


Tides of Magic
Dragon Tears



Selena Reed



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For a Love found
For a Love lost

Andragat



The tingling in her body subsided, her transformation was complete. Upon opening her eyes she glanced down on several dozen humans standing below her. Her stomach began to growl and saliva covered her tongue almost immediately. They were all standing perfectly still, staring at her, she just had to lower her head, open her maw and ...

She called herself back to order. She was not supposed to think like the beast that was deep within her, she had to control it. She closed her eyes, calmed herself with deep breaths and looked back down upon the monks.

Now she was beginning to notice all the changes. Her eyes could make out more details, seeing the stubbles of hair on freshly shaved heads. She even found her father standing in the back of the crowd. He was standing there proud, even though unshaved for about three days.

Her nostrils noticed smells that her human nose would have never smelled. Some were stinging strongly and now she knew that some of those monks were neglecting their hygiene. Knowledge she rather would have stayed without.

Her black scales on the other hand limited her feeling of the outside world. Only her leather wings seemed to catch the slightest changes within air movements. The wings were not the only additional limbs that gave her a strange feeling; the long tail was another thing she had to get used to, if she wanted to use that body efficiently.

As she tried to move her tail it swished from one side to another very fast and violent. Her mentors had to duck to not be smashed against one of the stone walls. It would take her days of practice to control every as-

pect of her dragon body... maybe even weeks or months.

She stayed for some unknown time in that body before she remembered why she had changed in the first place. Cheer and applause erupted as she transformed back into her human body, tightening the seal that was engraved into her very soul once again, sealing the body of the dragon away.

All the changes she experienced reverted to what she was used to, only the ghost feeling of wings and tail stayed behind for a few moments, causing her to look over her own body. Her frame was that of a typical monk, and only the seal, which covered the left side of her body, was out of place, coloring her left eye red. She looked back upon her mentors as one brushed dust from his robe.

“We are proud to welcome a new dragon priest within our midst. Litus Dias has succeeded in controlling the dragon that was sealed within him six years ago. The first stage of his training is complete.” The abbot addressed her and the other monks, trainees and mentors alike, still hiding her true gender. Although it had been an accident, she was the first girl to survive with a dragon sealed within her. She did not know why other women in history had failed – which dictated that females were never to become dragon priests at all – but she had succeeded in surviving both the sealing and the transformation.

Still, she dared not to reveal her true self. There were enough dragon priests around that would like to perform the final sealing, in other words: they would kill the dragon within her by killing her.

“Brother Litus”, the abbot addressed her directly, “you have been faced with a harsh destiny. You are fighting a constant battle against the wild dragon sealed within you.

You can never lose that battle or you will lose your free will, your body and ... your life. In exchange for that you have been granted an extended life and the powers of the dragon. But beware: Unleashing its power will make it harder to fight the dragon. Should you ever feel that you might start to lose the battle, come back to this monastery and one of your brothers will perform the final sealing.”

She had heard his speech before. There had been a long private debate between the abbot and her father, if she really should perform this test and she had to swear an oath to do just that. Otherwise they would have needed to kill her on the spot.

She agreed to the terms. She did not see any problems in that, after all she did not feel the presence of the dragon in her head since the day he was sealed. Then again, the abbot stated that it was normal as the dragon was sleeping but he could wake at any time.

“Thank you, abbot”, she inclined her head. “I will heed your words in my hours of weakness.” She then turned and left, ending the last ceremony of the day. She was the only dragon priest that was inaugurated that day, the only one in Andragat for ten years. Even if you counted the other three monasteries, there was only one dragon priest emerging every five years or so, always after a wild one had appeared. There were no more incidents after her accident ... and even that had been strange.

“I am proud of you”, she was greeted by her father as she found her way to him, as the rest of the crowd dispersed. He put a hand on her shoulder and embraced her in a hug for a moment. Then he put her at arm’s length and smiled. “Here, I have something for you.” He reached into one of his pockets and produced a red shimmering gemstone, attached to a leatherband. “It belonged to your mother and ... it belongs to you now.”

Lia reached for the stone, embracing it in her hand. It felt warm to the touch and she felt a slight tingling, as if an inner fire was burning within the stone. She felt tears rising up as she held it close to herself. It was something from her mother. He never told her anything about her, never uttered a single word. Even now she could read in his eyes that this was all she would get, for now.

She examined the stone a little closer, looking through the clear material, noticing the small golden ornament within, that looked like a small dragon, holding a bit slitted eye within his claws.

She had never before seen anything like this. But then again, she had never seen the outside world, not that she remembered.

