didn't even look at him as she screeched, "Just SHUT UP BLAYD!"

He frowned at her, then threw himself among Destiny's feathers. "Proud girl," he muttered, making sure it was loud enough for her to hear. Proud, because she was clearly still too strong in her own mind to allow even willing helpers to say kind things. Especially himself. And he'd managed to be honest and empathetic too!

He snuggled down and tried to sleep, but only Destiny seemed to have the gift for it right now.

After a moment, he had to know how he was right, even though he was still too upset. Peyoth?

Young sir?

She does not get to be rude.

He laughed again, very gently. I fear, young master, that a certain kindness eludes you, just at the moment.

Excuse me? He asked.

Peyoth tutted, still preparing a meal and not looking like he was talking at all. You told her what you wanted; to be treated with respect, and I am proud of you for that. But then you seemed to want to insist on it, even though it was clearly not the best time for her to offer it. That, I fear, was a certain kind of... unkindness.

Well, she was being rude to me.

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Yes, that is true. But how one is treated is never a reflection of their own value, but of the wisdom, depth of character, and maturity of the one doing the treating. Was she rude? Yes indeed. Did you tell her how you wanted to be treated? Without a doubt. Did you then insist on it beyond the point of her ability at the time to produce? Yes, you did. And, in the end, is that not a certain kind of rudeness too... I will let you answer.

Blayd was dissatisfied with that answer, but he could not deny the peace of heart it brought. Which was infuriating, at least intellectually.

He sighed.

Yes, she'd told him exactly what she needed right now. Not him. But he'd insisted. Why? Weren't they supposed to rely on each other during this quest!

He shook his head, and wished Destiny had been there to hear it all. She would have stood up for him. What did it take to get some respect, and to just be heard?

He didn't have any answers. And it just made him more tired.

## Queen's Gambit

Legions upon legions, a war to fill a world, and Rayn was in the thick of it. Darkspace, by Necrim, seemed to be living up to its name. Two massive armadas of dragons fought. Yet, even now, none prevailed. Each prospered only at great sacrifice.

*Commit our full forces to repel this incursion!* Jayd ordered as another wing formed up a spearhead to get at their command center, from where Darkwing commanded a world's worth of darkness. Their foe was about to lose another hundred wings, but it would cost them just as much.

Suddenly, something felt wrong. Indescribably, horribly wrong.

*What's happening?* Rayn and Ironfang screamed together in synchronized confusion.

In the blackness of space, there was a sudden silence. Dragons, enemies, paused and looked at each other in confusion and concern.

*It's... happening...* Ironfang pondered.

Suddenly, thick blackness began to fill the immensity of space. Within breaths it was the size of the innermost circle of the average solar system.

*Get all within the breath of my wings!* Darkwing ordered.



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Rayn tried to comply, but his mind was suddenly scorched with a blinding agony. He felt himself screaming, and knew Ironfang was similarly tormented. A blood filled his eyes he looked around, surprised to find the elite of their enemies were struggling as well. He looked in horror as some of them threw aside even their own helmets, casting their own riders into the blackness of space. One or two... slew their own rider outright.

But the dragons did not die. They fled. They fled by threat towards the darkest heart of darkspace.

*We need to go*, Rayn told Ironfang.

The only reply was a silent roar of agony. With gut wrenching terror Rayn knew what had happened – the curse has just increased a hundred, perhaps a thousand-fold. In a mere instant, in what should not have been possible, something had attacked at the very bond between riders and their dragons. Something agonizing.

He trembled, clutching onto his dragon's red scales. He had no further thoughts, no words. Just a desperate clinging to his own soul, now desperately struggling to become his enemy. He trembled with paralysis, able to do nothing more than pray.

Suddenly a bright light lit up from the field of his enemy. Instantly Rayn knew what had happened. Somehow, somehow, despite the blinding agony, his brother wielder of the archetype of the staff had

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maintained his consciousness, and now called upon the full might of world-devouring divinity to protect them.

In the light, Rayn knew what to do, feeling the strength of Ironfang flow into him, though his mind was untouchable right now. Rayn stood, trembling with unbidden agony, and he raised his staff as well.

Brilliant energy he did not know could exist consumed him in solar intensity. The light pushed away the power of the curse, but he knew it could not last. He looked about with his heart, and saw gathering darkness of the patron Darkwing congealing into incandescent blackness.

*Friends, and enemies!* Rayn screamed to them all with whatever power he could muster. He felt the minds of his army, and of his enemies, awaken to his words. *Gather, gather to the Patron Darkwing's gift!*

His forces fled in a breath.

The enemy joined them a breath later.

A hundred million dragons and their riders. Friends comforted foes, and dragons died as their cast-off riders expired. But the inextinguishable blackness covered them all, and sight was soon impossible.

By the gift of the helm, Rayn knew the instant the alien warrior Sunfire approached him. But in a gift beyond sight, he heard in his

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words tremendous fear – this was not a battle he'd ever considered he could lose. But new forces were in play.

“That,” Ironfang coughed, “was **excruciating**.”

The rider and his dragon approached and waited in the silence. Perhaps he expected chastisement? Perhaps he wanted to justify his stupidity. But the greatest warrior of his people said nothing, at first. *I thank you, all for this sanctuary.*

*Not how you assumed this battle would go?* Ironfang mocked them. Millions had died.

The priest approached, but not close enough to endanger the archetype. *This is impossible... Inconceivable.*

*Then conceive of it, priest!* Ironfang ordered him.

Rayn felt the other priests mind reaching out, and he pulled back as the staff itself bent space near the other wielders impressive will. *We face a crushing miasma of infinite darkness. It's coming from there... some kind of... mind. A will. No, an individual. She is there, and she is holding the minds of all the dragon's hostage.*

*Now what?* Jayd demanded.

*We retreat,* Darkwing replied.

*So, the curse does, indeed, have a central point,* Ironfang mused. *Then this is a fortress most secure. We will not take it, not without our combined forces.*

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The alien Sunfire looked pale. *Did you... did you **feel** that? What... what power do any of us possess, not in a million years, not in all the universe!... that can protect us from the only entity in recorded history capable of destroying the one thing dragons and sentients always knew they could rely on, and took entirely for granted. This will be the end of us all. This will be the end...*

### **Destiny notices.**

Dinner was done, though scarcely ten minutes had passed. Blayd watched the fire crackling, paying only dim attention to the hissing sounds and sandpaper texture illusion in his mouth as Peyoth cleaned the equipment with his own personal brand of care. But Blayd was tired, which was to be expected. Navigation was difficult, even with every advantage they knew about – boots, the alignment, threads of black and gold. He sighed. His head was hurting. He needed rest, and he lay now in his most favorite place in all the world; her wings.

Slowly, Destiny raised her head. There should have been nothing to notice about that, but he did. Perhaps it was a premonition? Perhaps it was the way she was holding her breath. But he turned, and looked at her immediately.

Her face, strong and wise, looked troubled.

Gayl had been sitting, crouched, by the door the whole time. She must have sensed something too, and turned to look.

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He watched a moment to see if the moment would pass, but it did not. “Destiny?” he asked, knowing he needed to say nothing more.

Gayl stood quickly, and drew closer.

Destiny’s head turned this way, and then that.

He put his hand on her neck, and stroked her scales. They seemed to shrink under his touch, and that made him worry.

And his worry seemed to break her out of her concentration.

She looked down at him, then over at Gayl, then turned her face back to his own. Then, unthinkably, she began to quiver, and physically began to curl herself up. “Oh... no...” was all she could say.

Blayd was up at her side in an instant. “Something is wrong.”  
*Terribly, awfully wrong.*

Gayl ran to her side.

“What is it?” he begged his dragon.

She said nothing. It was as if whatever was happening didn’t have words. This was a far too common experience in this unusual quest.

Then his heart leapt into his throat as he noticed tears begin to form along the edges of her dragon eyes.

Gayl knelt down, and patted her face gently.

Blayd pushed down his envy. “Please, please, what is wrong?”

Gently, with powers he didn’t know she had, Destiny used her tentacles to telekinetically brushed aside the sand at their feet to form

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images. There was the rune for humanity, and the rune for dragons. And, between them, the equation for the bond. Then those numbers slid away, falling into meaningless scrawl. A regretful sob wracked her mighty form. “The end... begins,” she muttered.

Then she slowly curled herself together into the tightest, saddest, most sorry ball of miserable dragon Blayd had ever witnessed.

Gayl knelt at her side, cradling her face and patting her scales. No one said anything more, because they both knew what it meant. And what it meant for those they had left behind. They were too late now to prevent it. But, maybe, they could put the world back together again and repair it.

Tears rimmed the young princesses’ eyes as well. *I’m sorry*, she mouthed the words to Blayd.

He nodded. Then a part of him wished he’d been the first to apologize, and the rest of him realized it really didn’t matter. *I’m sorry*. *I’m sorry too*, he replied.

She nodded, and smiled. Then hugged Destiny tightly.

For a long time they lay there, stroking her while Destiny whimpered in a subtle suffering neither of them could experience or explain. Blayd got the blankets, and made the princess and himself as comfortable as they could on either side of her head. And they slept there in the warmth of each other’s kindness, all bitterness forgotten.

*There are simply more important things*, he thought.

## Rushing along

Blayd was getting frustrated. Yet this was one of those rare times when he was grateful Destiny did not know his thoughts – they were about her. He didn't want to be annoyed. But every time he'd wanted to try a new technique for increasing their speed, she'd talked herself out of it. And just now, that Gayl and he had finally prevailed upon her to attempt a system hop using thread between two black holes, capable only because she was an eletromancer, her languages had been so self-defeating that she'd naturally failed. Now they were several hours behind what might have been a simple hop, and no one had said anything for ten minutes, or so.

Gayl was sitting behind him, and suddenly poked him in his ribs. "Hey, Blayd. What cha thinking about?"

It took him several seconds to disentangle his thoughts and feelings to provide her with a cogent response. He turned to look at her. It helped. "Oh, just, you know. Hey, if we take the glautroon cluster we might be able to avoid the shockwave from EDCU3003. That'll be sure to help, I'm sure."

"OK!" Destiny said, trying to sound helpful.

Then there was silence.

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“Sorry I couldn’t do it again, my boy,” Destiny said, her voice just a little sorry.

“No, no, it’s OK. We’re doing all we can. You did,” He wanted to say ‘you did your best’, but she’d failed, and he didn’t want her to think her best was going to fail. “More practice. Quests, and all.” He really didn’t know how to say ‘it was all right’.

Gayl huffed, and slid back held close to Destiny’s feathers.

*It is a dangerous way to cross the stars,* Blayd again realized.

Gayl was staring at him, looking puzzled. Then her face lit up. “You’re an orbweilder.” She said. Then she looked a little surprised. “You’re... an orbweilder!” it sounded like this was an entirely new revelation for her.

“I’m an orb wilder,” he confirmed.

She slid closer, and pulled out her orb as well. “Can you? I mean. Well. Can you teach me?”

“What?” She was an orb weilder too. What was there to learn?

“Well, anything. Everything! I know you’re a prodigy. They say you are getting the orb to do things they didn’t know it could do. Well, teach me. Help me begin to understand the start of all that.”

He looked at her, not sure what she was asking. “Well, do you understand turbulence?” he asked.

She huffed. “In principle, but I can’t get the art of it yet.”

He felt his excitement rise, “It’s really not that difficult!”



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He turned to face her, and he explained turbulence. Peyoth helped out, with cunning images drawn from the orbs to help her learn. She was, Blayd was very surprised to learn, an adept and creative student, with excellent focus and keen intent behind her large, brown eyes.

After a few hours, they grew tired, Destiny ignoring them both as she found her own way beyond the light between the stars.

Gayl stretched. She skootched back, and sat cross legged – a very sure footed way of riding a dragon. “Phew! That’s actually quite informative. I don’t know how you run so many lines. That’s really talented.” She looked away, and scratched at her face. “Master tells me all the time to focus. To block out all but the battle. Perhaps that’s why it's harder for me.”

Blayd was not convinced. “You’re still running 25% more than average. That’s not easy.”

She smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s not.” She sighed. “Harp was easy. And I never needed to study at all for shield or boots. Staff, and orb, and wand are a challenge. I need to do them in the mornings. Shield and sword are for afternoons. Then I get to talk. In the evening. I would talk to all my friends. And for a little while, I would not have to think.”

He listened.

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She shook her head, “But it was all learning too. Diplomacy, negotiation. ‘free time’ was always some other challenge. Was it like that for you?”

He looked at her. “No. Yes? No one ever told me anything. At all. Oh, no, Peyoth got me up when it time to eat and sleep, etc.,”

She shook her head, but her expression had lost so much of it’s disdain and ugliness. “It just came naturally to you then, thinking 100% of the time. Lucky,”

He felt a curious distancing in that word. “No no, not at all, no, um. Hmm,” what was this about? “I worked very hard. I only work hard.”

“You work too hard,” Destiny scowled.

Blayd smiled, the other one to watch over him, even more. She would pick up the orb when it fell from his sleeping fingers. She was his blanket, and his companion. She knew him better. And she protected him. “I see your point,” he confessed to Gayl, looking at Destiny’s legs. “No one ever told me anything to do. I guess they could see it was pointless. But everyone had something they wanted you to become. I suppose that must have been a certain kind of exhausting.”

She threw up her arms and out her legs, riding a dragon, “Thank you!” she said, probably to him. “Someone FINALLY said it!”

He smiled at this little victory between them. “My mother always spoke well of you.”

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She looked surprised. “What does she...? Your nonlinear thinking is difficult to follow at times, scholar.”

He paused with confusion, then smiled. “Ahh, yes, well. I was celebrating our successful social connection, and it occurred to me how my mother was always... wait a minute.” He realized he was thinking ‘tried to set us up?’ Oh, was this victory with the princess just another way to please his mother? She would be pleased they were talking like this. Then he wondered if he was pleased they were talking like this. Hadn’t they just fought yesterday? Then his head began to hurt.

Princess Gayl just laughed and patted his arm. “Your mother is a wonderful person, and I have more respect for her than almost any other person I have ever met.”

He found that oddly reassuring. Then he felt a little lonely. “She is...” the emotions in his stomach turned, and a tiny lump of tension found its way to his throat.

Gayl just looked at him with large, quiet eyes.

He looked away.

“Yeah. I miss them too. I really miss them all. Sometimes I miss them too much. Awoth, and Rebecca.” Then she shook her hands fiercely. “Stop it Blayd you’re making me cry again.”

He looked at her, confused.

*A jest to redirect tender emotions,* Peyoth explained.

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*Oh*, Blayd understood. But then he waited for her to carry the conversation. And that, it seemed, caused a redirect to fail entirely.

Gayl looked sad, and sadder. “I’m sorry about yesterday, to all of you. I just...” there were tears. “If... ahh... I know you don’t need to know, but maybe I just need to say it, and I didn’t think you ... pah! I think... I guess ... can we play secrets?”

“No,” Destiny and Blayd replied.

Peyoth chuckled.

Gayl looked sad and amused, then angry and upset. “Very well. I will just tell you. I will tell you my greatest fear.” She sat up, “Can you guess?”

No one replied.

She huffed, and rolled her eyes. “OK, well I’m not afraid of failing. Well, no, I am. But I think what fears me most is if our lives mean nothing. If, after all we can do, it’s not enough.”

Blayd gasped, “Don’t say that!”

“Let her speak,” Destiny insisted.

Gayl smiled. “I just don’t want my life to mean nothing.”

Blayd was angry bothered by that. No, motivated, that was the word. “This is madness... your life does not mean nothing! Not to your parents. Not to me. Not to anyone in your empire. This is not how it’s going to end!”

She blinked, then smiled. “You... mean that, don’t you.”

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“I do.” He stated emphatically. She had her faults, but it was unfathomable to consider her life had had no meaning. She was universally loved or, at least, know. Well, maybe not universally but that was just the way the phrase went!

“How much longer do you think our journey will take?”

Blayd was feeling, motivated. “If it takes a year, or ten, we can’t lose hope!”

She smiled, “I have not lost hope, no that’s not it.” She was silent for a time. “If I could die in peace, I suppose that would be enough.”

He expected her to fight, to disagree. But her wisdom and acceptance surprised him.

He tapped the ground between them, made of dragon scales. “I can’t promise you victory, but I can promise you that I will do everything in my power to make sure at least *you and Destiny* get our message to the giants.

“You... you’d give up your best friend to help us succeed?” she was genuinely surprised.

“Not just you. Our hope. And our people. Yes, yes, I would.”

Destiny looked up, and grinned at him.

Gayl looked impressed. “I would never have expected that from you, Blayd.”

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It bothered him, but he also smiled, because he wanted the next thing he said to come out kindly, “There is probably a lot you don’t know about me, princess.”

She could have said, ‘yeah, me to,’ but instead she said, “This is true. But I can change that, moving forwards.”

It stalled him. She was not the bickering spoiled royal he knew. She was a student, willing to learn. And he was no teacher, but a student too. “Yes. Yes, me to,”

She shoved him, then pulled out her orb again. “Now, stellar development and the golden thread via gravitational machination. I get it, but I want to understand it better, will you explain it to me?”

He was happy to.

## How bad it is at home

Arj, dragonman priest, reiterated the situation to the gathered elite of two empires. *We have stabilized our combined forces, estimated losses still at about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> each. But it’s beginning to look like this is not a natural compulsion. Someone, or something, is in control. And she, it feels like a she, is compelling all dragons to serve only her. They are fleeing toward the outer rim of Thiaz. It’s not possible to get close*

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*enough to get any reading. But they are flocking there, it is now abundantly clear that there is some malevolent plan to all this.*

It was impossible to see in the darkness of the Patron's gift, so they had to use the helms to communicate. Rayn felt themselves lucky, with a thought the entire miasma could become a weakening shadow that might slay them all. Darkwing, his wife's soul, was an immeasurably powerful dragon, a true noble of his kind. He stood, almost alone, against whatever compulsion was tearing dragon and rider apart. Yet somehow, he stood.

Not one hour later, two dragons arrived on Pearl – and they came with no riders. They travelled from the heart of the anomaly. By now, the aliens had shown them all that they knew, including how their mysterious helmet worked.

“Come,” he offered to Sunfire. “Let us meet them.”

He wasn't afraid until they entered the light at the edge of Darkwing's power: It was a golden noble from Thiaz, one he'd seen before. And it was the matron of Argentus.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ironfang demanded before anyone else could speak.

Rayn did not mean to shiver as the glacial matron passed by, but her breath was truly frigid. But she did not approach to let him feel her presence, but to see in her eyes. They were black pools of scintillating blue starlight, extended fully across her eyes in a truly unnatural

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fashion. “Do not be afraid,” she spoke in a voice that did not remind him of her own. “But be at peace. We bring good news.”

Sunfire rode close, “You are the matron of Argentus! What has happened to you? What has happened to your rider Lelleth!?”

Incredibly, the matron laughed, a hollow, defeated sound. “I was set free! We are all free now. We bid you join us... you will all, eventually join us.”

“Join you?” Rayn asked them.

This time, the royal of Thiaz replied. “Yes! Set free, truly set free! No longer are our hearts ruled by fickle, frail humans. No, now we have a true queen!”

Rayn’s heart boiled within him. What was happening here? How had someone, or something, overpowered the bond of rider to dragon? And then, how had that demonry been able to bond the dragon, forcibly, to yet some other mind? And where they all bound to that one mind?

If all the dragons are forced to serve this one queen, no empire in the universe will survive.

The mentally dominated dragon’s laughed. “Our one salvation! I have awakened to the truth! Join us, Darkwing and Cambion. It is your fate.”

Sunfire scowled. “We can take them.

There was a baleful ‘click’, and suddenly the agony of a bond assaulted returned.



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“The helmets, the helmets do nothing!” Cambion cried in pain, but resisting all that felt natural and normal in that moment, fled back within the patron Darkwing’s power.

Rayn and Ironfang quickly followed.

*This is a very serious situation,* Ironfang observed.

## The tribespeople

Destiny was getting thirsty again; she would not stop talking, “and then why did we need the bond in the first place? Since dragons live to serve sentient species all over the galaxy, yes some are tyrants, but why not allies? I mean, I’d love a bond, I’m sure, but we were made to love it.”

“Destiny,” Gayl finally interrupted, “Do you need a drink?”

“Oh, no!” Destiny replied in such a cheery voice. “I’m quite fine. However, you know how dice aren’t really random? Well-”

“Destiny,” Blayd was about to begin a lecture about how she needed a drink, but he really didn’t know what to say.

She paused, “Yea, I suppose I do.”

Blayd looked out through space in his orb. “There’s one,” he said, pointing to a standard world in the golden zone for life.

Gayl seemed concerned, “But it’s populated. We haven’t seemed to have much luck with populated worlds, by and large.”

Blayd was bothered by that. He thought she should trust him by now. “Statistically, we have been ignored at more populated worlds than not. Also, we need the atmosphere.”

Gayl sighed, “And the world’s spirit is already always more welcoming if there is life already.”

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Destiny began to head away.

“We’ll find somewhere out of the way. Near fresh water. Oh! They have an obelisk! That’s ... well, that’s neither here nor there.” Blayd corrected his course.

Gayl turned, and gave him a grin.

The world was reasonably young, and extra welcoming as Gayl told it. It had long, bluish grasses and two distant suns.

Peyoth was rolling out a blanket, while Blayd checked the local biography for a diversion. Gayl seemed to be praying.

Destiny, who had just finished taking a long drink at a nearby stream, was tasting the air. When she spoke, her voice was sober, “There are dragons here.”

Everyone stopped what they were doing.

Blayd immediately began to check the orb. Yes, the signs of dragons were very clear. The obelisk held an entire genealogy, but curiously it was closed to him. Well, perhaps not too curiously, they were travelers after all.

Gayl did a curious thing and checked her orb as well. “We won’t be here long.”

“A plasmid dwells under that mountain.” Destiny pointed with her nose. “And that forest is claimed, a quetzelmurm, I presume.”

Blayd nodded. They had heard nor seen no passage of dragons. Still, no more than an hour, perhaps.

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But sitting down all day, or flying through the vastness of space at many times the speed of light, combined with a warm sun and welcoming spiritsphere have a tendency to make one sleepy.

“Master! Arise!” Peyoth’s voice sounded concerned.

Blayd shook of his sleep. By the suns it looked like 4 hours had passed.

He looked out, and saw several human-like figures with purple tint in their skin approaching. They had mid medieval weaponry – crossbows, swords, leather armor. But their leader wore a robe, and he was holding up a staff.

Instantly Blayd recognized the tool. It was glowing powerfully.

“Peyoth,” Blayd asked his hologram, while kicking Gayl gentle on the leg in the hope of waking her up.

But there was only silence from the orb.

*Peyoth?* Blayd asked directly.

No reply.

Gayl was up. “Oh, my,” she said, and looked like she was about to draw her own staff from the sash.

Blayd knew what was happening. “It’s an interdiction field. Why can’t we break it?”

Gayl looked worried, “Their world, I guess. Destiny!” she shouted.

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The men charged.

Without their tools, they were no match for the frightened natives.

Destiny, on the other hand, found their ropes no more threatening than threads.

The priest ran up to them, holding his staff high, “Back, back sky demon! I cast you out! Return to your forsaken roost to ponder your wickedness for eternity!”

“Oh, no,” Gayl repeated.

Even Blayd could feel the overwhelming compulsion of the man’s faith. This was a true wiseman in the height of his powers. And yet, at the same time, there was such pity for him. He held a staff, but clearly did not know how it worked, or he would honor a dragon. Something was wrong on this world. And it was beginning to feel eerily similar to one he’d grown up on.

“Was my father ever so ignorant and self-assured?”

Gayl did not reply.

Terrified humanoids held knives to their throats.

Destiny glanced at him, but pulled away into the air, angry lightning trailing in her wake.

Blayd gulped down his fear, they were in real trouble this time.

The man approached them. “Do you see my tongue?” he said.

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By the powers of the still functioning obelisk, Blayd knew what he meant. “Yes, we can understand you just fine.”

The man looked taken aback. “Then you are local then? Your speech bewraileth you. But your clothes are unfamiliar. They have the appearance of southern weave from Phartuk from beyond the sea? Are you spies then, come to search out the land?”

The others snarled and grunted their threatening approval of the man’s words.

Blayd looked at Gayl, and suddenly he felt very vulnerable. She was an artisan without tools. How could she help here? Would the natives hurt her? No, they seemed to have a sort of dignity about them. These were the ‘good guys’.

And that, he knew, made them their own kind of dangerous.

“Please,” Blayd spoke, doing his best. “We are on an important mission for the dragons, we-”

The priest cut him off. “You work with the sky demons? Take them away!”

The others cheered, and Gayl scolded him with her eyes. They were marched then, for at least a good two hours, hands tied behind their backs and a sword at their ribs most of the way.

It was humiliating.

At last they came to some kind of camp. It looked military, not the sort of hunting trip his father would have gone on. There were very

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few females, which was unfortunate, and about 200 armed men. They were placed in a tight prison, while the others debated about what to do with them.

Gayl sat on the floor.

“We need to get out of here,” Blayd reminded her.

She kicked the dirt. They had not taken any of her things, but none of them were apparently weapons. “That stupid priest has one of the best interdiction fields I’ve ever encountered.”

She folded her knees and put her face on her arms.

“What are we going to do?” Blayd asked.

Gayl took too long to answer in a universe threatened by a fate worse than death. “This is up to Destiny now.”

## Research

They were fighting a losing battle, and everyone knew it.

A healer with a wand was at his brow, mending his wounds. There was a certain insanity about sitting down to let others fight, but it was the only way to wage a war. The room was crowded, with leaders from every world. It was the perfect place to strike, so they’d placed it far within their world.

He sensed his wife’s approach even as he heard it. She was so much shorter than everyone there, but they all deferred to her. If not for

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her close bond to the most powerful dragon in the alliance, than because she had a gift, a great gift. And she could find answers when no one else knew where to look.

The thirty or so who were with her stopped when she was about ten paces away from him. There were no fine words at the outset; time was of the essence. And they were loosing several dragons per minute now. They had protocols, they were trying to save the riders when a dragon succumbed. But it wasn't always possible. The room was filled with champions and royalty, but when she spoke, she looked only at him. It might as well have been just to him.

“The unknown unknowns are too many, and what can we say we know for certain? We don't know enough to prosper at the moment. What do we do?”

The one who chose to answer her was the surgeon, Jane Jones, of Ethphraim. “What can we say we know for certain? Well, the intensity of the prohibition field diminishes gradually from the point of origin, so much that it's not, at this point, likely to be overpowering to any dragons outside the current galactic cluster. Aside from curious, individual differences that we are still trying to understand, we note those most protected are within a planetary atmosphere, particularly one with a magnetosphere. What is concerning, however, is that we can be sure that the device has not yet reached its full power. But most alarmingly, the shock wave that emitted from the anomaly travelled at



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something far greater than the speed of light. It was something akin to the speed of thought. It reached maximum regional intensity in an instant. Nothing like this have ever been experienced on this kind of scale before. Its speed of propagation approached infinity. If there are entities within our universe capable of intergalactic transverse, I expect to hear from them shortly.

And in the meantime.

She sighed. “We do what we can – all that we can. Your helmets. Let us examine them. I wish we had had more time, but they may be all that now stands between us and complete enslavement of all our races.

### Destiny’s quest

Destiny watched the aliens take her boy and the princess to a war camp they had, her mind feverish with fear. *They have the tools, those swords are sharp enough to kill. That staff makes me feel so weird. What do I do? That priest needs to die I can die him faster than he can think but ... the dying is wrong. Not like my boy would want. Not like... this world would want oh why is she testing us like this **she’s not a dragon!***

She put her heavy head onto trembling paws. *What am I going to do?*

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Her own words still echoed in her memory. *The dragons! I can go and see the dragons! They'll know what's the score on this world!*

She lifted her head, and roared, as much to let this world know her displeasure, as to warn the aliens of her growing wrath.

Through the foliage and stone she could feel the little aliens falling over each other in fear.

Within a breath she raced over to the plasmid's home by thread. She stood up on the mountain, sniffing fiercely to find her abode. A standardform, rare for plasmids.

She struck the mountain with her forehead, once, then again. Then she roared, her voice sending back pictures of the mountain within. Then she placed her demand. "Wake up!" she shouted. "Wake up, we need you!"

There was silence from the mountain.

"Get up, great one! Get up! We-l"

*Oh, be silent, dracoling!* A voice replied. It was the plasmid.

Destiny's heart lifted with such hope she must have jumped like a puppy. *Oh, oh, great one. My rider, my friend have been taken by the natives here. Please I beseech you,*

*Bah, the plasmid scoffed. Politics. Stupidity. Humanity lost our trust a thousand years ago, now they have lost their technology, languishing in superstition and war. Give it another thousand, they will all die out again.*

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Destiny's heart sunk. What was the plasmid saying? Did they hate their sentients like... like others once did on a world she called home?

*How as Divinity called us here?* she wondered.

*What?* The plasmid demanded from a bed of magma, several kilometers away.

*No, listen. You do not understand. The bond is dying. Can you not feel it? I know you can feel it here too. The whole galaxy-*

*We don't have a bond, she replied, her voice sardonic and pained. We need no bond.*

Destiny fell from the sky onto the earth. *Have no bond? Have you forgotten what you are? What the giant's made us to be? Allies, and friends. The welding link between worlds.*

The ground trembled at the plasmid's hidden passion, but when it spoke, it was calm. *A thousand years ago, the humanoids betrayed our matron and slew her. The new matron, her only child, broke off all contact with the sentients. Even now, she forbids the bond. I cannot recall what it might have ever felt like. So if the bond is dying, we will not miss it one bit.*

Rage boiled up inside Destiny. How could this entity disdain everything she had ever wanted or loved? How callous. How stupid! Without meaning to, she roared back into the soil, her voice saying more than her words ever could.

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*Well, I'm sorry to offend you, the plasmid said in a sarcastic voice, but that just the way it is on this world. If your so bothered, why don't you go and get them yourself.*

Destiny almost did just that. And then she found in herself an unsettling impatience for all she wanted to be now. It was her weakness, and it stung.

And she wondered how she'd never noticed it before. After 12 years of waiting, was she not patient?

Was Ironfang not waiting thirty years? Or Pure's dragons at least two thousand years each. Both had waited, in pain, for what was lost.

And this world had lost it as well.

Tear stung at her dragon eyes.

She could be patient, a few hours more.

She looked out toward the village more than three hundred kilometers away. Blayd was standing, Gayl sitting. They were not harmed. They were in no immediate danger. They were waiting.

But Destiny would still need some distraction, or their sharp swords might harm her people. Could she call some lightning? The great Kzaromancer could animate his, making walking men of light. Would a portal suffice, while she teleported to the jail and ripped it apart? Yet without their tools the humans were very vulnerable. Squish and vulnerable. A single log on their head, or a sword in their chest, and they might be done for. And she had no healing arts, just maths,

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and astronomy, and a friend she cared about more than her own ability to hurtle through the stars.

She looked about, seeing the great forest. Perhaps that dragon would be more kind?

But she was bothered. Turning about, she made a portal in the air. Blayd would hear it, she was sure. And maybe the plasmid would be impressed?

In an instant she was over the forest, sniffing fiercely. The dragon was close, but hiding in the mud. She approached it over the trees, skipping low, hoping no one else would notice.

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Blayd looked at the situation. Destiny's thunder was still echoing in the air, frightening all the primitive warriors. Was his father really like this, not so long ago?

And Gayl just sat there, a sorry heap, legs bent, head on her knees.

And Blayd then again realized how lonely, and lost, he was without Peyoth here either.

"You're quite lost without a tool," Blayd observed.

Gayl glared at him. But she did not start hurling abuse, not yet. "Waiting for a dragon, why does she delay?"

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Blayd looked out. “Likely she is aware of how much damage our enemies can do to us, even with their primitive tools.”

Gayl glared at him from the ground, “That staff isn’t primitive. It’s a full wiseman’s staff. Curse him! If I had only my staff right now I’d best him in a battle in an instant!” And she threw her forehead onto her knees again, “Ow.” She said.

Blayd looked at her. This was not the heir apparent he knew. The irrepressible, unsilenceable Princess of Pearl. This was... this was a child waiting in poor spirits to be rescued by someone else.

Blayd looked at the sentient creatures, so much like humans. Their work was rudimentary, not forged or even printed. They mended them with needles. They cooked food on a communal fire. If they had, even a second, with even one of either of their tools, they would surely come across as demigods to these creatures. *But mother wouldn’t like that*, yet her story still made him smile.

But his father... what would he do? Blayd looked at Jayd again, and had a thought, “We could be out of here in a moment. The only thing stopping us is not that staff.”

She looked angry, but her looked softened. “Elaborate,” she asked.

She actually *asked*.

He was momentarily distracted by the enormity of that, though he also realized he should not have been. “I, um, hmm. Well, look at it

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this way. We can get out; we both know this. We don't need to wait for Destiny, but we are forced to, because that staff has cut off the interdictional access to your tools, and mine. And that staff is powered by the divine, as well you know."

She looked interested.

Blayd knelt beside her, "Why would the Divine stop us now, itself, unless it had something it needed us to do, here."

"Hmm," she agreed, looking more hopeful than he'd seen yet. She stood, swiftly, and went to the small window. "Primitive, like our people before we found the teachers. I wonder what happened on this world? They seem to have lost their teachers."

Blayd agreed with that. "Hey, guard!" he called.

Gayl then tried to shush him.

He looked at her, completely bemused. She wanted to know the answer to a question, they both did, and they natives might have it.

Then it struck him that, perhaps, just asking wasn't the most effective means. He tried to wave the warrior away.

But it did not work. He summoned the wiseman, or demoner. This was a creature of impressive faith.

The wiseman walked over. "Children of the sky demon, it would do you well to not speak this hour." His staff was glowing bright with the interdiction field. Blayd was impressed, for all their technology

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they could not have known about the sash, or the other tools he was ignorantly oppressing as if with practiced skill right now.

Blayd looked at Gayl. She was silent. He looked at the males. Perhaps this was a male thing? “We, um, oh!” he really didn’t know what to say.

She hit him.

“We are wondering,” what were they wondering? If they had no teachers, they would not know what he even meant. “I was wondering, why are they ‘sky demons’?”

The priest looked indignant, “A thousand generations ago, the sky demons came through a door of fire in the air from another world. They set about killing and enslaving all the people on our world. Then a great congress of warriors arose, and threw down the invaders. Most of them fled, but a few were tragically left behind. Most are hunted, a few remain to this day in forgotten parts.”

Blayd pondered at the story. What truth lay behind it? It was his father’s job and art to interpret such stories. Blayd was a scholar, they just tended to collect them, or repaint them. Had the dragons here been tyrants? Unlikely, he’d need to hear the full story, from both.

“Where is this army headed?” Gayl asked.

The wiseman just glared at her.

She glared back.



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Blayd sighed, disappointed in this priest's sanctimonious prejudice. "Where is this army headed?"

The wiseman glared at him too, "I still don't know who, or what, you are. There are pictures of your kind. You have skin too pale, and you are seen sleeping at the edge of waters on a Day of Wet Deer! I don't know what you are! Yet, for all my fears, the High Art bids me trust you. How is that?"

Gayl lit up, and bounced on her heels, her lips sealed yet cheeks bulging as if she had too many words to say and dared not. She was hitting him, repeatedly, on his hip.

Blayd wondered what to say, "We are humans, from a faraway world. On our world, they are not sky demons. They are our friends."

The wiseman looked very doubtful. "We go to war," he said instead. "The vile Huntsmen of the Narrows have been sending raiding parties to steal our women and our treasures all winter. Now, we have had our full of it. We will destroy their scattered, primitive warbands to the four winds, and finally our children will have peace."

Blayd looked at him. Even Peyoth's advice would have been invaluable now. Not even the schooled wisdom of the rising princess could help him with a stupid priest determined to distrust him. But his father must have been like that, once.

"We have teachers," Blayd replied. "They looked like men, but of stone, arms like this," he said, but felt very foolish, every sentient

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species needed to develop their own symbols. “They taught us, made us wise.” His voice began to fail, “If you showed us one, we could know what happened...”

The wiseman reached into his pocket, his staff still high and in defense position, and he brought out a handkerchief. When he opened it, a black stone was there.

Gayl gasped.

Blayd was delighted. It was, indeed, a teacher’s stone. Instantly he connected with it. There was enormous damage. Someone had, no, thousands of someone’s who had no real idea what they were doing had been ... fixing it. Altering the programming. Entire libraries of pure data were shut away.

“Enough!” The wiseman shouted, pulling it away. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t be such fools!” Gayl shouted. “This boy is an orb master! He is trying to *fix* it for you!”

“Enough!” the wiseman roared, guards drawing weapons.

Blayd broke away the link. He had achieved nothing.

“Stupid fools!” Gayl screamed.

The staff was raised higher, burning with light. Blayd was worried, that was UV. It could really actually hurt them. He rushed up, pushing Gayl away. “I am sorry, please, please, you need to trust me.” He stood up to the wires, and looked the wiseman right in his eyes.

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“Dragons are good, most of them. And my friend is a very powerful dragon, and right now she is very afraid for our safety. And this will not bring out her best. You need to let us go, and when you do, we will repair your teachers for you. Just like her mother did... her mother did that for me. Because if she hadn't, I would still be as primitive as you.”

The wiseman grew livid with rage. “How dare you, what proof have you!”

“He's telling you the truth,” Gayl said, her voice flat and strained.

He glowered condescendingly. “How dare a woman speak of truth? Only males have the intuition and emotional maturity to find out what is real, and what is not.”

If she'd had her tools, Blayd was sure, she would have electrocuted him right there and then.

He pushed in front of her, just in case she did manage to pull something dangerous, “That's not what is important now! We're telling you the truth. Your world... the dragons. You have teachers and you can learn so much more, but you have to be willing to admit you're wrong!”

He knew it was a stupid thing to say as soon as it came out of his mouth.

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“Blasphemy child, and you shall be punished. I know what is true, though I don’t know what you are, and I am called to speak the truth at all times, for I am Wise among my people!”

Blayd was throw sideways as Gayl pushed him out of the way. “Give us our tools” Gayl screamed. “Then I will humble you and your entire army! Let us see how ‘wise’ you are!”

The staff burned even brighter, “I should not have spoken to you. Guards, give them no water. Prepare to bind them and take them back to the capital!”

Gayl screamed and kicked the door. Some guards shouted in what might have been excitement, or fear. But the wiseman held, and they soon fell silent. Gayl screamed again, and walking back threw herself to the floor. She was breathing quickly, her eyes fierce. She was clearly very upset.

Blayd wasn’t sure what to say. He went to kneel in front of her. They’d made things worse, but there was no need to point that out now.

To his surprise, there were tears in her eyes. “He never listens!” she gestured at the wiseman, who was saying nothing. She wiped her face, and her voice was angry, “One thing, one thing they’ve ever wanted me to be. And they don’t listen.”

Blayd didn’t know what she meant. So, he said nothing, and waited.

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She sniffed. “All my life, all my life, I’ve ever wanted to make my father proud. To make my *people* proud. I worked *so hard*. I worked every waking hour. I mastered every tool and now I have none of them...” her voice broke. “Stand tall, study hard. But I never even got so much as half a smile.” She started trembling, and looked in his eyes. “Why was it not enough, Blayd? Why am I never enough, for any of them. For even... my own father.”

She began to weep, and Blayd did not know what to do. But if Destiny was here, she would have wanted him to hold her.

Cautiously, in case she hit him again, he scooped through the dirt. When he was close enough, he held out his arms.

She threw herself into his embrace, bitter sobs wracking her entire body.

Blayd felt fear. She’d never been like this. And if she was afraid, what could *he* do? What was he *supposed* to do?

*Oh, Divine*, he prayed a very, rare, prayer.

Or perhaps he was he doing it, already? He held her close, and she wept like he didn’t know she was capable of. It tore at his heart to see the ever-impressive Gayl crying like a child. So, he held her even closer, and pushed away the tears from his own eyes too.

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Destiny searched through the trees. The forest dragon was about here somewhere. *Why are you hiding so difficult?* She pondered. *Come out, oh, I will call you!*

Just as she was about to speak, the forest exploded as the dragon launched itself from the mud and tried to eat her. It was a terrestrial wyrm, long and sinuous, like herself, about ten times the mass and with a gaping jaw of thousands of dragon-killing teeth.

Thanking the Divine, Destiny unleashed all the lightning that remained to her, blasting the savage dragon in its maw. It fell away, but began to coil again, ready to strike.

*This isn't going to work,* Destiny realized, and catching the threads went out of the atmosphere.

Fortunately, it seemed no one was going to pursue her here.

She looked at their world, very green, very pristine. Nothing in orbit. No subterranean structures. A world full of potential, if they would gain the trust of their dragons once again. Was the matron to be found? She would likely be even less welcoming.

Destiny returned to the plasmid. She swam in the air above her mountain, unsure of what to say.

The plasmid spoke first, *Didn't go as well as you'd planned?* She laughed.

*Please,* Destiny said. *Please, he's just so small. He's a human, and he has a princess with him. Please, he's... my only friend.*

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The plasmid sounded like she was swearing to herself, and the earth again trembled. *Unbelievable! Who am I to contramand her orders? I'm going to **die** for this!*

Fire burst out all around, and the mountain violently shook. A dark plume of black ash erupted from the summit, filling the air with purple lighting.

It was amazing. Destiny squealed with excitement. *Woah, you are so powerful!*

The plasmid rose up through the soil, burning it out of her way. Her wingspan was enormous, her countenance truly... regal.

*You're a noble,* Destiny finally guessed.

The mountain was in full eruption at this point. "You seem so surprised, hatchling. Come, let us get your boy,"

"Yes, my boy!" Destiny grinned up at the much larger dragon.

*But I warn you, I will never be a bonded slave to one of those sentients.*

Destiny scowled at her. "You're allowed to just **be their friends.**"

The giant plasmid tilted her head, as if thinking this was such a new thought to think she'd never thought it before. "Hmmm," she mused, and saying no more took to the air.

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Blayd sensed something was happening. The dragons were up to something. The fact that a local volcano had just erupted was a rather obvious clue. Gayl had stopped crying, but had not left his arms, nor ordered him away. This was both consoling, and concerning, to him.

Two soldiers rushed up to the cage, throwing the door open. “Come!” the wiseman ordered, “Mt Hujitsu is alive again, we are leaving the area.”

Neither of them moved.

“Are you fools, children!” he shouted, “We need to leave now.”

“You need to leave us here,” Gayl told them, matter of factly. “Or the mountain will follow *you*.”

At his order, and soldier ran in and dragged her out by her hair. She screamed in anger and pain. Blayd was so angry, if he’d had a knife, he’d have struck the man on his arm right away. But the much more seasoned soldier just grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him out as well. If it wasn’t the military strength, designed for interstellar transport, it would have torn asunder at the act. But the soldier didn’t even seem to notice.

He threw them to some other soldiers, who bound their arms.

“You do not want to do that,” Gayl told them. She seemed to recover very quickly.

Suddenly the sky began to fill with a terrifying darkness. Red and angry smoke filled the air above their position. Guards were screaming



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and running about. Some fell over. They didn't seem to know if they should grab weapons, or run for their lives.

Gayl and Blayd looked at each other, and smiled.

Then, from the angry sky, a huge silhouette was forming. It was a dragon, likely a plasmid. Standardform; two arms, two legs, two enormous wings. A blistering heat shone from its presence, setting fire to every inflammable thing within several meters. It was terrifying, if you didn't know what it was.

“Oh, now, *that's* a skydemon,” Gayl smirked.

The wiseman held up his staff, unintentionally lessening the interdiction field around them. “Back, back, unholy monster of the skies! Back, lest the Wintercurse find you!”

The plasmid actually laughed.

There was some commotion from behind him and before he could move, a sharp claw ripped apart his metal bindings.

Without looking to see who it was, he spun around and threw out his arms.

Destiny caught him without effort. “My boy,” she sniffled.

Every part of him wanted to fly away, but there was something he wanted to do here first. With a fluid, well-practiced motion, he pulled his orb from the sash. He then reached out, and tore the orb from the wiseman's robe.

The older man turned on him in alarm.

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Gayl already had her staff out, so he was no longer a problem. But she made a show then. She materialized her sword slowly, enjoying the raw fear as it spread across the arrogant wiseman's face. Then she conjured her shield over her back to protect them all. The boots began to levitate her just a span above the ground. And as the diadem at her brow lit up, the air around them spun about in a protective cyclone.

And Blayd studied the orb, unaware of how he was now levitating too, trying to ignore the fact that Gayl was being so exceptionally talented, powerful, and amazing right now.

"St... stop them!" the bigoted wiseman shouted.

Two arrows sped towards them and Gayl cut them out of the air. A guard with a spear tried to attack her, but he was no match for her speed or technology. She picked him up into the air and threw him away.

Now she had the wiseman's attention, and they battled silently, staff to staff. Within a moment, she was backing away. "Oh, he's pretty good," she admitted.

Blayd was trying to hurry. If she got desperate, she'd be quite capable of cutting him and his staff in half with her blade. As much as he was unimpressed with the wiseman's ignorance, someone had once been kind to his own. And he sort of reminded him of his father too.

Blayd lost his mind in the orb. It was centuries of mess. It was hundreds of hundreds of ignorant people forcing opinion to be fact;

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contradiction and confusion the result. The orbs were a shambles, right to their core.

As if on cue, Gayl switched out to her blade. “Better be quick,”

Guards were closing in. Destiny stood low, behind him, ready to eat anyone who got too close.

But that was not a reputation he wanted her to leave this world with.

“You got this, Blayd,” Destiny promised him – right in the very moment that he realized, indeed, he did not have this. This was a lifetime of repair that need to be done.

“I cannot,” he said.

“Yes, you can!” she swam in front of him. Blayd heard a few soldiers should out and fall as Gayl made the wind do things it normally couldn’t do. The plasmid was probably still laughing in the blackened sky.

Blayd actually felt annoyed, at Destiny’s well meaning, but ignorant, insistence. “No, I don’t. Not in a lifetime. I need to reinitialize it from original protocols. They’re not going to like it but we need to fix everything.”

“So, do it!” Gayl shouted.

“I don’t have permission!” Blayd replied. “You’re supposed to have regional authority.”

“Now!” Gayl shouted.

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“All right,” Blayd muttered.

Suddenly a whispered voice stopped him. The plasmid’s fire died instantly, and Destiny cringed on the ground, *Do what?* it asked him.

A moment later, ectoplasmic material began to rise up from the ground around the entire battle camp. It was a dragon, and she was truly huge. The plasmid bowed, yet the sky stood black.

“The matron,” Destiny trembled.

### **Astrid and her matron arrive**

For a day, nothing happened. Forces slaved away to fortify their worlds against a slowly growing anomaly. Dragons and their riders fought a dreadful, silent battle against a deeply amoral, murderous compulsion. Whatever they did had no lasting effect. They could distract themselves, but they could not numb that incessant demand.

Then a scholar spoke, “Sir, we have a deep space standardform approaching at beyond light to our position. They’re asking for safe passage.”

Rayn reached out. It was not a threat. There were dragons arriving from all points in deep space now, and they most often arrived alone. This was a welcome hope.

“She has a rider,” he informed the scholar.

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The scholar checked his orb. “Why, yes, indeed she does. Two, in fact, no? Two dragons? I don’t understand.”

“Let them come,”

By the time Rayn was only nine paces out onto the docking platform, the dragon teleported down from the sky in a smear of golden light, like Starwing might have. There was a young rider, looking almost human, and what might have been a glacial standardwing. But the very human looking woman got his attention the most.

She dismounted, and glared at him.

Following nothing but his intuition, he bowed, as he might to a dragon.

She visibly relaxed. “You have your son’s scent,” she observed.

*What?!* A voice screamed over the helm. Jayd teleported there a breath later, and glared at the woman.

The child, and her dragon, had yet to speak a word.

“And you would be the mother,” the woman looked a little... ashamed.

Jayd glared at her without a sound.

The woman spoke again, her face proud. “I owe you far more than an apology. I don’t even know if I will be welcomed back upon my world. I have treated the children poorly. I am here to begin to make amends.”

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Blayd looked at Jayd who clenched her fists and jaw tight. A younger Jayd might have flown into a rage, demanding answers.

The woman seemed to understand. She looked at Rayn, “He has your patience too, which would be what made him so dangerous. They almost brought my world to ruin, and have most certainly ended my reign – but there are worse things. Like this which assaults the bond? Traagh, what an obnoxious sound!”

“You are a dragon,” Jayd finally guessed the truth.

The woman sighed, “And the matron of my world, once.”

“How?” Jayd demanded.

The woman just glared at her.

Jayd sighed. “I am grateful to hear the children do well. Please, your majesty, whatever aid you offer will be gratefully received.”

The matron huffed, getting a backpack down from the standardform, who almost seemed to wince at her touch. “I am a shifter,” she answered Jayd’s question.

*An immaculately capable one*, Ironfang observed, his voice filled with respect. *She seems entirely human.*

The woman continued, “There is a plant, an astral carnivore. Its toxin is particularly effective against dragons. But we have found that in minute quantities it can numb the resonance of the force that is attacking the bond. It cannot be a coincidence. I think it is at least worth your try.”

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The general had already made her decision. “Scholars, look into this!”

It was an hour, but they were able to negate the current challenge.

### The Matron

A dragon half a kilometer long surrounded them. She was a rare ectoplasmic serpentine, made of materials most humans feared.

The sentients threw themselves the ground. Only the wiseman was foolish, or bold enough among them, to stand.

The enormous dragon circle around them, glaring. Thinking. She approached Blayd and Gayl. *You are not dirtkin, what are you?* she demanded.

Gayl bowed to one knee, then stood. “We are Pearlians, our race is human.”

*You are a long way from home then,* the matron replied. She moved closer.

Destiny hid her face in fear, and Blayd covered her head with his body to help her feel safe, and to perhaps protect her a little.

The matron stared into him. *A scholar.* She looked at Gayl. *And what are you? I sense both all and none of the tools within you.*

“An artisan,” she replied, head held high, “soon to be master of all the tools.”

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*Soon?* the matron laughed. *You must set a very high expectation of yourself then, from what I just witnessed.*

Gayl did not reply. This dragon was royalty, and this was a world they had no authority on.

*Master of many? Hmm, speak freely, humans. I need to know what you are doing here.*

Gayl nodded, and bowed, finally prepared to speak one royal to another. She stepped forward to stand equal to the confused and powerful wiseman, which was impressively bold of her. “Matron, we come from far away. I know there is no bond upon your world, but among us there is peace, dragons and humans, living and thriving... that is, until a few suns ago.”

*Your bond is dying.* The matron announced.

Gayl nodded, her whole body a curtsy.

The wiseman still just looked confused.

Blayd watched a nearby guard, his hand near his weapon. He wasn't likely to do anything stupid... even so, Blayd welded his sword to his scabbard in absolute silence. It would do the man no good to act rashly now.

The matron sighed, and turned to face them all. She brushed past the still glowing plasmid, but received no harm. The gesture might have even been friendly. As she spoke, images flitted past his mind, and he imagined they all did. *I was there, almost one thousand years ago. My*



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*mother, well, she was talented as well, little female. She was rare double bonding, and they were very happy. He was for war, she was for peace. Their diverse ways of looking at things made for a powerful rule. The matron's voice grew tense, or tired. But with power came complacency. There were those whose ambition overstretched wisdom's guiding hand. In him they found an ally, and in a moment of weakness, they slew my mother. They slew her, right in front of me!*

The world trembled at her rage.

No one spoke.

*So now you know, she said, and seemed to be speaking to the wiseman himself. Now you know why you dustkin are beneath us, and to you, we are sky demons.*

He looked aghast. "I ... I did not know. But, oh, it cannot be true!"

She reared up as if in surprise, but did not shout. *True? What measure do you expect to find such... truth.*

He searched for words, and glanced at Blayd. "Well, the ancestors teach of the wars, of the hunting. Of the imprisoning and cruelty. Besides, you are a ghost yourself, a creature of death and horror!"

The dragon laughed. *Oh, the siblings then? Logic, and Emotion? The two who reveal all truth? Oh, how my mother loved them. She*

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swum closer to them in the air. *But logic is only as good as the truth upon which it is built.*

“I don’t... understand,” the wiseman admitted.

Which was, really, very wise of him.

The matron tutted. *Logical fallacies are new to you, then? And you, a wiseman among your kind? She tutted. Have not your scholars only recently revealed to you that the world only looks flat because it is actually just very, very large? That rotten meat does not turn into flies, you just cannot see their tiny eggs? She glanced at him condemningly. You think only men are wise, but you withhold all education from your females, revealing your truth is caused by your actions, not your actions by the truth.*

The wiseman was clearly thinking about this, many of his kneeling soldiers pondering it as well.

Blayd felt to assist, “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, except in a curved universe!”

*Yes!* The matron agreed.

“And if you believe everyone is lying to you,” Gayl added, “You will never be able to recognize when they are telling you the truth.”

*Precisely!* The matron chimed. *So, dustkin, honor me in this – is it possible you have crafted a logically coherent narrative of the universe and your entire place within it, based entirely on the false ideas that you, alone live in it?*

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His words struck true, and he seemed to genuinely be considering it.

*These two children have travelled far, and they only wanted to help. But because you did not understand them, you assumed the unfamiliar as threatening. I think you might need to get out a bit more, don't you?*

Gayl snickered at that jest, and Blayd had to smile. But the wiseman and his army said nothing.

*And what of emotion? Does your heart bear you the conviction of this truth?*

Now the wiseman stood up boldly, “The Divine always bears conviction to my heart!”

She tutted, *That depends, very much, on what you are asking. The Divine has a much better idea of your sincerity than you do, or of what you intend to do with your understanding. How much wiser it is to leave her children to their prejudices so that you can learn from your own experiences, than to try and force wisdom into you!*

She drew closer, and glared at him, *When your only question is ‘how do I deal with these deceiving, child-like allies of the sky demons’, you will always get a very different answer than if you had asked, ‘Oh, Divine, what would you have me to do?’*

The wiseman looked like he might have argued, his mouth opening and closing a few times. Then he looked down, and his aura

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grew brighter, and stronger, and wiser. “Then, what, great ghost, is your advice? If we cannot trust our reason for the hidden truths it is based upon, if we cannot trust our feelings for the insincerity of our own wishes, where is truth to be found?”

*Child*, the matron asked of Destiny.

Her head popped out, and she spoke to them all wisdom that flowed into her from her ancestors, “Trust not only your heart, for hearts can be deceived. Trust not only your minds, for minds may be deceived. Trust only the Divine which will speak to both heart, and mind, and reveal truth to all who are honest and compassionate about their desires.”

Gayl looked very impressed.

Destiny looked more than a little shy and abashed, but she was not going to challenge a matron’s wish in the hour of her power. With a frightened grin she dashed behind Blayd once more, trembling, yet her face was lit up with a big smile.

*Until you know everything, it is wiser to assume you know nothing.* The matron summarized.

Gayl nodded, and the dragons bowed.

The wiseman looked ... wiser?

Gayl stepped forward, and waited for the matron to give her leave to speak. “Mother, the way is long, and the hour is late. We have tarried so long here, we-”

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*Just like the other three.* The matron announced.

“Queen of dragons?” Gayl asked.

*I thought you might find it curious,* she replied, *Godsight told me of three of your race who passed by here not two days ago, sped on light and wearing those boots similar to yours. They, too, were in great haste.*

“Starwing and Godnor?” Destiny asked out loud.

Gayl hushed her with a glare.

Blayd’s heart sank. If the others were already beyond then, they would have to have added caution now. He looked at Gayl and she seemed to share his concern, *How is that possible!*

The matron, thankfully, just seemed amused. *Such a brief visit. But if you must leave, you may do so.*

“One thing,” Blayd’s voice interjected before he could even think about it. But he meant it. He held up the black stone. “I can fix this. I can help your dustkin, if you allow.”

She smiled. *That is not my decision to make.*

Blayd walked up to the wiseman, Gayl close behind. He looked up at the older man, so unafraid. His eyes held that piecing confidence and wisdom, so much like his father.

Blayd placed a hand on the staff and bowed, as one might to the village wiseman in his home tribe. The wiseman here seemed confused

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at the gesture, but made nothing of it. “Sir, wiseman. Jailer. This orb is a ... book? Gayl?” he turned, seeking her help.

She just smiled, and gestured for him to continue.

Destiny pressed herself to his back. He must have looked an intimidating sight, a small boy silhouetted by a levitating feathered serpent many times his length. He gathered his courage, and looked the older man who reminded him of his father right in his eyes. “I can fix this. This is a computer, it’s like a book. It holds knowledge of your world for thousands of years. But it’s a mess. Everyone has been trying to fix it, and no one has been trying to understand it because they did not like the answers it provided. But I can reset it from the start. I can fix it up for you, with your permission.”

The older man took the orb from him, and held it up. “A book, you say?” He looked confused. “And people have... they have altered it.”

Blayd nodded, “At times, quite deliberately. They did not like what it said. They wanted it to tell *their* truth, not provide a statement of events so that people could make up their own minds, and write their own stories. Much of it is destroyed. But I can fix what I can by resetting it back to it’s original... manuscript, if you will. At the moment it’s not even a book. It’s like a bomb... wait a moment, a fire is set to a great library and all is strew about. We kept a copy of the

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original library right here. We can fix it up, but it will be up to your people, then, to keep it right.”

He turned the stone in his hand. “Memories, then. And great speeches. All in here?”

“Yes! And truth. But having truth and *knowing* you have the truth are still very different things. At what point can you tell what you believe to be true is actually the truth? It’s the difference between science, and philosophy. And truth is something science can inform, but not prove. That is a personal choice, but that doesn’t mean we can choose to change the truth just because we don’t like it, or understand it. Epistemological understandings can-”

“Blayd,” Gayl cut him off.

He looked at her, and realized he’d been rambling along with his own thoughts, and not talking about what this man was asking or probably even ready to know. “Well, thoughts, and feelings, are both important. But you have to be able to *change*. Until you ‘know all things’, right?” he glanced at the matron, who nodded. “Not being afraid to be wrong is the only path to truth, for dustkin, and humans.”

He glanced at Gayl, who looked at him proudly.

*You restore my faith in sentients*, the matron told him. Then she seemed to grow annoyed. *But I lost my Dustkin in the insurrection. I will have no one, and thus the circle cannot begin.*

“It’s not true!” Destiny shouted.

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The matron looked confused.

Gayl stood forward, and spoke, “My mother...” she swallowed hard. “She was bonded to two dragons.”

That got the attention of all the dragons, very much.

Gayl smiled, “Not at the same time!” They seemed relieved. “After our matron passed, who gave her life so my mother could live.” She covered her face with her hand, and her jaw became tight. But Gayl shook it off, and spoke to the dragons boldly. “She took another dragon, the patron, who by his arts made it possible for them to be bonded. It was not easy, some things aren’t. But he made it possible.”

*Hmm*, the matron seemed to think about that. Then she looked at the quailing dustlings, and the two dragons on the ground. *What say you, Mt Hujitsu, my Fireheat?*

*Ever you have known my thoughts on the matter, mother.* The plasmid spoke in their minds.

The matron lowered her head, and finally spoke, “I must give it some thought.” And with that, she began to fly away, her body disappearing into mist as she went.

A moment later, the plasmid lifted up into the air as well. As she flew away, the sky lightened, and the mountain stopped trembling.

They were left, alone with the army.

The soldiers stood, ready to do the bidding of their wiseman, their hands on weapons. “Do we take them?” a soldier asked him.



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“No,” the wiseman replied. “Something Divine has happened today. Our whole world is about to change.” He turned to Blayd. “As you wish.”

The change was made in an instant, though it was not apparent to anyone there.

The soldiers and their wiseman looked puzzled.

“Do not delay,” he said, “you-”

“I already have,” Blayd replied with a grin.

From far away towards the mountain, a bright beam of light shot towards the sky.

“A temple! With a teacher! They still have at least one!” Destiny squealed. “Oh, look, look Blayd, they can leave the darkness, they can leave their prejudice behind!”

Blayd grinned and patted her.

Gayl stood up toward him, “Go. More important than your war. More important than your home. Go to the place where the light falls from the sky. You will find there a teacher. And you can begin, again, to learn.”

The man looked inspired. “Yes, yes, I have prayed for such a day! I will go. We will go. Quickly, men, toward the light and all it intends to teach us! And get the scribe, we need to write down all that has just happened!”

Destiny gathered them on her back in an instant.

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But the wiseman turned toward them. “Thank you, children of the Humans. I don’t know what this means. I can barely understand what you have taught us. But you are as angels descended to cleanse our world of pain.”

Blayd was uncomfortable with the analogy, but Destiny seemed to know the perfect thing to say, “As are we all, father.”

Waving, they took to the air, and in a breath, were out again amongst the stars.

## Queen's welcome

Scant days had passed. The toxin was proving effective. One at a time, dragon by dragon, they were able to capture a compelled dragon. Usually, they could numb it down, some even began to recognize their riders again – if they had survived. But none were able to re-bond again, not while that dread voice kept speaking day and night to every heart.

But the horde at Thiaz was growing even faster. The council was in agreement; they had to take the fight to their enemy.

Rayn looked out as half the dragon riders of their world, about a quarter of what once were, waited in the space between the stars.

*You nervous,* Norwich asked, not needing to.

Rayn nodded, forgetting the others could not see him, again.

*You're nodding again, aren't you,* Norwich jested.

They laughed.

*I suppose this is something worth being nervous about,* Stormbreath noted.

Rayn was just about to agree when he heard a voice scoff, it was Stormclouds. *Would that I might silence this annoying voice forever! I haven't slept well in weeks. How I envy you riders, you at least have something to distract you!*

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Rayn was tired of the war as well. *We will have silence, when we have peace*, he said, sounding a lot more threatening than he intended to.

*It is time*, the general stated.

*All wings move into attack formation*, Darkwing announced.

Within a breath, fifty million dragons and their riders surrounded a strange anomaly. It seemed a world, or a small moon rather, surrounded by a ring made up entirely of dominated dragons. Huge ships, transport supplies perhaps, brought materials to and from that moon.

And Rayn suddenly had a dread sentiment that, despite all their prayers, they had fallen into a trap.

A voice spoke, and it was a smug human woman's voice. She sounded young, but spoke like a queen. "I am Oneheart, Matron of Thiaz, and now; True Queen of all dragons. Today, I welcome you all to the revelation of power of the true rising order. Today, I free your dragons to their true place as *my* servants alone. I am queen, and none rule beside me from black heavens to red heart. I am queen; Surrender your worlds and your dragons to me, their true mistress of both mind and heart, and you may yet live on. Resist, and I will feed my children, your children. I am the queen, and I have spoken."

Dragons on all seven worlds screamed and twisted in agony. Many fled, forced into the stars by the dread compulsion. Some few,

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whose riders with tears and passion managed to hold on to their bond, did not. Soon, the compulsion faded. But the message continued, gnawing at mind and will day in, and day out.

The effect devastated their forces. Even as Rayn began to realize she'd somehow managed to negate much of the forces of the toxin, he began to wonder if someone on their side had been converted to her power and never let it known. A non-bonded dragon, perhaps?

There was a blast of black night as Darkwing somehow managed to resist the compulsion yet again, and fill the nearby space with a world of darkness. It saved them all.

*Back to Pearl, now,* he commanded, and none who wished to live free disobeyed.

*What will we do!* Cambion mourned.

A sudden peace settled on Rayn's heart.

A dozen lines of energy, as if someone was carrying golden threads with them by some unexplained miracle, appeared in the sector. Within a breath they had formed a wall of glowing light between the two opposing armies, and in the light the queen's terror field dramatically decreased. And at the center of the light, stood humanized entities in the unharmed in the emptiness of space. They seemed to be struggling against the energy by the force of their own, incompressible, will.

*The Etherian?* Ironfang muttered.

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Rayn just cheered, his forces joining with him.

Within an instant, one appeared before him. She had a mature look on a very young face. *You must be the father*, the creature told him.

Rayn wondered what the being meant.

*I have met the children. They bade us work with them, but it was the others that convinced us. We have sped them on.*

Images invited themselves into his mind. Godnor, and Starwing. They were closing in! He released a breath he did not know he was holding.

Staring up at the wall of light, nudging away the field of hate that gnawed at his consciousness, he said the only words he could, “Thankyou, we are thankful.”

She nodded, *This is only a temporary measure, the voice of hate will grow. Until the children return there is no hope for any of us at all – we have asked your ancient enemies to assist where they can. Stay strong, we will provide what little assistance we can here. Our shield of light can protect an army, but it cannot protect a world.*

Rayn nodded, *Then we wait. All forces, full retreat. Get back within the safety of Pearl’s spiritsphere and the shield of light provided by the Etherian. We have to hold out, and give the chosen ones the time they need.*

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Desperate stragglers from a decimated army fled back to his home.

*We can only hope*, Ironfang muttered, struggling now against the compulsion, *that they will be soon enough!*

## Landwraith

Blayd was lost in thought, solving garmantun theorum as they rode between the stars, when Gayl suddenly stood up, drawing sword and staff. As if sensing her alarm, Destiny switched threads rapidly, leaping between worlds.

‘What’s going on?’ Blayd asked, wondering what had interrupted his study.

For a tense moment, neither female answered.

Then Destiny reared back, and Gayl pulled a curtain of dangerous high energy plasma between her and whatever threat he had not seen yet.

He was just about to scan the region with his orb when the threat fully presented. It was some form of six-legged drake, made of stars, with prehensile tentacles on its face and down its spine. Its transparent body ended in a long, curling tail dripping with deadly poison. Its face was undraconic, its claws were impractically long, but just right for stabbing the heart of both dragon and rider. For a moment he was puzzled and curious, then he remembered the records of the entity that had materialized before them riding effortlessly along with them while they were on the golden thread.



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“A landwaith!” he screamed in alarm. Stumbling to stand on his young dragon, his body shield formed around him so clumsy it was quite visible in the act. But even as he rethought his tactic, he knew it was going to be little defense against the most ancient of the enemies of the dragons.

Nether spoke, till the entity actually seemed to laugh. *Slow, and soft, as all the legends say. How your two races bested my own, I may never know.*

No one answered.

*Be careful, Gayl warned them. There may be more.*

*There's not, Destiny replied, I would know.* Already her body was changing, taking on the formidable defenses her genetic programming knew where the only protections against this incorporeal entity.

Now the landwraith actually laughed. *You actually think you're going to fight me?*

Gayl lowered her sword. *Not if we can help it.*

Even the landwraith seemed to relax to hear that. *For though your deaths would be assured, I find no value in bearing the inconvenience of my own injuries today.*

He then teleported behind them, and closer, without any warning, and with such speed it was truly horrifying. If there was any way to

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sense his smell in the emptiness of space, Blayd was sure it would smell like death.

It floated nearby, and twisting gently in the air showed how its spineless back could twist completely around without needing to untwist again, a clear tactical advantage. *I have always wanted to see a real dragon, not just the memory of one. You are very young, aren't you?*

*Leave us be!* Destiny demanded. *We are on an important quest.*

The landwraith seemed to consider that. *Five thousand of your years ago, or so, our kind warred. Or so it must have seemed to you. But what you fought were only the hunters, those most honored warriors sent out among the dimensions to teach humility to any race with the potential to threaten us.*

*You make murder seem so dignified,* Gayl accused him.

*It is!* He retorted, his voice cold and factual. *But... we were too effective. Our mighty hunters build thought upon thought till their entire pride was founded on the victory of the hunt. A culture was born, and the young ones thought of nothing else.*

*What is your point?* Destiny asked, in full battle readiness. Blayd looked at the landwraith, swimming so softly in the space around them. It did not seem to want to kill them, at least not yet.

*But it had already shown how quick it could be,* Destiny said.

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The entity laughed, and Blayd was concerned it could even sense the silent communication of their orbs. *Your quest, I wonder if it has anything to do that that sound emanating from the place of your origin?*

Blayd and Gayl shared a glance. She spoke, *Oh, you know about that then?*

It seemed to emit a soft, bothered, growl. *It is the only reason I am here in your blinding, harsh universe right now. How bothersome! Oh, wo is me!*

Blayd looked at Destiny, who ignored him. She was entirely ready to fight at any instant. *Probably a smart idea*, he thought.

The landwraith laughed, *Oh mortals, If I wanted you dead, you would be fleeing for your lives already.*

Destiny snarled.

The entity backed away.

*If you must know*, Gayl replied. *Yes, somewhat. Though I wish to know more of what you know before I speak further.*

The entity was bothered. Whatever sort of creature it was, it had the bearing of a prince of its kind. It was not accustomed to being the one giving the questions. But all credit to it, it obliged them. *It is a rancorous, dissonant noise. It bothers the children!*

Destiny spoke carefully, *It does not harm you?*

The landwraith honored her question. *No, we close it out, or move our house further away, if we must. But the neighbors are being*

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*bothersome. So, I'm here to ask them to keep it down. Now there was a clear sense of a, well, potential threat in its thoughts.*

‘Would that we could!’ Gayl shouted in mind and voice. ‘It will be the ruin of us all!’

What the entity said next, Blayd admitted, would always surprise him. *Well, I think that would be a bit of a pity.*

*Pity? Destiny snarled at him. Pity? I have no memory of those you hunted in my mind, because they all died! Our only salvation was destroying your people, and hunting them.*

The landwraith actually nodded, a clearly recognizable act. *As I said, a regrettable effect of the over enthusiasm of our heroes. They were too good at it! You may not know, or do you, little dragon – there were others we offended. Your race might not have fared so well had not every city in this dimension been brought to ruin by the others who learned to fear us... all too much.*

*Then watch yourself, landwraith, lest you give us cause to bring entire ruin upon all your race.*

Gayl actually gasped, and even Blayd was shocked at what she had just said. ‘entire ruin’, he patted her softly. That was ... that was a lot of ruin.

The landwraith stopped its calm stirring in the sky, and turned to face them. Then, if it was possible, it smiled. The space behind it began to curl up and away, forming a twisting torus like someone had just

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perverted the entire remnants of the galaxy. But he knew the effect was just an illusion.

But the sight within the torus was not. It was another universe. Green and blue nebula like clouds seemed to pass on forever. And it was dark, emitting no light their eyes could naturally see. The effect was ... just that hard to describe.

‘Is that...’ Gayl spoke in wonder.

*The true home of the landwraith. This is a sacred trust I offer you. A token of peace between those who once warred.*

Destiny snarled again, *Or a trick of some kind.*

It sighed. *We have done nothing to deserve your trust, except for ignoring you for over five thousand years. The hunters are all fallen, it was the price we paid for that peace. Now, I alone, remain to make sure none follow our foley.*

Then he drew close, and Destiny’s lightning lit up along her flanks unbidden.

*But, it continued, lest you think us anything other than bested, behold – the true might of the landwraith!*

From within the giant torus, a hundred, hundred.... An innumerable number of landwraith fused with the normal dimension. This was the citadel of their power. This was their fortress. And it was as wide as the galaxy itself and filled with their strange cultures and life.

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And Blayd had a distinct and sinking feeling – if they had needed to destroy, no current empire of men or dragons could have stopped them.

*So, if you please, stop sending quite so much hate our way, it is hurtful, though I know we earned it. But if you could please turn down that noise, well, we would think kindly on that.*

Destiny was trembling in panic.

Blayd patted her, then hugged her tight. It seemed to help.

Gayl was still standing, but put her sword away. *You have a means, I did wonder about it. We need to get to the center of our galaxy*

-

*I assure you, most would rather see every blistering sun put out in your realm before they allowed our dimension to be used as a courier service!*

Same, Destiny stuttered.

Gayl took her eyes away from the danger of the landwraith to pat Destiny on her head. *We're still at least a week away from the center, and probably three days behind the others. If there is a way there... and if there's any other way! But this chance has never presented itself in all of history. Destiny, please. And the Last of the Hunters, please. If we can save but one life, is that life not worth it.*

*At the risk of our own?* Destiny whispered, her voice trembling.

Blayd held her.

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*What say you?* Gayl spoke to an entire universe of their enemies. *Will you grant us safe passage to the center of our galaxy? I offer no payment and seek no bond. But for your peace.*

There was a half-minute of uncomfortable silence.

They all sensed it at the same moment, *Yes*. Gayl grinned at Blayd, and he nodded back at her. A hundred, million of the landwraith beyond turned away, a thousand more moved forward – the ones with longer claws and sharper spines.

And Destiny froze.

*You are expected to turn aside your technologies. And you will allow us to carry you – our secrets are our own to keep!*

Gayl put away her tools. She held out her wrist, *This device is needed to carry our world with us, or we will die there or even here. We are frail creatures.*

*That you are*, the hunter agreed.

Blayd felt a trembling, and looked down. Destiny's eyes were wide with panic, her jaw locked with fear. He could almost hear her unspoken thoughts. *I am not going in there.*

He looked up at Gayl, hoping in part that she wasn't going to make her.

She held up her staff, and it glowed that pink color. But she indicated with her head that that was where they needed to go.

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And he knew it was true. There was a war on, he was sure of it. It was madness to think they could eat and sleep while people were fighting for their lives. But that was what they had to do to survive, both of them.

Blayd climbed past Gayl to float in the space by her head, holding her face. ‘I don’t really trust them either, Destiny. But Gayl checked, and Divinity agrees. We need to go that way.’

“Can you promise you will be safe!” she begged.

He had to be honest. “No, I can only promise that is the way we should go.”

“Errmmmm,” Destiny cringed. “I... we... oh! I can still feel every loved one lost! Those sharp claws! Those sharp minds! The traps... This is what they used to do... and now you want me to go... IN THERE. Into the darkness. The place we never went. The place they fled to when we defeated them! I don’t think I can do it. We dragons... we were not made to go there.”

“I know, I know,” Blayd was saying. He patted her.

Gayl looked at his hand. “And we were not meant to go here; not in normal space. Our body dies quite painfully in less than a minute here. But here we are. And because you are here, we have gone places I could have never imagined without you.”

Destiny made a frightened squeak, and pulled away.

For what it was worth, several more of the landwraith left.



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*If you are here, Destiny said to Blayd, I am not afraid.*

*I am here,* Blayd said, and wrapped his whole arm around her neck, and held her very close.

*Are you ready?* The landwraith said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

Destiny nodded.

*How does one be ready for this sort of privilege?* Gayl muttered.

Blayd looked up at the sharp, spiney, semi corporeal entity. *As ready as we may ever be.*

Something then took them along the golden threads into another universe. It was cold, and ... wet? Colors betrayed and abandoned them. Their path was a corridor of malevolent spines and silent hatred. Then, from far away, another torus began to form. Without, familiar lights of the common reality were clearly visible.

Destiny twitched, and almost surged forward. But the landwraith held them close. She clutched her nails onto the invisible energies, but did not deny the entity its hold.

A few precious breaths later, they were out. The landwraith let them go gently, and they turned. Already the torus was closing.

*You kept your word,* Destiny's voice was one of surprise, and gratitude.

*Thank you, mighty hunter of the landwraith. We will speak of your kindness to all* – Gayl began.

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The entity cut her off, but spoke with a grin, *Don't come back now you hear? Let our worlds not meet again, at least not for another five thousand years!*

Gayl bowed, and Blayd tried to nod but hanging from a dragon's neck in space it's very hard to do that properly. Destiny swung him around and back on.

A dark, malevolent presence flooded from the closing orifice, and Destiny, not to be outdone by her ancient enemies, lit up space itself with a blinding array of lighting that impressed even her. *Till next we meet, Landwraith!* She shouted.

*We look forward to it, dragon,* the creature replied, its voice a mix of strength, threat, and perhaps a touch of compassion.

The torus closed.

“Let's... never do that again!” Destiny proclaimed, and with a terrifying screech turned, and raced towards the gravitational center of their galaxy. Gayl turned them into light, and guided by a navigation he was able to calculate in an instant, they sped towards their final goal in unimaginable haste.

## The well-meaning fools

They stared out in awe, still approaching at beyond the speed of light, yet the creation before them was so unimaginably large it looked like it wasn't changing apparent shape at all. A hundred billion, billion points of light in a rough sphere, surrounding the small family of black holes at the center of the galaxy. If they returned to normal space now time would slow down so much they might miss their grandchildren's funerals, literally speaking.

"It's a city," Gayl said.

"An unimaginably large one," Destiny agreed.

"They appear to have smaller cities interlinked with others by thread," Peyoth added.

"Can we get past them?" Gayl asked.

Blayd was already trying, "There's a dim opening, look there."

"Perhaps we can slip by, unnoticed, if we continue by the highway?"

Blayd was not convinced, "It's not as strong here, diluted by the relative nearness of the central stars."

"Do you think you can find the Giants?" Destiny asked.

Blayd nodded, forgetting Gayl again till he remembered, "Oh, yes. They're *inside* the singularities."

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Gayl turned around, “Just how are we supposed to do that!”

Blake realized he hadn’t really thought of that yet, “Well, I guess if we travel at light, using the boots, ... I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

Gayl huffed, “Worth a try. Or we die trying and never have to face the results of that attempt.”

That was not terribly encouraging.

“Hurry up then,” Gayl demanded, “Up and through, we’d best be gone before Starwing finds us again.”

“I can’t believe he’s found us at all,” Blayd admitted.

Destiny begun to shift her direction. “Up and through, we’re off the see the g—”

Suddenly one of the giant cities materialized around them. Blayd was almost too impressed by the impossibility of that to take a look around. It was sphere shaped, and its internal structure enormous, at least the size of a small, golden moon. It was a surreal experience – a moment ago they were out in space, and now, they were not. A moment ago, they were moving faster than light, and now, either they were not, or the city was somehow moving along with them.

Two, giant, floating men of polished stone materialized in front of them. They bore giant spears. Strange lights accompanied them, and deep darkness as though black holes were somehow part of their armor, or form.

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Gayl was swift, almost swifter than they. She activated her shield as a sphere around them, and drew her sword. “Stand aside, guardians, for our missive is great!”

They appeared to confer among themselves for a moment, then with complimenting gestures summoned a glimmering sphere of gold around them.

If they intended to speak, Gayl gave them no chance. She swung her sword, unleashing a nanoscopically thin sheet of dangerously sharp

bladeweave, which flew with impressive haste and severed several important looking wires on a machine’s limb. The sphere shimmered and threatened to fail.

Blayd was just about to join her, to try and hack into the second machine’s computerized workings, when a voice with all the commanding of an



## Twilight of the Giants

experienced staff wielder spoke in unbroken ferocity, ‘Stop!’

Gayl stood down, but kept her weapons out.

A dim light disappeared in one of the machines, and materialized in front of them. It was a tall humanoid figure made of black stone. She was holding a staff, head down in what was perhaps a gesture of peace. But her voice was that of an officer of the law, or perhaps a judge. “Younglings, you have wandered far from home, and these are unwelcoming times. We know why you have come, and no: You cannot see the giants.”

Gayl glanced back at him, still seated on his dragon friend, while she stood ready to fight. “Who are you?”

“The Gadaleam, eternal guardians most holy of the sacred tombs. You cannot pass.”

Gayl, never to be outdone, swapped out her shield for a staff as well. Holding it down, she levitated to the height of the stone being.

Without warning the other stone being teleported from his machine as well, holding out a short staff and was girded in some fierce looking armor. “Humans, we arrest you in the name of the guardians of the tomb.”

With a forceful gesture the stone lady tore the staff from Gayl’s grasp. She reached out in defiance, and the staff strayed back to her momentarily. But the powerful stone lady won.

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A moment later the world changed as they were, all five of them, teleported to some kind of holding cell. It was comfortably appointed, not dank or dark as prison cells often were.

Blayd looked around. The city was inconceivably huge, and the hundreds of billions of inhabitants focused, and powerful. Few of them seemed to be paying any attention to the ‘younglings’ in their midst, but what infinitesimally small number that did numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and their will was uniquely united.

But Blayd knew Gayl would care nothing of that.

She was still silent, as though thinking. When she spoke, it was with that tact her father had once been so famous for, “Guardians most Holy, I greet you on behalf of the seven worlds. I wish our timing were more fortuitous, as our cause now is most dire-”

The creature cut her off, “We know what you are, *human*. We are surprised, however, that you made it this far so soon. You were not supposed to arrive here for another hundred thousand years, at least! You are out of place, and you are out of time.”

“Yes indeed!” Gayl agreed. “For-”

Again, it cut her off, so very rudely. “The tombs of the giants are not to be disturbed, young one. We have honored them for the past five hundred millennia, we will guard them till the end of time. This was their last request of us. You may go no further.”

## Twilight of the Giants

Gayl sat back down to confer with him, some few thoughts and frustrations flicking against his mind momentarily. *Why were they so desperate? And why so unkind?*

*And why are they not impressed, if we have come so far, so soon?* Destiny wondered.

Blayd looked out, seeing a world of golden lights. His sphere, already connected to their own vast network of information, was already working through their open archives for hints and clues. Their city was vast, with fountains, parks and statues. Some motifs of dragons lay around, the symbolism of a dragon's flight echoed in their architecture. But there were none, none at all, that walked among them.

"Why are there no dragons?" Blayd burst out loud.

The solider stopped, apparently unaccustomed to being so directly addressed.

*Though it seems to be the rule around here,* Gayl bitterned.

Destiny scoffed.

The feminine solider stiffened at the question, but then spoke. "We have no need of dragons, not anymore."

*That felt very wrong.* Destiny thought, and Blayd agreed.

"We learned all they could teach us a hundred thousand years ago. After that, they left."

"They went away?" Gayl asked in clarification.



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“They died out.” The other soldier replied, the touch, perhaps, of bitterness in his voice.

The first soldier did not seem impressed. “We rose above all they were created to teach us, and took their life ribbon to compliment and complete our own. Us, this city, our people. We are the first of the first. We are pinnacle of all that can be!”

Gayl was angry, *Then why didn't they help us out with the plague!*

Destiny muttered, *Or any of our current predicament.*

The monologuing soldier stopped. “What do you mean?”

And, apparently, they could read surface thoughts. Blayd began immediately to look for ways to conceal his thoughts.

He and Destiny looked to Gayl to speak, “A dread wounding, a dire predicament. There is a ... curse of some form, and it's affecting the bonding.”

The stone beings looked to each other, but Blayd felt the rising confusion inside their parasymphathetic conceptual matrix. “You... you already know.” He then turned to the others. “They adapted the bond to create an emotive-telepathic bond within their own species. Now they're... they're dying from within.”

The second stepped forward as if it might strike him them.

## Twilight of the Giants

Destiny leapt forward defensively, while the leader stopped her minion with a simple gesture of her staff. “How were you able to reveal this?”:

Blayd said nothing. These people weren’t being very helpful to them. he wasn’t sure they would just learn things to hurt him.

“It’s impressive, I’ll grant you that.” She replied, “Especially for one as regressive as a human. But the council’s judgement remains the same. You will wait here, and be sent away tomorrow.”

Gayl was too upset to care about diplomacy anymore. “You idiots! Our people are dying in a war with aliens while the bond dies within them, and you think you can solve it by getting a good night’s rest! This is time for war, you well meaning... fools, and you are keeping us from the only forces powerful enough to save us all!”

The stone woman just glared at her with disdain. “Till tomorrow then, human - ”

Without warning the woman and her n#2 paused, and looked at each other as if concerned.

“What is this?” Destiny wondered.

The second looked like he might have replied, but deferred to his superior.

She spoke, “Interesting. Three more humans and their dragons have arrived. I wonder, is this the beginning of an invasion?”

## Twilight of the Giants

Blayd and Gayl looked at each other, ignoring the insult and wondering who could have just arrived. More humans?

The penny dropped for them all at the same moment, “Starwing!” they cheered.

The second scoffed, “Not to matter, they will be locked up with you in a mo-” and she paused.

*More interruptions*, Peyoth chuckled.

“And?” Gayl demanded.

The older looked concerned. “They are claiming you are the crown princess of an entire empire spanning more than a hundred worlds?”

Gayl blinked in surprise.

“Yes,” Destiny hissed. “She is!”

They almost looked embarrassed. “Well, we are sorry for your treatment then. If you had mentioned you were a diplomatic envoy and not merely some lost children seeking adventure. Will you come with us?”

They looked at each other, Gayl almost too angry to be sensible right now. “You know what? Sure, yeah, let’s do that!”

They teleported that moment into a central square of some sort. It was still all gold and black, but had some lovely light blue banners and deep green trees. There was a river, and some impressive statues. But all Blayd really noticed was the wonderfully welcomed sight of six

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good friends; Godnor rode Starwing, a blue dragon with a female rider of the Venfirth that looked oddly familiar, and a tall dragonman who rode a deep night aerial serpentine. All were light walkers. Dark stone people looked around at the levitating dragons with mild interest and awe.

And they looked exhausted. Bedraggled beyond belief. The dragons were offered water, and the riders stepped down from their mounts as if they were very sore. They all looked thin – emaciated.

Blayd was simultaneously terrified, and impressed. Terrified that they'd made these allies of their parents on such a wonderous chase. Terrified that for all that, they'd still lost! Somehow these great warriors had defied the power of an archetype and found them anyway!

“I have never seen such strength and will!” Destiny whispered in awe.

It summed up his feelings as well.

*We're in big, big trouble now!* He mourned, nonexistent black lace running past his arms, a song he'd long forgotten arriving in his ears.

Whatever blistering chastisement or diplomatic pleasantries might have been exchanged was suddenly overshadowed by Starwing's exuberance, “Wey, Trues! What a Ride and I am thirsty!! Gayl, you being as your name a whirlwind it is **real!** And Blayd, what a navigation, **man!** That's one for the record books now and always!”

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And then, incredibly, the dragon riders applauded.

Blayd could not help but smile, and there was something in the warmth of their presence that he found reassuring. They'd come so far, surely, they would not take them back having already failed.

He ran over, and though the others were keeping a close eye on the giant robots, Godnor dismounted and hugged him tightly. It felt like one of the best human hugs he'd ever received, all chocolate caramel and warm hugs.

The other riders approached.

"Who are these?" Gayl asked politely.

Godnor stood aside, gesturing to the woman who rode a blue standardwing. But she spoke for herself.

"I am Auroriella, the second. Clone to the great dragon rider who saved all Pearl from the treachery of Thiaz under Mendelain the fair tyrant."

Gayl nodded, taking it all in her stride. But Blayd was curious to note that the Venfirth must have missed their hero so much that they'd decided to clone her. That was a lot of pressure to put on one person – he was glad she'd found a dragon.

The other figure, incredibly, was a dragonman. Again, she spoke for herself with the rich accent he never felt he'd get used to. "Dwan Clawface, of house Dakhnan. I ride with the black aerial serpentine Dreamspeed. We are honored to be at your service, rising queen."

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The three bowed to the ground, and the stone people looked very embarrassed.

The solider stood forward. "Come, good emissaries. We will have a meal prepared for you, and you may sign your names to the endless roster of all those who have sought wisdom at our gates. Please, will you come with me."

Gayl looked very pleased with the new change of event.

They began walking then, along the wide lawn to an impressive building. Gayl was caught up with Godnor and the female solider, Peyoth caught his attention and motioned towards the clone, and she gave him a simple telepathic signal which clearly indicated she needed to talk - privately.

He let only her words into his sphere, trying to seem like a distracted child again. He set a program for Peyoth to run, exploring seemingly random factoids in their massive open database. Then they talked.

*Have you been able to see the giants?* Auroriella asked.

*Not a chance.* He replied. *And they will not allow it, I think, even for diplomats. They called themselves the 'guardians'.*

Auroriella scowled. *This is exactly what we expected – my dreams of late, and Dwan cast runes last night. We are exhausted beyond imaging for our chase, little one! You did very well.*

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Blayd couldn't help but smile. *I may never know how you managed to keep up.*

*Luck, mostly – which is the hand of the Divine. We started as five, and now we are three.*

Blayd almost felt guilty, he didn't think anyone had died, surely, they'd just quit and gone home? But he didn't really know.

*And now, Auroriella#2 continued, we must bid you a sudden goodbye yet again.*

*What?* Blayd asked.

Godnor replied, all the time while speaking to soldier. It was an impressive ruse. *Get a hold of your princess and your dragon. He told him. In a moment we will cause a distraction, and you will have to use it to get away. Go directly into the dark heart of the galaxy – they will not follow you there for their own religious reasons.*

Blayd sped up, Destiny keeping pace and within arm's reach just because that was who she was. *What distraction?*

Blayd had scarcely grabbed hold of the princess's wrist, when time suddenly slowed down dramatically for all but them.

'The boots?' Gayl pondered, "Why did you activate the boots?"

Blayd looked around. There were three streaks of light where the three heroes who'd come to rescue them had already taken to the sky. But those that travelled on light could think faster than time itself.

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Dwan answered, *The machines that hold back gravity also hold back time here, and as we damage them, those here will resolve to normal temporal mechanics for this place. This is your only chance! Go, go, and save our people, and theirs!*

They wasted no time but were already seated on Destiny.

Blayd looked over, and saw where Godnor and Starwing had attacked was already a rapidly growing incendiary ball of truly impressive fire. He could only hope, down in his soul, that they had not died, for surely they would be imprisoned for life if not.

It almost froze him.

Gayl nudged Destiny into the air while time continues to role slowly about them. *We will have time to honor this incalculable sacrifice some other time. On, on Destiny, let us fly!*

Blayd pushed back his tears, and turned to look at the stone soldier, her eyes still barely widened, the realization of what had just happened still only forming in her mind.

They became light and were gone.

As soon as they were within the enormous sphere of light, a certain oppressive affirmation fell from his heart. They were free of the zealots, for now.

“Where to?” Gayl asked as they sped towards the inescapable blackness.



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“There,” Blayd replied, pointing to the obvious. “Head toward that large one.”

Destiny sped on.

“We’ll be crushed to death,”

“Not necessarily,” Blayd agreed. “I mean, I’ve never tested it personally, but a lightform dragon moving at speed along a golden thread should, theoretically, be able to pass through the event horizon. If an established hollow singularity exists within, we should find ourselves within.”

“What will we find?” Gayl asked.

“A world? The dead heart of a crushed star? Nothing at all? No one knows,” Destiny replied.

“A gravityless void, at the very least.” Blayd reminded them. “... and... whatever has been created within by whatever Divine power has built there.”

Great silence hung on his words.

“Then we go there,” Gayl commanded.

### The last battle

Whoever could not get within the spiritsphere of a planet was soon lost to the dread queen’s will. Hoping for sanctuary in Darkwing’s gift, most fled to Pearl. Yet their foes had now completely turned the

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tide. In great flocks they attacked the still bonded dragons, throwing their riders aside and dragging the tormented dragons back to the golden moons. Even the etherian's powerful gifts could not stop the onslaught. They were loosing.

Again, they attacked, but Rayn and the others were only able to save a handful of dragons and their riders this time.

“There is but little hope for us now!” Sunfire shouted.

How Rayn wished they could find her where she hid.

“We cannot hope to storm her out of her fortress.” Cambion argued.

“Is there any hope that we can destroy it from afar?” Stormclouds argued.

“Not without the fortress from beyond the clouds, or perhaps with one of the dragonmen dreadnaughts... but we made sure that chance was lost to ever ourselves, years ago.” Ironfang said.

Starfire raged, “Then we cannot surrender all we have and are to a queen without compassion or mercy! She will die all sentients, eventually, and enslave every dragon to her will. This is a fate for both our peoples. This is the endgame. This is to die fighting for freedom, or to die failing to fight for freedom. There must be a third option!”

“Not without a miracle...” Ironfang replied.

Suddenly the direction of down gave a subtle yet noticeable shift in the room. No one needed to say what had just happened – the moon,

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by the inexplicable art of dragons, had just teleported into the heliocentric orbit of Pearl itself.

*She is coming...* Ironfang said, the fear clearly evident in his voice now.

## The Last Giant

Blayd could not put into words what he experienced as soon as they breached the infinite darkness. It was a kind of nothing, a sort of ‘pop’ as though all the air in the universe had suddenly stopped existing, and there was a parallel reality he never knew existed that had surrounded him constantly but now was the only reality he knew. It was... exactly that hard to explain.

“Dark,” Destiny mused.

Dark it was. But not quite ‘black’ either.

“We are on the other side of light,” Gayl seemed to decide, and Blayd was inclined to agree. It seemed to put the feeling into words adequately enough.

*Over there,* Destiny pointed with her mind.

Blayd struggled to see, but there was a kind of podium of sorts, or a chair. It seemed to be in a granite temple perhaps, or what was left of one. It was very far away. Destiny tried to travel over there by thread but quickly gave up on the idea – the only way that led here was out, so they had to fly over the old way.

Soon it was obvious that the temple was dedicated to the giants, and to the dragons. Motifs and statues of them working and playing together adorned the enormous, shattered structure. The entire area was

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broken apart like it had exploded eons ago, but swiftly given up on the idea of complete annihilation and now everything simply floated in the silent, timeless void forever. It was a strange, surreal site that brought with it a distinctly reverent feeling.

*Something is alive in there*, Gayl told him, not daring to use her voice to spoil the halcyon night.

Blayd nodded.

They began to approach the largest surviving corner of the shattered temple, and when they did, Destiny gasped.

A huge man, composed entirely of gemstones and dim, failing light, sat on an ornate throne of solid granite. He was at least twenty meters tall, with sagely, ageless features that were distinctly non-human. There was a sorrow, and a wisdom emanating from his soul. He did not move, but they all felt his enormous mind watching them.

Suddenly Destiny surged forward with a desperation Blayd had never before experienced in her. It was as if she had spent her entire lifetime dying of thirst, and this was her first sight of pure, clean water.

He clung to her mane.

“Destiny, hold on!” Gayl commanded.

Blayd knew his good friend well enough; he could almost hear her thoughts in this place. “She can’t!” he confessed for her, then added under his breath, “Even if she wanted to.”

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Within moments Destiny crashed to the floor in front of the stone giant. There she lay, quivering and bowing.

At Gayl's suggestion Blayd bowed as well.

A subtle sense of amusement lit up the corners of the area, then filled his frightened heart. Blayd could hear nothing, but it was as if the stone giant then suddenly burst out laughing.

They could not help it; it made them laugh too.

*Oh, the mind of the giant spoke to them once he had finally composed himself, Oh, after all the eons, after watching worlds swirl into being and a hundred stars devour their systems with light... they send children!*

It was a sobering thought, and Gayl shared a glance with Blayd, but Destiny still laughed as though the giant's thoughts were entirely her own.

The giant's head seemed to move; his eyes perhaps looked like they turned as though to look down at them. *Now, little children. Let me get a good look at you. What do we have here?*

A mind of enormous, incomprehensible wisdom lifted them up into the air, bringing them to the giant's line of eyesight. Gayl clutched onto him in the sudden lurch, but Destiny giggled again and simply said with a well impressed voice; 'Ooohh!'

For a moment the impossible being simply studied them. Blayd looked back at the creature. It was made of some kind of gemstone,

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almost entirely transparent and yet not. Colors moved within, but never so as much when he looked, as though it was the light around that moved instead. He regarded the being; it seemed wise, beyond imagining. A thing of inexpressible strength and power. But it was old. Old beyond telling. So old now that all his joints had frozen solid with time, and any movement was to be met with searing pain. Blayd had to wonder why this creature was still alive. Did some impressive missive compel it to live on, even now, even here in the heart of the galaxy?

*Yes, indeed it does, Blayd of the Celtwyld.* The giant spoke to him. Blayd looked at the others. They seemed to be ... talking. As if the giant was talking to them all at the same time.

“Please, good, kind creature...” Gayl pled. Her lip began to tremble and her face reddened.

Blayd knew what she was thinking. He knew exactly what she wanted to say. But now, he knew, she did not know how to say it.

The giant sighed, or seemed to sigh. When it spoke, it spoke to them all. *I am Gid-gidallion, a remnant of the once mighty race that formed the galaxy more than thirteen billion of your years ago. We are from the very dawn of time. We have watched life grow on worlds without number, many by our own hands. We have experimented, time and time again.*

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*And is that what we are to you!* Gayl suddenly demanded, though she seemed more upset than angry. But then she whispered, *Another experiment!*

The giant seemed touched, and saddened still. *No, princess Gayl of the Celtwyld. No. I would not have you misunderstand this. We lived in peace, in our lives a millennia to a single day. But we lived in peace, and in peace, we found the Divine.*

Then, as he spoke, the visions of millions of worlds sprang into existence before them. The life and entire existence on their worlds, evolving from dust and then back to nothing over, and over again. Then once, maybe twice, a world of sentient beings would become. The giant continued to speak. *We wanted them to know. We sought allies. Some would not hear us. Here visions of planetary scale war took hold. Others lived in such peace as to achieve unity with that which reaches the infinite beyond even ourselves – with the Divine. Over time, perhaps you may say ... we became curious. What would it take for a race of sentient, willful beings to achieve that simple elusive goal of both inner, and civilization wide, peace? We tried, a thousand times. But mostly, we took our lessons from the Divine, and we just watched. Then we began to perceive that silence was not the only necessity for peace, no, but at times, its very opposite. We strived to harness the **chaos**. Here visions of war broke out on their minds, terrible unremitting conflict. We perceived that in chaos the most noble actions*



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*would be remembered. That in pain, a simple kindness was magnified a thousand times. That by death, life became a quest of incommensurate value.*

Blayd found himself trying to duck away from the crippling sensations that rode along his skin as the giant seemed to be trying to download ten billion years of wisdom into a single paragraph. It was ... uncomfortable.

*We considered then, for longer than you can imagine. The greatest of our minds working for millennia beyond your count.* Here the visions of stone giants, walking, watching. They took various civilizations and with a word or a thought tried to bring about peace, even if it meant passing first through great sorrow. They never encouraged war – they simply allowed it. World upon world of glorious and sentient beings. Some found peace, a peace they still held. Many did not, and could not trust in their own race enough to prosper eternally. Some few others wiped themselves out entirely, or ended when their suns inevitably died. Blayd was enraptured by the visions. There was no time to weep, it was simple, pure, harmonious information given by a creature whose truest motive was simply... to be helpful.

*After many eons, our sages found a way, a solution. A way to bring peace not only to one civilization, but potentially to **all of them***

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*within the galaxy. A message of peace, from us, to every race within this dimension. We knew it could be done.*

The giant paused, as if daring them to guess what their solution had been. Blayd replayed what he could of the vision through his memory, impressed at the vast amount he could already retain. But nothing stood out. No philosophy, no device. No one thing that he could see from a dozen billion years that could bring galactic peace –

“The dragons!” Destiny squealed, shattering the forbidding silence.

Now the giant’s mouth clearly curled into a gentle, kind, and grateful smile. *Yes. You. The dragons.*

Fighting pain unimaginable the giant then lifted his hand so they could stand on it, and Destiny immediately took to swimming in the air around his arm with unbridled glee. She was laughing, and purring. She looked like she was having the happiest day of her life. The giants; the ancient, forgotten race that had created her and her ancestors long before humans had arrived in their little corner of the galaxy.

*You, the dragons.* The giant chuckled, seeming to tussle or play with Destiny in some form of telekinetic manner that was not immediately obvious to Blayd, or apparently Gayl. It ‘felt’ like he was petting her.

“You treat them like cats, or puppies,” Gayl observed.

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The giant took a moment to reply, but then seemed to nod in agreement. *For yes, indeed they are. Created by us from the soil of a thousand worlds. Made for the singular purpose of bringing peace to the entirety of Creation, if it were possible.*

“But how?” Blayd wondered.

*They are beings of chaos; harnessed. The giant said. They are power, and freedom and choice embodied. Their memories are long, as long as our own race. They provide power and wisdom, the ability for any race to move between the stars by means no race could ever discover on their own – for some truths cannot be created, they **must be revealed**. The dragons are us, and we are in them. And they are the gift; the last gift of the Giants given to a fractured, frightened, warring galaxy in the hope they might help lead you towards the inextinguishable peace.*

Here he sighed, a desperately, lonely sound. Destiny immediately stopped playing, and looking frightened ran to Blayd’s side, hiding under his arm. The giant spoke his thoughts, *Our last gift of peace, in this, the Twilight of the Giants.*

“You’re dying,” Destiny observed, her voice breaking.

Unbelievably, a crystal tear seemed to bulge at the corner of the giant’s eyes. *Yes, little one. I am all that remain. I had hoped, so hoped, that I might have lived to see peace before the light that is the nearest galaxy begins its five hundred-million-year collision with this. Ah!*

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*Lived to have seen what you all might have done with the privilege of building your own solar systems and seeding life on more worlds than you might have ever imagined possible. But now... that cannot be. For now, I perceive, I will not live to see the end of this hour.*

Destiny and Gayl gasped. Blayd felt like his heart was ripped out of his chest. It was almost painful. How could this powerful, compassionate creature be denied its last request, the last request of its entire race!

A sudden warm feeling of hope lit up in his chest, and by the looks of things the other two warmed as well. *Do not mourn for us, young ones. We have found our own peace, and only I remain to guide perhaps a few others. But the situation I now perceive you are in can no longer be resolved without our direct intervention. And that, I'm afraid, will take all the strength that to me remains.*

“No!” Destiny pled, seeming to wish she could sacrifice her whole, entire world just to save his one life.

The giant looked right at her with enormous, unimaginable, ageless compassion. *Destiny, Destiny*, he spoke. *You are so bold, and so young. But why are you holding yourself back? Take to the air and stretch out your wings, truly, for the first time!*

A bold encouragement surged into them all, and Blayd had to wonder if he was already, somehow, bonded in some way. But Destiny did not wait to check, she launched into the air. Raging lightning

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suddenly crackled around her, purple and sky blue. Then many of her scales began to turn up at the edges, emboldening the lightning. She roared, then roared again, and her voice became progressively deeper, seeming to ripple both space and time in its sound.

The giant was laughing, laughing with Destiny's own heart.  
*Louder, little one, and stretch out those wings!*

Destiny swung in wide, courageous circles. It seemed to Blayd that she was getting closer without getting nearer. Then it dawned on him that she was getting larger. **Much** larger.

Carefully the giant lowered them to the floor.

Within moments she was at least half a league long, her wingspan easily that of Ironfang, or perhaps a noble. Thousands of feathers had grown in that supernal moment along her wings. She hovered, effortlessly as she always had, in the air. But when she landed the entire ground shuddered and he and Gayl were almost thrown to the floor. He ran to hug her, and she was warm, and smelt like a thunderstorm. She embraced him in her clawed wings, and the entire world seemed to disappear in her shadow. Blayd trembled with happiness.

The giant spoke within his mind. *And this, what is this?* He seemed to be tugging at his mind, at all his senses at once. There was a confusion and amused frustration in the giant's mind. Blayd felt the giant exploring his synesthesia.

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“Well, my mother and my father felt I was better to develop my own strength against this trial.” Blayd replied, suddenly feeling the entire weight of intensely concentrating against false illusions in every single sense in every living moment crash against his soul. A sudden sob escaped his exhausted frame. He was *tired*.

*Well*, said the giant, *what will we do?*

But the hissing didn't stop.

*Master?* Blayd asked. The creature seemed to be stopping short of healing him.

Yet the giant seemed to be grinning. *Because there is nothing wrong with you, young one. To deny your uniqueness is to deny your talent. Would you lose the edge to your creativity, your memory, your incredible processing speed? No. this is a gift, hasn't it always been?*

Blayd was silent, disappointed, and inspired. *Well... yes. And no.*

The giant grinned, inside. *You experience a world, every day, that no other being has access to. Embrace that uniqueness, for it is one of the only things that you can truly say is your own.*

He found solace in that.

But the giant was not done. *And what is this? I know your people have begun to unlock the keys of knowledge of the bond. What are you waiting for?*

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Blayd's eyes ran with tears now, for he knew what the giant was about to do. Only Destiny could answer him, "They'd hoped we'd figure it out ourselves."

*It doesn't work like that,* the giant said.

Blayd was instantly surprised as the giant welling of energy he knew was already growing between he and Destiny suddenly took form as an orb of light at Destiny's forehead. He knew it, he'd felt it. It had been there all their lives, a little too far away to touch. It was the power of their bond. And it was finally about to be healed.

"Well," Gayl said, and Blayd was too distracted to notice she was now standing right next to him in Destiny's wings, "What are you waiting for?"

Blayd looked instinctively down, and found his left hand, his dominant hand, blazing with a ball of energy as well. It was his, his half of the bond.

Destiny bowed her head, and waited. The most powerful, most loyal, most beloved creature he'd ever known, and yet she waited patiently, trusting, for his touch.

He did not make her wait a moment longer. The bond burst upon them light lighting and thunder, a desperate connection that had waited far too long to be in this reality. It felt like... laughter, and also light lightning. For a moment he struggled to realize it was the lightning on Destiny's skin, and not his own. And the lightning then burst from his

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hands now, because she wanted to let him. It was an unimaginable feeling of confidence and connection he'd been denied for his whole entire life. But any bitterness, any regret at having been made to wait for so long, were already gone, or simply washed away in the joy of what was becoming right now. So, he chose to be grateful.

It took him a moment to realize he was standing on Destiny's giant head while she rode through the air throwing lightning around. But after their laughter died, she took him down to the ground. She let him slide off, but he kept hugging her now giant face tentacles. It felt right that her eyes were level with his now, her head so large he could curl up quite comfortably in her mouth, if they'd wanted to.

Gayl walked up, her eyes moist with happy tears.

Blayd was proud for the princess; for once to see she was happy for him. Then his heart almost died within as he released, she'd been standing right next to him during his healing, and had probably seen him burst into tears like a baby!

But, if she did, she smiled at him now in a way as if to reassure him that it did not matter. Gayl had her faults. Her many, many faults, but she knew what was important. And this was one of those things.

So, he smiled, and held her hand when she gave it to him as if to honor their bond with her authority.

But the giant still chuckled. *Gayl.*



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He spoke, and she shook with fright. She then stepped two steps away, and bowed with great dignity and ceremony. “Yes, ancient one?”

He seemed amused again, but honored her dignity. *It will not do to send you into the coming battle without a companion of your very own, would it.*

She gasped.

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Gayl gasped. She did not mean to, but she could not help it. What the giant had just said, what it must have meant... it could only be one thing...

With the graceful dignity of a moving mountain the giant stopped down to conjure a handful of clay from the nothingness here within the singularity. She could almost feel his tremendous pain at moving for the first time in uncounted millennia. He held it out just in front of her, and it looked like a huge mass of unworked mud.

As if instructed by his thoughts she reached out to touch the clay. It was cool, and moist. But it was so very finely made, to rival the best clay makers of Tourmarelle. Dim lights began to glow in the air, and find their way towards the clay, embedding themselves within.

Thunder sounded in the unclouded skies, and bright auroras of light ploughed into the clay only just missing her own head. The entire

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earth shook. Great cracks split out upon the giant's torso as this great act seemed to be tearing him apart. She would have begged him to stop, but for once, it seemed she had nothing to say. Something was alive within the clay, and it was growing, and it was calling toward her as if with her own soul.

*Behold!* The giant exulted. *Our final gift to all the peoples who live, and think, and love. To you, Gayl of Pearl, to you I bond Clayheart – the final gift, the last lesson, the Enduring Hope!*

The light shattered away the outer clay, and a new dragon stood up. He was huge, like Ironfang, already a noble. Gayl stared at him in rapt wonder. She looked at the dragon, and seemed to see through the dragon's eyes back at her. She knew what the dragon was feeling – awe and gratitude and amusement. But how could she know what he was thinking? Were they already bonded? Or had the giant simply created a dragon as her own perfect companion?

'Gayl, Princess of Pearl,' the dragon spoke.

Gayl wondered as the word floated through her even as the sound made the ground under her feet seem to tremble. There was a power she instantly recognized; this was a dragon among dragons, a noble pure forged, made at the hands of a giant themselves as their last creation. His voice was royalty, and none would ever doubt that authority. She felt it even as she felt it – her weakness. Her dragon saw right through her and was already everything she knew she lacked;

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courage, talent, intelligence, yes, but a sense of confidence that would make ruling easy. A voice of authority none would now doubt. As their eyes met, she knew she no longer needed to prove herself, to study herself to sleep, to... pick a fight with every other talented person she knew. People like Blayd.

She looked over at Blayd, wondering if somehow the dragons had already told him what she had only just realized existed within herself. She had allowed her life to be driven by fear, and loss, and an entire narrative of pain.

But when she looked at Blayd he simply, obviously, hadn't noticed anything of that. No, the only thing he cared about was the fact that someone had someone just materialized a fully cognizant and adult dragon only a few meters away. Blayd didn't care for who was the wisest, or the smartest, or the best. It was what has always infuriated her about him, so careless and carefree in a world that would look to him for guidance and leadership. How was he already so much of she wished she could be? No wonder she was insanely mad with him. And, possibly... more than just a little bit in love.

“Stupid boy,” she grinned.

But, this time, Destiny did not rise to defend him, or even seem a little bit put out. This time, he and his dragon simply smiled a wry, side-on smile. It was as if they finally understood she wasn't trying to

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insult him, just, express her frustration and maybe... find a way to connect.

“Proud girl,” he teased.

And as one Clayheart and her laughed. *He is right.* She thought, and no longer felt any need to fight him over it. Everything about Clayheart was strength and nobility and capacity. She reached out, bathed in the furnace of glowing pink light, and felt her mind become his, and he became hers.

But there was a very important task for them to do. Gayl looked up at the stone giant. *What... do we do? The bond is dying... your gift... It's just, I just...* and words failed her again.

The giant seemed amused, and more than just a little sad. *Most sentient will not put in much effort, once they feel their cause defeated. The bond cannot be broken, only dimmed! You must find another way. There is, almost always, another way. And it is often, so very often, such a simple way!*

Suddenly the giant grunted in pain, and the lights in the mystical place grew dim. Bright fractures of light grew along his outstretched arm.

‘We need to move!’ Clayheart ordered, scooping her up even as Destiny and Blayd sped away.

Moments later the entire area shook as the giant’s glorious arm came crashing down onto the ground. Earthquakes trembled all

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throughout the area and did not cease, great crevices breaking upon the earth.

There was a strange tug within her mind, and Gayl sensed some powerful connection between her dragon and the giant had suddenly ended – some conversation regarding a hundred million worlds and the secrets of over fourteen billion years none others may know. And she knew Clayheart was a sacred treasure, and his secrets must be carefully kept.

But she knew what they had to do even as Clayheart did. *Blayd!* She called through the orb. *This realm is dying!*

*We need to leave.* He replied, and she agreed.

*GO!* The giant's voice roared from behind them as they sped away. *With my last breath I send you away to stop the war that threatens to undo all the goodness ever made at giant's hand or by dragon hearts! Go, and bear this message to them all – peace!*

It seemed the giant might have wanted to say more, but it could not. Strange indescribable ripples shuddered out from the edges of their apparently fragile reality, tugging at their clothes and hair, threatening to string their bodies out like spaghetti if they did not flee soon.

There was a sound like a mighty hurricane, and the edges of space curved out in front of them. For a moment they could see an image of the guardian's space, but then the giant's breath broke the

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space there too, somehow unharmed the well-meaning fools there. A corridor of twisted light broke out, like a rainbow.

Neither dragon needed so much as a nudge to know which way to go.

She knew in that moment that the giant had died.

‘Goodbye, giants,’ Blayd mused sadly.

Tears stung at her eyes. Despite the miracle of somehow crossing their entire journey home in an instant, they’d had less than a few moments with one of the oldest creatures in existence. And now it was dead. She marked the passing with her silence.

They hit the light with fierce power, and then a surging wave of energy slammed into them, tossing them about as with a fierce maelstrom. A breath later they broke out, facing a region of space that she instantly recognized.

They rode in silence till Clayheart spoke, and when he did, she felt his regal presence all through her, “Farewell, creators. Till we meet again beyond the now.”

“Divinity, give you rest,” Destiny whispered.

Before them, the inexplicable, immoral horror resided. A million dragons, stolen from seven worlds and more, circled about a fortified golden warmoon in the shattered silence. And arraigned against them; the failing armadas of two of the most powerful empires of the entire

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galaxy, commanded at a battered and beleaguered might of Darwing, one of the five remaining royals of his kind still remaining.

‘Now what?’ Peyoth wondered out loud.

### Joining in the last battle

Gayl and Blayd, with Clayheart and Destiny, surveyed the scene before them. The first thing to notice was the intense increase in the gnawing compulsion that tugged at all hearts at once; to turn on each other, and to fly away towards where some dread coercion compelled the dragons to... “belong”. It was insistent, and powerful. But it was still not overpowering. Perhaps it was the strength of their own commitment?

*Or the newness of our bond,* Gayl and Clayheart suggested.

Blayd and Destiny did not reply. They looked, instead, at the next stage of the unfolding crisis before them.

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*The enemy is heading towards Pearl.* Peyoth informed them dispassionately.

*Hmmm, Clayheart mused, not an hour old. It seems her power is lessened in a planetary spiritsphere – the world's themselves deny her. So, the men and dragons have decided to make their stand at home.*

*If there is a home to go to,* Gayl muttered. Even as they looked, the world began to be wrapped in shadows.

*If it goes into the shadow realm...* Blayd worried.

*I don't think that is the Patron's plan.* Clayheart announced. *The enemy is growing stronger by the hour. If the battle moves away from Pearl today the enemy will just build their empire elsewhere. No – this is where we make our final stand.*

*Then I guess Darkwing hopes to use the shadows to also help to push back the compulsion.* Gayl wondered.

*That would seem to be the hope.* Clayheart replied. *Look, all seven worlds. And there are creatures I have never seen before.*

*What are those?* Gayl pointed.

*I do not know. They are not even from our galaxy, that I know of.* Clayheart explained. *I suspect they might not even from our universe.*

*Then this is serious indeed.* Gayl said with determination.



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They turned then, to look at the rapidly approaching armada. A hundred million dragons. But they looked... they felt... driven to madness. A calculating insanity.

*What has happened?* Destiny mourned.

And in their midst, guarding and protected by them, was a golden, moon sized orb radiating powerful energy and magnetics.

*What is that?* Gayl asked.

*Isn't that... Cabros?* Destiny asked.

*I thought the dragon men destroyed that moon during their second conquest. There are still meteor showers from its destruction.*

Gayl replied.

*Not as destructed as we might have hoped.* Blayd observed.

*How does she control all those dragons?* Destiny asked, her voice caught between horror and fascination.

"I do not know," Gayl replied.

Blayd caught a sensation in his helmet. *We need to hurry; my mother is aware of us.*

They raced ahead on golden threads. Within an instant, violence surrounded them. A fleet of golden dragons, their eyes milky and soulless, tried to intercept them. But in the same instance good guys turned up and saved them.

As an entire world was enveloped in darkness, with impressive haste, guided by the Patron's will, they found their family in breaths.

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Teleporting straight into the conclave, they dismounted their dragons to the cheering of the assembled throngs there.

His mother was in front a moment later. The general did not look pleased. “Son, Destiny. I am grateful for your safe return.” Her voice was stern, but kind.

Blayd was relieved at the straightforward greeting. “Thank you, mother. You will be intrigued to know we met a giant, and that Destiny and I have bonded.”

There was a small, thoughtful pause before answering. “And did you find the assistance you were hoping for?”

Blayd and Destiny pointed at Clayheart, “We did.”

His mother, general of all forces in the galaxy at this point, no doubt hoping to stop an implacable tyrant, looked over at the new dragon with curiosity. Blayd sighed with relief. No hugs, no tears, no accusations. She just got straight to work, like someone in this sort of situation was supposed to, he supposed. “Is... is that dragon bonded to the princess?”

“Yes,” they replied.

His mother looked at them, and laughed. Then she looked up to smile at the wisemen and scholars. Already they were examining the dragon and the princess, his father the first among them.

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Then she walked over, and held him by his shoulder. He tried to look away, but Destiny would not let him. She showed him all his mother's relief, and fear, and pride.

He smiled, and held her hand.

Then the general turned away, and began to discuss things with others, so Blayd knew this part of their conversation was over, for which he was grateful. If she was all right, their world was all right, including his siblings.

*You still might get quite the chastening after the war is over,* Destiny smiled in him.

Blayd nodded, for it was not untrue, despite all her own quests at fourteen. *But she has all the information pertinent to the current situation.*

*That, and we are rather pressed for time.* Destiny thought.

Scholars and healers were busy studying them as well. One spoke, one from Ethphraim possibly, "Have you any indication on how the portal was formed that brought you here?"

"I've sent you all we already know," he replied, having been quite prepared for this line of reasoning. "We met the very last Giant. I hope you will study his words well."

The scholar nodded, no doubt trying to understand the whole hours' worth of once-in-a-lifetime experiences in a single minute. "I will."

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Blayd then paused as he noticed the new creatures and scholars among them. The Etherian, and Astid and her matron. And the foreigners were *here!* But then... he smiled. All, friend and foe, wore the helmets they'd invented, and an all too familiar neurotoxin in incredibly small amounts. And the earth skinned humanoids eagerly shared any power or information, studying side by side with human and dragon allies against the true enemy of their freedom. Their numbers were few, but their powers were growing. Blayd sighed with relief.

Blayd approached his father, who turned, and grinned, and then picked him up in his large arms and swung him around playfully.

“Blayd, you did it, you did it! I knew you could do it!”

He felt uncomfortable in his father's arms, but grateful. “Did you get what you need?”

Another man answered, running up. It looked like that scholar of Thiaz who was a good friend of his fathers, Ko. “We have, look! A parasynchronicity from Clayheart that deharmonises the dissonance! It's not a cure, but it'll make *all* the difference!”

Ryan had put him down. “How long till you configure the helmets?”

“Hours... minutes. This was custom designed. This is a miracle. This is...” Ko became tearful. “We would have never figured this out in time.” He turned to the surgeon of Ethphraim. “We need a

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morphing algorithm...” more was said, but Blayd was swept away by healers and scholars wanting a piece of him to themselves.

There was a tap of a staff on the ground, and it was such a soft tap. But it brought the room to silence. “Stand back,” Blayd’s dad’s voice calmly stated. It sounded like a request, but it held the power of a command.

The old man somehow seemed to have summoned Gayl and Clayheart as well. They stood before the highest authority in the Divine in all the worlds. Scholars and priests still bustled around them, but stood well back. And far away, beyond the black sky, war raged.

“Clayheart,” Rayn bowed, and the dragon and his young rider bowed in return. “We have no time for the well-deserved pleasantries of the youngest and most influential of all dragons in the known universe. And princess, I welcome you home – home to us, and home amongst the dragon riders.”

Blayd was a little bothered. Death was happening all over, why waste time on conversation?

*He has time, and he knows it.* Destiny informed him, but did not explain.

“Tell us, Clayheart, do you know your Dragon gift?”

There was a silent pause, and the entire world seemed to hold its breath. “I do,” came the thunderous reply. Instantly every dragon

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in the room stood still. Within that voice there was ... nobility, and power... it was...

“The gift of Pure, Princess of fire!” a scholar muttered.

Dragons and dragon riders all over bowed in respect to the risen royal among them. Then the room erupted in thankful applauding.

Rayn’s words could hardly be heard. “Unite with your rider, and think as one.” He instructed. “If we can augment your authority across the world, it will give the pretended ‘Dragon Queen’ reason to fear.”

Gayl was already standing on her dragon’s head. “We know,” she replied, and in her voice Blayd heard the same power, and the very power her mother had once wielded as her dragon gift as well. And everyone, especially the dragons, looked much, much more hopeful.

“And, Blayd and Destiny, do you know yours?”

He knew he should have expected the question, but for whatever reason, he did not. He looked over at Destiny, swimming in the air around him protectively, and keeping the scholars a few good paces away. She looked puzzled, but hopeful, and it was clear she did not know the answer herself.

“Freedom from excessive Synesthesia?” Blayd suggested.

The look on his father’s face informed him this was not going to satisfy.

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Blayd looked harder inside. “I... don’t know, father. I am sorry.”

Rayn looked puzzled. “This is unheard of. Bah, but everything about you, son, is unheard of and unprecedented! Well, I did not know my talent at first either, and it had to be pointed out, so what am I saying! But it was there, right from the start. All along. So present I did not notice, not in a dozen really rather obvious situations! I wish your dragon gift was as obvious to me. Destiny may make portals, and become a capable electromancer. But neither is her gift particularly apparent. But my, how you’ve grown my feathered areal serpentine!”

Destiny laughed, but grew serious too. “Please, father. We need to get to the front of the battle now. The Queen grows in power every moment. We cannot delay her defeat a single day.”

His father looked serious again. When he spoke, it was through the helm. *Our people’s fear is legitimate, and justified. But for now, being within the atmosphere of a world may be our best defense. Until we unleash our new weapons. She will not risk bringing her moon too close. So Pearl, herself, must do battle with us. The planet herself must rise up, and threaten the moon of gold. And so, while the Queen thinks us cowered and unprepared... “we stand a chance.”*

*That sounds like my mother’s tactics,* Blayd observed.

*Oh, waiting it out is more my thing. But calling on the planet itself to cast its atmosphere, spiritsphere, and magnetosphere out into*

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*the vast black to travail a moon of compulsion and domination? Yes, those where her ideas, her and the patron's.*

Blayd nodded. In a war of dragons, worlds might die.

*And space be rent till all reality consumed,* Destiny spoke in a memory she did not share, but it involved the leviathan.

The entire room seemed to wince as another powerful surge assaulted them.

“Pull forces back into the shadow,” the general reiterated.

“It is time?” Rayn seemed to ask the obvious.

She nodded.

Weaponry unimaginable pointed towards the sky as dragon's summoned ageless energies from beyond humanity's history. Some truths had to be *revealed*. With arts unknown they somehow began to stretch out the atmosphere, the magnetosphere, and the very spirit of Pearl. Blayd felt in every part of his soul a tugging he'd always known but never felt. In an act that would never be forgotten, the world itself was battling against the encroaching evil.

They waited tense moments in silence.

“She does not cower from our show of power,” the leader of the foreign creatures mused, whom the helm called Sunfire.

Clayheart spoke, “No, but she longs to test the limits of her strength. She is arrogant and self-assured, thinking just because all



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she can sense at this time belongs to her, that nothing else of consequence matters. It will be her undoing.”

*Not without great sacrifice*, Darkwing warned them, his voice strained in his psychospiritual exertions no human could experience, or explain.

“Your thoughts?” Jayd asked Clayheart.

“I sense... though the Divine within me and you... there is a device,” Clayheart replied, “made up of dragon minds and human blood, I believe. It will be large, as large as a great hall if not a small city. It will be easy to find, as the closer we get to its power, the more we will feel its effects. We need to find it and, at all costs, destroy it.”

“I can feel it,” Ethnomancer spoke. “It is there, near the center of the moon itself but just off to one side, at the opposing point to the center of gravity when it stood in Thiaz’ well. We should be able to access it through the many entrance points, but battle will be sore. I would not trust the golden threads, else why make your throne something as large as a moon? We are better to travel through the light, or to teleport there.”

*Then we attack from all sides?*

“Some should,” Sunfire stated. “But let us limit our specific entry points. General?”

She seemed to have already guessed his points. “Sonic resonance indicates there are entrances leading into the core from

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here, here and here.” She said, indicating on a map. “We have one chance. We need to use every resource we have on this battle. There will be no second chances at victory. If we fail today, we will only be slowing her down. Ko, how long will the helmets hold out.”

The scholar did not look pleased. “My best guess, and even with Clayheart’s gift and at such close range! An hour, at best. And only for those with a strong bond with their dragon. Those already weakened might be compromised within breaths of arriving at that glowing moon’s presence.”

“What of her defenses?”

Norvich spoke, “Initial analysis indicates she expects most trouble to come from human vessels such as those brought today from Chalcedonah and Thiaz. Dragons will have the advantages in the airless wilderness. My guess is that she planned it that way, but never expected the gift these of the foreign empire bring.”

“Then that may be our only advantage, after the gift of the giants.” She pondered, other’s feeding thoughts into her faster than a book could be read. “Have the vessels lay down surface fire. Try to disable and not kill any dragons you can. Any vessel nimble enough to match a dragon may follow them, but they are going to be likely prey for her minions. Know this, her dragons will target the helms. Anyone risking compromisation is to get to Ethphraim or Argentus immediately –

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Suddenly the room was stilled as a mighty dragon roared, “No, it is enough! I hear you; I hear you, my mistress!”

Blayd turned in surprise and horror to see a green dragon throw its rider across the room with such force it must have killed him immediately. Yet instead of dying, the dragon just seemed even more motivated. Its helm, looking just a little askew already, was torn aside and torn apart.

“Blind him!” Darkwing ordered.

The green dragon almost managed to get a good look at the image Jayd was displaying, but in that moment a dozen other dragons torn it down to the ground. “No, no!” It roared. “You fools! You don’t understand. We HAVE to obey her!”

In the next instant the noble of Sanmarellis appeared, and crushed the dragon’s skull into dust. The noble had no helm, but had conjured something similar out of light around its brow. It spoke. “Any with fear in their heart are not welcomed in this battle. Depart for Argentus; now.”

With dismay, half a dozen dragons grabbed hold of the golden threads, their riders still on their backs, and fled the battle.

“We don’t have time for this,” the patron snarled at Jayd.

She only paused a moment more. “All wings, attack! Attack now!”

## The fall of Pearl

For almost an hour, a pitched battle was fought. Chaos swum around them. They took great losses, but inflicted terrible damage. Sunfire kept trying to hold their forces back, Jayd kept trying to drive them in. But by the end of that hour, it looked like a painful war of attrition would set in, years of pointless war between two desperate worlds.

Then alarms began to sound. “What is this?” Norwich asked.

Ko answered, “Look, it looks like she is organizing a spearhead of about ten thousand wings to aiming towards the control center.”

They studied the tactic carefully; the number of wings, their talents and strengths. They were strong, but they were not the elite. Several laughed. It seemed they thought it a very uneducated gambit for this war.

“No,” Norwich stated. “It’s a *wildfen feint*. Strengthen the flanks and extend the rear guard.”

Everyone agreed, and acted swiftly.

But his mother looked worried.

And, in the next moment, his father was in front of him. “Son, take a wing, 12 dragons, and get out towards the Venfirth now. If

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there's any trouble, and I'm not saying there's going to be any trouble, well. War is hard for the best of us to guess, at times. Divinity blesses the prepared."

Blayd nodded. He looked across the room. Gayl was there, but the adults were running the war now. She stood, holding Clayheart's chin as he talked to others. She was watching everyone, taking in everything. Her orb was out, and her wand. She must have already returned the boots to someone from Ethphraim.

And yet, through all the chaos, she somehow seemed to sense his pondering glare. She turned, and looked at him. She looked... unafraid. Determined. Confident... and yet so utterly alone.

The sentiment confused him. She was *surrounded* by people. But she was twelve, and they were running a war in her name. Would she be all right? They'd been through so much together. Did anyone really... would they all just treat her liked they used to?

She glanced at him. And with a nod, she smiled.

Her expression warmed his heart. She was where she needed to be, the heir apparent to this world, surrounded by the most unbreachable defenses they had. If the strength of this room failed them, the war was truly lost.

And they needed him somewhere else.

Briefly he wondered about his siblings. Checking, they were apparently in the bunkers below, though Jasth was helping out as best

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she could. He smiled. Very well, back to surveillance. It was what he was best at. It was how he could help.

He looked back at the princess, but she was already gone.

Destiny nudged him, knowing all his thoughts. “Let’s go, my boy.”

He nodded, and holding her feathers she sort of lifted him up and sat him on her with a quick twist of her neck. They took to the air, and as soon as they were cleared, they slipped over by dragon arts to another continent.

And they sat, for an hour, studying war. For the first moments, it was simply a dire fascination. He could forget the deaths. He even forgot the dragons that helped protect him. But those long moments turned swiftly to dread.

It was NOT a feint.

*They’re making impressive progress towards the conclave, don’t you think?* Destiny finally put words to his worries.

*Don’t worry, he reassured himself, there’s no way they can get there, it’s the conclave!*

But dread turned to fear as in the next minute, they appeared to have done exactly that.

All felt the sudden jolt in their souls as the strength of even the patron Darkwing was put to the test.

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“How is that possible?” a dragon rider with him spoke, his face pale with fear.

“If you need to go, just go,” Blayd told them all.

Within a breath, half of them left to join the battle.

“It’s impossible!” Destiny sounded confused, and upset. And angry. “They’re not supposed to be able to get to our *conclave!*”

But Blayd shook his head. He’s seen it. He’d noticed it ten minutes out. The movement of lightwalkers, the ring of dominated patrons forcing Pearl to spread out her forces too broad. It was the tactic of a genius level intellect.

And now he was angry too. *We have to do something*, Blayd begged his dragon.

*There is nothing we can do*, the dragon guard remaining spoke. *We have to keep you safe; you would make a highly valued prisoner.*

“But they’ll have the princess!” Blayd shouted, so, so much more fear and anger in his voice than he’d ever intended.

*Not a chance*, Destiny replied. *Look, any that got through are already dead, and the rest are pulling back already. Plus, Darkwing’s power is still here, how much damage could they really have hoped to do?*

No one spoke for a moment.

Then the second in command, a headband wielder, verbalized their worst fears, “Authority is shifting to the backup command.”

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Blayd's voice shouted in frustration, the world crumbling at the sound. Destiny held him close.

The guard spoke, "I know we can't get a reading just yet, because, you know, war and all. But I'm sure she'll be safe. We know what we're fighting for. They were at the conclave for only a few moments, and they don't have any humans with tools."

Blayd checked his orb. "Look, the front lines are collapsing! We've lost central command! Stop trying to reassure me without purpose. We're going to lose this war!"

Suddenly his heart shifted. There was a peace, a peace from the Divine. He looked at Destiny, and knew it came through her. Something about lifetimes of experience in her soul.

"We need to get up there," Blayd demanded.

No one was willing to sit motionless while their world fell apart. They took to the space between the worlds, the battle distant from this vantage point. Tiny motes of light within impressive darkness lit up the war between millions of dragons and whatever entities fought by them. Somehow, the queen had overcome all that, and somehow... now they were alone.

"Now what?" Blayd begged the Divine.

There was a crackle toward through the magical helms. The voice that spoke was clearly dragonman. It was their queen, "Children of the dragons. Man, and beast. Ride to me."



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The entire army responded, forming an impressive maelstrom of dragon power around the final dreadnaught. It left their world undefended, but there was little the opposing army could do against their improvised fortress. Blayd wondered what the queen of the dragonmen would do.

She spoke again, “Humanity and dragons, it would seem we owe you one. Let this be the beginning of our repaid debt. Keep the sky clear, cousins! Thrusters to full! Let fall the final fang of the dragonmen upon the false queen!”

They could only watch in awe and horror as the final thorn that was the dragonmen dreadnaught accelerated to ramming speed. There was no way it could destroy that moon of Cabros, not without the tip and main thrusters removed. But it would still do enormous damage. And it would kill everyone on board that ship, without a doubt.

“How can it move so fast?” the guard asked, “I thought the removed the facility.”

Blayd knew, “They’re overcharging the engines. Look, one just burnt out. This is their last journey. There is no coming back from this.”

It was an agonizing five minutes as the craft picked up enormous speed. Dragons, humans, Erioth and countless other beings from beyond the universe battled fiercely. But it was a ship the size

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and mass of a supercity. It struck the moon with such intense power the shockwave was visible blasting all along it for hours.

Chaos resulted. Blayd and Destiny did not know what was the fate of the armies. Both seemed to have lost their command centers, though secondary ones were trying to kick in. But it was difficult to organize this kind of war. And dragons were dying, in their thousands per instant, falling like rain on the soil of both worlds. Would there be no winner?

No, the compulsion was *still there*.

“If only they could find where that force is coming from, and neutralize it.” Destiny told them all. “Then this war would be over.”

Blayd was silent. He knew that that was what everyone was trying to do. That, or just trying to stay alive. Wars were bad, they always were. And they were both going to lose this one. His heart thundered and his fingers felt weak. He looked at the situation, and then also realized that if Cabros didn’t stop its plight, it would collide with Pearl in less than a few hours.

*Darkwing will take it through the shadowrealm before that happens*, Destiny told him.

*Not if he’s dead, or dominated*, Blayd replied. *We **have** to stop that compulsion.*

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She nodded. There was no one in authority to stop them now, they were too busy fighting, or worse, had been killed, or controlled.

*How could it all come to this?* He looked at the others.

They nodded. They were ready to help, or to die trying.

And so was he.

His mother, his siblings. His dad and the princess. He could not let them die without honour. “There must be something we can do,” he reasoned, and with the others took the thread over to the battle moon. *Or at least... let us die trying.*

He felt cold on his face, a realized there were tears in his eyes. His mother... his family... his friend.

Destiny and the remaining guard took thread over there. Blayd was then momentarily stunned as the world swam past and around him. The darkness that was the Patron of Pearl was a sensation beyond description, a dusty ichor that was neither malicious, nor kind. But, for now it protected them. Something about Destiny’s arrival disoriented them both. They twisted in the air, but she found her balance soon.

It was impossible to describe the enormous scene of destruction. Haze covered the ground where an artificial spike of vengeance, shattered and broken, penetrated several hundred kilometers into the warmoon. An entire moon – fully armed and defended by a hundred, million dragons driven insane strove against

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the strongest and most loyal warriors of two empires combined. Raw element battled in near pitch darkness thrown by the Patron of Pearl over the dread moon. But above that stunk a vile horror of suffering, and indescribable wave of nauseating violence and hatred.

*Hang in there, boy, Destiny warned him. If we want to make a difference, we'd better do so soon.*

Another wave of commanding power surged against them, and it took a moment for the helms to adjust. But it was too late for one of their allies. They bound the struggling dragon and stole his rider quickly away.

They flew apart from the madness of war, as best they could. Then Blayd did what Blayd did best, and began to study with his orb from within the war itself.

Destiny did not wait for him this time, but surged towards the battle. There was little good she could do, however, while his eyes and mind were elsewhere. But two dragon riders of Pearl went with them, and they were able to bring order and safety to a dozen of their allies before Blayd's rapid research began to pay off.

*I think I see... yes... the anomaly. Look, there's too many power fluctuations.*

*Tell your father,* Destiny ordered.

He did, hoping they'd be able to confirm his research. Hoping he was still alive. Desperately pushing away unhelpful thoughts.

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*There are power fluctuations all over the moon,* Destiny observed, breathing heavily. Another surge hit them, but there were safe at the current distance. It looked like the queen was trying a new frequency, and it wasn't a good one. But it gave Blayd a unique moment to observe the change in action.

“Look, Destiny, the main wavefront of the control surge came from just under the surface of the moon. She must be using it as some kind of emitter.”

*Meaning...* Destiny grinned. But she already knew what he was thinking.

*Meaning the control field is probably weaker under the surface.*

*That confirms that conjecture,* Destiny beamed at him. Then she got a wry grin in her mind. *Want to pop in and... test that assumption.*

His heart thundered with excitement. There must be some, relatively quiet and safe place inside the moon that they could hide in, get some readings, and then get out again.

As if somehow realizing the dangers, a dozen mentally controlled dragons surged in a wing in their direction. Defenders from all over the galaxy lined up to protect them.

And Destiny, taking it as her cue, swung into a circle, and disappeared into her own portal not a breath later.

## In the cavern

Thunder rumbled all over the moon as it was rocked with powerful explosions. Blayd looked out – thankfully the entire room was air filled and fit for both human and dragon. He'd aimed for what he thought might most likely be a key emitter point of some kind. But something was going down at the command center now, and now it seemed that chaos and confusion was beginning to unfold among both armies.

*If there's a source, or even an emitter. Maybe we can take that out?* Destiny said.

Blayd refocused, and set to studying the readings within the orb with every milligram of focus his mind possessed. The interdiction field here was enormous, powerful enough to overcome any dragon who was unshielded at the moment. But it had a static resonance – so it was not, at its peek, capable of being more powerful than the field outside. So, not quite what he was hoping for, but it meant one very, very important thing: they had a better fighting chance under the moon's surface than above it.

A fact he immediately tried to relay to the command center.

*If it still exists,* Destiny muttered.

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Blayd ignored her lack of faith. But then the orb relayed an error message, and then the helm did as well. There was another communications interdiction field. Whatever research the queen had accomplished in her time in seclusion it was truly impressive.

*We need to leave if we want to tell the others,* Blayd told Destiny, and she nodded.

Then she gasped.

Blayd turned around and was horrified to find a mind-controlled dragon staring at them with soulless eyes. “Come,” she muttered in a voice that was not her own, “Don’t be so hasty to leave, little one. After all, you would not want to keep Princess Gayl waiting.”

He knew he had no choice, there was no way Destiny could escape this one dragon in the time they had. And if they already had somehow magically captured the princess already, and who knew how many others... then their situation was already grim.

But he had to see if he could reach the machine, or at least the minds of the dominated dragons, somehow. It was at least worth a try, “Please, Windfryth, don’t you recognize me?”

She scowled an unnatural scowl, and with grasping claws wrestled Destiny and himself out of the cavern, where a handful of other, mindless dragons waited. “Move,” she ordered, “it is time for you to meet our queen.”

## The Dragon Queen

Blayd was walked, and Destiny dragged, into a huge cavern in the middle of the battle moon. They did not remove her helm, which was interesting. He could feel the temptation, the dread compulsion, that bid her every second to tare it from her and fall down at her new queen's bidding. But it filled his heart with pride to see that Destiny still resisted.

The cavern was huge, and it must have been more than mere luck that revealed it was far more than just any other emitter. It was the command center they'd been searching for! Before them stood the machine, a strange conglomeration of tubes and wires and... something fleshy and biological.

"Brains? You monster!!" Destiny cursed.

It was clear that she was right. There were hundreds and hundreds of brains; human, and dragon.

"How?" Blayd wondered, his scientific curiosity getting the better of him.

"Impressive, isn't it?" A human voice with the accent of a high Thuizian nobility replied.

Blayd looked around. The room was busy. Hundreds of dragons, and thousands of humans, hurried about. But they all deferred to a



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human woman who stood at a command center for war, dozens of screens depicting and predicting the war that was going on outside, standing right in the middle of the complex machine. She looked young, early twenties, with straight, dark hair and royal clothing built for battle. Forcefields built in apparent chaos all over the room protected her and her machine, while battle still raged on around them.



**Figure 6 Oneheart – The Dragon Queen**

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And, at her feet, a young princess Gayl and the noble Clayheart, were chained, gagged, and helpless. He was, in that moment, both terrified and relieved to see her, though the conflicting thoughts made no logical sense.

But it was their captor who truly tore at his heart. It was Ironfang, glaring at them, helmless, and with soulless eyes.

Blayd's voice trembled when he spoke, "Where is my father."

Ironfang, mightiest dragon of Pearl and soul to the high priest, did not reply.

The woman, instead, turned. She looked at him with almost pity in her eyes. "I'm glad you took our bate, young ones," the woman said, turning to face them, checking on Ironfang and his prisoners. "I was getting bored. But the wisdom of dragons was able to tempt you both here, and now I have you, and all I'll ever need to control the entire universe... in a day, or two."

Blayd's heart rang with fear for his father, and his whole world. This was not how it was supposed to happen. They were supposed to win! Yes, there would be losses. But they'd met the giants...

Suddenly, Windfyrth ripped the helmet off Destiny's head. For a moment, there was a blinding pain, but it quickly subsided.

*Are you all right?* Destiny asked.

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He choked back sobs of gratitude. Somehow, she was still his, and he hers. The queen had not been able to control Destiny. At least, not yet.

But it still hurt her. Destiny wriggled with pain in her captor's grasp. "Who are you?" Destiny asked the human, eyes wide with fear.

The woman strode fearlessly up to them, while others fought her war for her. She had some human guards. They stood close.

Ironfang dragged Gayl and Clayheart along the ground, then threw them down beside each other. Gayl struggled up to him, and Blayd tore the gag from her mouth, but she did not speak. He helped her sit, but could not remove her bindings.

"I," the woman announced, "Am Oneheart, and I am the *true* dragon queen."

"What?" Blayd didn't understand. But he saw Gayl staring at him with fear in her eyes, shaking her head as if to beg him to shut up. And above them, Ironfang stood silent, soulless guard.

Suddenly the queen screamed, and the sky shook as her voice was echoed by the hundred, hundred, hundred dragons enslaved to her thrall.

Then she turned, and if they weren't her prisoners, he might have believed she was genuinely happy to see them. "Over a thousand years, breaching every law of morality and physics, but it has brought me my prize! Complete control over the dragon bonding. Yes, of this machine

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there will be no other, not at least now the dragons know where to look for one.”

She stepped closer, petting Destiny and Clayheart with covetous hands while Windfyth, Ironfang, and others pinned them down. “Still to be honest, you are a paradox. How are you two dragons able to resist the bond? Can you not sense it, Destiny? Even now as the strength of your new bond slips from memory you, too, will eventually become mine. As for you, Clayheart. What keys do you hold? I’m afraid I cannot let your princess die till I have you, too. But I suspect whatever force created you might have had that in mind. We will have to be... cautious.”

Suddenly, without any warning yet again, she screamed at them. A wild, primal, inhuman screech. Again, the world echoed with the soulless chorus of a hundred million dragons taken prisoner.

Ironfang and Windfyth held them down with black, sightless eyes.

Blayd wanted to speak, but Gayl did not let him.

“I was nothing, once,” the queen continued her monologue, while dozens of scholars did her bidding in trying to enslave them. She stood close, making sure Blayd could see right into her deceptively human eyes. “Can you imagine my mother’s *horror*? My little egg was a transparent, formless *sack*. Just like any other human mother’s I

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suppose. I am amazed she did not kill me there are then. But for reasons of her own, she gave me secretly to the wisest sect of Thiaz.”

“Then you were raised with safety,” Blyad uttered, the immediately doubted the wisdom of angering this creature.

The claw upon him clenched down as if all dragons felt her rage, “I fought, *every moment*, to survive! Can you imagine any human infant being expected to care for their own life from birth? I was barely a toddler to their eyes... I had a nurse, but she was no use to me. Raised just like any other child, swapped out at schools because it was too obvious how slowly I aged. But they were discrete – they wiped the other children’s memories, and they took care of any who got too close to the truth. But they never intended for me to become what I became – their living *goddess*. It took a dozen generations, but soon they became so used to my influence I was at first their servant, then their confidant, then their matron. I learned how to rule the sect, and from there, I learned how to rule the senate.”

She paused, relishing her monologue. “My mother was the hardest to kill. A little poison was all, over the century. But by then no one was able to question my authority because no one knew who I was – just another daughter of the matron. But I was the true power on Thiaz, and none prospered but by my whim.” She glanced at Gayl. “The family of your father, I have bread them for rulership these past seven

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hundred years. Your great grandfather knelt further than all others before my rule, and thus it amused me to prosper his house.”

“Then it was you, and not Mendelania, that coveted the fortress?”

Gayl asked, her voice bitter.

“Oh, she had her reasons, but they were programmed into her from the moment of conception, as I have manipulated all within her world to create the leader I needed. So, when they managed to turn my fortress into dust, well, I was not a little unhappy about that.”

“We will take the dragons back from you, too,” Gayl promised.

She seemed to be getting angry as well.

“Will you, though? Your defeat of the plague presented unforeseen opportunities to spread my power. I will confess, the invasion of those blasted dragonmen was an unwelcomed interruption to my plans! They almost found me, almost. But I can pass as a human, and hide in rags. And just as soon as I finish subjugating the last of humanities’ dragons, I will destroy all their DNA from this universe! And then will turn my full attention to the humans, and everyone that does not bow to lick up the dirt on the ground at the sounding of my name will set to death themselves and their entire family! Now, the dragons are all mine! Soon, I will have humans who weep for bliss as my name is the only joy they know!”

“Truly, you are a monster,” Destiny condemned her.

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She laughed, her minions echoing her baleful cackle. “No, I am *free*. Truly free! I am the only free being in reality!”

“No, you are not,” Gayl denied her. “You are slave to your paranoia and lust for power. When you define the free will of others as your only threat, then you are truly alone, and the day will come that none will ever stand by you.”

“I have been alone my whole, entire, existence.”

“Raised in privilege by a sect devoted to your salvation?” Clayheart pondered.

“I never knew my father. My mother silenced my voice so that I might as well have been dead. All I have achieved; I have done so – alone.” There was an almost... sweet resignation to her voice. A humble acknowledgement of an astonishing life.

Blayd was almost sorry it had to end here.

He looked around. Hundreds of minds all interconnected, made by centuries of forbidden science. It would take centuries more to understand it. No one could understand it, not in its entirety.

But, in his mind, the war had already been lost. There was no help coming this time. They had to solve this themselves, with what they had at hand, and at claw, right now. He looked up, and saw Ironfang, bold and uncompromisingly loyal to his father, now with no memory of that friendship. And Windfyrth, who guided humanity with wisdom while her beloved rider tried almost single handedly to

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repopulate the entire Celtwyld alone, now beholden to a megalomaniac's will. How had they forgotten the goodness that had once surrounded them, for an evil monster's oppression?

"Alone?" he asked her.

As he knew she would, the dragon queen turned to him.

He continued, "Have you truly known, 'alone'?" A strange rage grew inside his heart, and he stood. "Were you raised by a father who loved you, but only ever saw your mother's eyes in yours, and thus had nothing to say to you? Did you grow, surrounded by sycophants and petitioners, desperate for your attention but never caring *who* you *wanted* to become? Have you lived, surrounded by an entirely civilization, that required you become something they needed you to be, but never asked you what you *wanted* to be?"

"Yes, I have," the matron snarled.

But his speech had not been for her.

"You were alone; because you never knew how much people really cared... you only wanted them for what they could offer you."

"What is your point," the queen hissed.

But Gayl had understood what he was trying to do. She continued, becoming stronger, and Ironfang seemed to lose his grip. "And who are you now? Surrounded by millions whose thoughts are only your own? With a heart so cruel you don't risk them accepting you for who you really are, so you force them into slavery! You do not



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know them; you do not want to know them or be known! You are, in this, in a loneliness you wanted. And the complete subjugation of humanity and mindless control of every dragon in reality will never sate you!”

Now Gayl had her interest. The queen could tell what she was trying to do – reach the dragons. She glared at Windfyrth and Ironfang with great interest.

Gayl turned to the dragons, and shouted, “Can you not remember what you were!” She turned to Ironfang, “Remember his staff! The pillar of punishment. Who took you! Who took you from that prison!”

“Rayn,” Ironfang mused, as if in a dream.

The queen gasped, but the scholars behind her were studying what was happening with intense interest.

She turned to Windfyrth, “Whose heart found you, and brought your people to the fortress! Whose children weep without your council!”

“Snow,” her voice sounded far away, but sad.

But neither dragon moved.

In a moment later, the queen laughed. “Good try, I will give you that. But it’s not going to work. They are mine. They are mine forever!”

“Remember,” Clayheart said in a deceptively quite whisper, without any trace of his divine command or authority whatsoever.

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Scholars pressed close, but looked disappointed. “Remember the ones who brought you *home*.”

Suddenly Ironfang roared. Blayd was thrown backwards and the mighty dragon swung his tail around and struck the dragon queen’s throne with such force it blasted a hundred thousand chunks of glowing red stone right at the terrible machine.

The queen screamed, dragons echoing her cry. But it was too late. It was already too late. A deadly hail of a thousand bamboo spines burst against the forcefields, many breaking through to impale the soulless brains within. A tangible shudder rippled across the interdiction field – it did not break, but it began to waver dangerously.

“Remember!” Clayheart suddenly roared, now pouring all his divine ability to command into his voice.

The queen glared at him with covetous fury. “No, stand away! Stand down!”

Desperately they shouted, each trying to drown out the other’s voice. Dragon’s rocked with the swaying interdiction field. Occasionally one would break free and attack the machine, only to die defending it in the next breath.

But the swaying was rapidly increasing. The damage was great, but the queen’s allies were so, so many, and some fought for her of their own volition. All over the room, violence had broken out.

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Desperately Windfyrth and Ironfang tried to protect them, or to eat the queen, but they were struggling to stay focused.

In the midst of her battle with Clayheart, the queen pointed at them, “Sleep,” and dragons fell over.

“Enough!” Clayheart roared.

An instant later the queen denied him, “Silence!” There was true power and authority in her voice. Somehow, the scholars were imitating his power already.

Suddenly Gayl stood there, sword in hand. With a prescient swing, she loosed a microscopic slither of that blade, like a scything curve of silver light. It struck the queen across her arm and face, and she screamed, likely experiencing physical pain for the first time in centuries, perhaps ever.

Clayheart’s voice grew in power, even as the damage to the machine seemed to grow. He seemed to be targeting the dragon’s brains in the machine, somehow. “You know who you are. You know how you came here to be... not the slave of any other being, for you are dragons! Ungovernable, unconquerable! Silence the voice of any other tyrant, for in this hour, you claim that which is your eternal right – chaos harnessed in wisdom, be truly free!”

Brains exploded all over the machine, and hundreds of hundreds of dragons screamed in agony and rage. They began attacking the machine and any humans who protected it.

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The queen fell to the ground, a large chunk of stone struck her, but bounced right off as it might with a dragon. Golden dragons tried to protect her, but they were vastly outnumbered by the outraged enemies. She pulled out a blade, but before she could escape, Windfyrth struck down and crushed her legs.

“Please, help me,” the queen begged to Gayl and Blayd as destruction rapidly spiraled out of control around them.

Blayd and Gayl just looked at her, shielded by Ironfang’s defense. Every moment of every second the interdiction wavered and failed. And then, in an instant, it was gone entirely. Dragons all round them blinked as if coming into the light. Several, it is sad to say, died on the spot.

The queen, red blood flowing from her wounds, smiled at them as she reached out pitifully. “I surrender myself to human judgement,” she grinned a cunning smile.

“Stay back,” Destiny growled.

“Thiaz will stop at nothing for her return,” Gayl’s voice was dry. “She is, she was, their matron.”

Clayheart approached the fallen queen. He glared at her, without pity. “A dragon queen must face a dragon’s judgement,” he softly proclaimed. And with that, crushed her with his enormous maw.

A surging psychic energy blasted out at her death from the machine, throwing them all to the ground. Blayd felt his heart lurch as

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a hundred, million dragons all took to the golden threads and almost, as one, fled back to their homes. The entire room fell entirely, eerily silent.

He looked up, and saw princess Gayl standing above him, hand outstretched.

She pulled him to his feet, but held his hand so that he could not walk away. “Blayd...” she was still lost for words. “What you did was very smart, and it was very brave...” Then she burst into tears, and threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you, thank you! Oh, I’m so thankful for you!”

He tried to disentangle himself, but perhaps that was because he was afraid he might be about to burst into tears as well.

Gayl released him, but Blayd was dismayed to see Destiny had surrounded them both, so there was no escape from the crying twelve-year-old princess.

“Ahh, look...” there was so much he just couldn’t say. “You’re pretty amazing yourself. You got what I meant, and you got Clayheart going, doing what he was built to do right here. But, um, you... you’re welcome?”

“Oh Blayd!” she grinned, and hugged him again. “I still don’t get you, but you’re a very smart boy. And... I’m glad you were here. You showed me how to reach them, and all it needed was an instant.”

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That made him perk up. “Really? Oh. That’s nice, I suppose. And, well, we’re all very grateful for you, princess.”

“Yes, we are,” Ironfang’s deep voice shook the room. One look at him, and Blayd could tell his father was all right, and had somehow gotten away once the queen had turned her full power on them during the battle.

Destiny moved away. And Blayd was amazed to see that hundreds, if not thousands, of dragons had filled the room of every form, size and hew.

Ironfang continued. “You alone spoke the truth through which I was able to find, even for just a thought, the power of my human’s heart. She could not break the bond, only... dampen it, for a time. But your words found it again.”

Then, as one, the dragon’s bowed.

Gayl burst into tears again. Then she stilled her tears, and breathed in bravely. Then, in a moment of inexcusable privilege, she grabbed Blayd by his hand and held it, tight. “Thank you, thank you. But I could have never hoped to achieve this without Blayd, scholar of the Celtwyld!”

The room thundered as they roared their praise. And it shook, it shook all through his chest. And he felt warm there. And *worthwhile*. And, perhaps, so very “unlonely” that he might have died right there for all the joy but for Destiny’s ageless courage surging through him.

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Gayl waited until the noise had died down, “No, go! Go to, and spread the word of peace! The war is ended! Let our enemies feast at our table tonight! The war is ended! The war is ended!”

Again, the dragons cheered, and spreading their wings took hold upon the golden threads, and quickly began to leave. And Gayl turned to face Windfyrth, and Ironfang, and Destiny, and Clayheart. “And, if you please, destroy all memory of that machine, its creators, and what it can do.”

And the room was lit with bright colors as they fully demonstrated just how effective dragon flame could be.

## The En-Peace-ening

Blayd watched the creatures with dread satisfaction. They ate, calmly, and with great manners. And behind them stood a wall of human guards. They were invited, but they were not welcomed. And he really did think they should have rethought their introduction to worlds of humanity - it had almost been their entire undoing as well.

And, as he'd always dreaded he would, he sat on the right hand of the princess of Pearl right dead smack in the center of all the attention.

He knew it should have crushed him into shame, but something from Destiny prevailed in him. It was her pride and love. She thought the world of him, and he couldn't hide his face in a stone, when she thought just so much of him before the world.

She was up in the sky right now, sailing around with the others, learning from and teaching them in the way dragons had always had – without words; altering each other's DNA and exploring secrets humanity had never known and might never understand. Clayheart was particularly popular, as the newest and only to have been forged personally by a Giant's hand. He would have a lot to share, and now that he was with the rising queen Gayl, she had suddenly seemed to have lost the need to boast, and brag, and show him up at every



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opportunity. Oh, she was still a tough headed, bright minded soul. But she was... palatable, maybe even ... nice.

His thoughts drifted back to the aftermath of the war. Dragons and riders had been united in tears and apologies. Some, tragically, could not. Lady Snow and his father were both spared, and reunited with their dragons the hour the queen was destroyed. It brought tears to his eyes once more.

Then there had been the reunion of all the princesses' friends, an alternating chaos of blubbering tears and cheering. Mintsi had said nothing, and blushed every time he looked at her. Orong alternated between squealing and taking notes. Awoth was in tears, and Rebecca wanted all the details on tactics and xenomorphology. She told them the whole story, making sure she was always cast in the best light, of course!

But then again, he had to admit, she had been unconquerable.

"Have you found your dragon gift?" his father suddenly asked, bringing him back to the present.

Blayd was about to disagree, but Destiny now showed him. "Oh. Am I... an empath? Gifted to know and understand the emotions and needs of all others? What does that mean? How is that possible, when all I have done is hide from them my whole life?"

Rayn sat back, as Ironfang grinned at them both. "It was clear, from the hour of your birth, how deeply connected you were to all life,

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especially sentience. You craved that connection with a desperate fervor that worked against your own best interests. But you could always feel what others felt, knowing them deeper than they knew themselves, at times. But you were a child, and couldn't tell when to center yourself, or share that awareness. So, you tried to block yourself off to everyone. I tried to guide you, as I could. But I knew this was a dragon test, just for you. I could not solve it for you, nor force your bonding. I always thought it was within you, and wondered what you were waiting for. But connecting with others was so intense it hurt you. And until you found a genuine need, like saving the world... and by then you didn't need my help at all." He smiled at him, "Be careful of this gift, young man. Other's will seek to draw sympathy, and thus your power, from you. Promise me this; you must let other people face the trials they *insist* on having in life, no matter how they beg or cajole or threaten you to take those trials away. It is their trial to be borne. There is no safer way."

Blayd nodded. His father had stood back to let him face a terrible trial at unprecedented risk. But he'd done it anyway. It was, in a fatherly way too, heroic.

He flung his arms around his father, as if he were a child again, "Thanks dad. You were there for me too. You were always there. Thank you, thank you so much!"

"It was my privilege," his father replied, and hugged him too.

## Twilight of the Giants

Time drew on as the party went late into the night. Blayd grew bored, or anxious. He would have never noticed it as anxiety without Destiny's wisdom coursing through his veins. Briefly he wondered if humanity perhaps should restrict itself to having less children, so everyone could own a dragon, but imagined that would probably be unwise on some other level. But even if he wasn't feeling anxious, or driven by habit, he liked to gaze into his orb, and allow the wafts and waves of humanities thoughts and, now he could allow himself to recognize it, *feelings* to flow across his consciousness. It was... nice.

He was hardly there a moment before a strange wave crossed his mind. He looked, and was in a moment alarmed, and excited. Thrilled.

Gayl noticed him immediately, "What is it?"

"Visitors," was all he could reply before royal guards approached them, and the alien guardian approached his lord.

"My queen," one said, honoring her future title for having helped save his life, perhaps, "We have a situation."

The entire retinue was being warned. People were preparing to leave.

A dragon roared, and weapons were being drawn.

Gayl looked at him in alarm, but gave no command. He realized she was waiting on him for information, which was perhaps the nicest compliment he'd ever known, especially from Gayl, queen of Pearl.

He looked back, and with a broad grin replied, "Leviathan."

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She paused her guard. Then she looked out at the rapidly panicking assembly. Her voice rang out with authority and courage, “Let them come.”

Others looked confused. They looked at Rayn. They looked at Caspina.

He spoke, and they were to be his last words of authority; “Your queen has spoken.”

People sat down, but many left. Two of the aliens politely retreated, but not their leader. He sat back down, nodded at Rayn, and they waited.

It was a tense few minutes, and it was difficult to clear the sky of dragons willing to die to protect their world from their great ancestral enemy. But when the leviathan arrived most of them stayed in far orbit. Only one dared approach the planetary atmosphere. It was an enormous interdimensional plasmid, made of light and energy. It filled the entire sky with lights of red and orange and blue. She was beautiful, beyond imagining.

The world fell to a hush. The dragons, ever fearless, fell to a humbled silence in the presence of a noble of their enemy’s kind, the only other life form truly capable of putting their race at risk of extinction.

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For a moment Gigantatoan hovered in the sky. When she spoke, the air tingled with her power. “Blayd, Gayl, Little One. You did it, you did all you said you would. And we... we are *thankful!*”

And then, with a brush of electrified air, she was gone.

Gayl looked over at him, and he must have been grinning wildly.

Gayl looked to the air. “You are so, so very welcome,” she replied. She turned, and looked at the picture of her mother on the wall, and of her father waiting quietly in the night. She turned to see Lady Snow and her many children, at the feet of Windfyrth, by the statue of their mighty friend Rhoc and his irrepressible shifter Fairystone. She looked at Jayd and Rayn, holding hands in silence as they stood in the shadows of their powerful souls, Windfyrth and Ironfang.

And she looked over at him again, and then out into the endless, boundless, mist filled sky of pearlescent clouds which had once been the final boarder of whole entire world, which had simply turned out to be just another step to an infinite, wonderful, divine universe.

And she spoke, “Thank you. Thank you for listening to our story. Now, all is told.”

## The End

## Notes

- Message to the giant ‘Emotions and thought processes. ‘pace is too fast’. Why visit them? And it’s destiny’s idea...’
- An endearing interaction for destiny. Pop-hoppers, interdimensional entities, playing in the lightfall of the cavern.
- Channeled Anna McCaffery: "The bond between dragon and rider is a relationship unlike any other. Make sure to delve deep into this connection and its implications for both parties."
- Channeled JRR Tolkien: "The lore of the world, from dragon nobles to the golden threads between worlds, is rich with possibility. Remember to ground these fantastical elements with the deeply human emotions and struggles of your characters."
- JRR Tolkien: "The historical significance of the Giants and the archetypes feels like it's deeply rooted in the lore of your universe. It would be beneficial to occasionally delve deeper, giving readers a taste of the ancient tales and myths that shape this world."

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- ‘anything but stupid, 11yr old Gayl calls him stupid, he resents it and starts to study dragons instead. ? or is it too young for her to have that kind of influence on him.
- Giants was destiny’s idea.