“Congratulations, Litius!” She turned her head to look into the eyes of a young, tall man. Bright, blue eyes and black hair complimented his rather hard features. He was wearing a robe similar to her own, the emblem of the monastery embroidered on his back and a small one on his chest, though his was in blue, while hers was a deep crimson.

He had completed his education only shortly before her, becoming a dragon guard, trained in anti-dragon magic and a possible vessel for another sealing, if the need would ever arise. “Brother Janus”, Lia put the stone on her neck, smiling slightly embarrassed at him.

“I knew you could do it”, he told her. “And as your rival I now admit defeat.” He bowed before her, mocking her playfully in doing so. He had tried to best her in many things and she did so in regards to him, making both of them the best of their class. Still, his compliment felt good.

“I am sure you could have done the same”, she did not meet his eyes, feeling a slight blush on herself.

“Probably, though we probably will not find out. Where will you attempt your dragon training?”

Lia, sighed. “I am not sure.” It was tradition to go into one of the other monasteries to learn from other dragon priests and obtain different techniques in suppressing the dragon and fighting one.

“Then come with me to Cerinsagath. It would be nice to travel home together.”

“O... of course”, came her immediate answer. She looked at him, her face feeling a lot warmer than usual. And somehow her whole body felt a lot lighter than before.

“I will set off in the first hour of the new day. I will see you then.”

“I will be there”, she promised without even thinking.

“I will be waiting”, he smiled and turned around.

“There will be no need to wait”, her father looked at Janus with a stern face. “We will be in time.”

“I look forward to travelling with you”, he turned, waved and left smiling.

Lia stared at his back before realizing what her father just stated. “Wait a minute. You are coming with us?”

“Of course, I cannot let you be alone with him. Not in your current state!” He turned around, suddenly in a worse mood than before. “There are things that I still need to tell you. Follow me.”

Was this about her mother? She looked back into the crowd, hoping to catch a last glimpse of his back, but he had left already.



The sun had still to rise as Lia and her father stood at the gates, waiting on Janus. All his explanations on love,

the difference between man and woman and the implications had left her ears ringing and her face in a deep blush. She did not even find sleep as she kept pondering what could happen on the journey.

She asked him why he never told her anything before, getting the short answer that he never saw a reason to do so. But what exactly had changed? And how should she deal with all the things that could happen?

But before anything could start, she had to tell him, that she was a girl. Janus still saw her as a boy ... but what would he say? Would he even consider such a relationship with her? A closer relationship between boys was frowned upon within the monastery ... and then there was the problem that she was the impossible female dragon priest ...

“Do not even think of telling him”, growled her father, apparently reading some of her thoughts. “I am serious about this”, he whispered just as Janus came into view. He had stuffed his belongings into a bag that he was carrying over his shoulder, while hers were with her father.

He carried a few more smaller bags on a belt. They probably contained some ryu to buy meals on their long journey across the country.

Smiling he came to a halt before them, hugging her first and then shaking hands with her father. “Don’t worry, I will not do anything to your daughter.” He winked towards her, bringing another blush to her cheeks.

It took her a moment to realize that he knew her secret! But how? It frightened her, because if he knew, there were probably others that knew as well. Others that shouldn’t know.

At least she would never have the problem to tell him personally and upset her father.

“And why do you think that I have a daughter?”

“I have seen fathers around their daughters before. They tend to get overly protective. The signs were there, I only had to see and interpret them.” He smiled broadly. “Oh and the abbot told me. He figured that she needed a dragon guardian at her side, whom she could trust. It all suddenly made sense.”

Her father turned around growling, leaving the monastery through the gate without looking back.

“Let’s go as well”, Janus set onto the path before him as well, treating her like he had all those times before.

Sighing, but also with a smile she followed them. So he was told by the abbot. Her sorrows subsided to the back of her mind. On the first few meters she looked back towards her the place that she had called home for all those years she could remember.

She felt like giving up some sort of comfort but at the same time the spirit of adventure got ahold of her. There were so many new things to discover! Her eyes fell on Janus back again, lifting her heart and almost her entire body. This journey would certainly be great.

With renewed energy she closed the distance towards the two men, who were walking in silence. The path slowly wound itself down the steep mountainside, stones slowly giving way to some grass and further down she could see some trees, their green leaves rustling in the wind.

“What is your real name?”, Janus suddenly asked her out of the blue. “I cannot imagine that someone would call their daughter Litius.”

She shook her head, smiling. “I am Lia. Lia Luxana Dias.”

“You got two names? That is unusual.”

“Luxana was my mother’s name”, her hand enclosed the stone hanging around her neck once again. “She died shortly after my birth.”

Janus fell silent. "I'm sorry", he whispered after a moment.

"I never really got to know her. Would you", she looked to the side, her voice becoming quieter, "tell me about yours?"

"I miss her", he looked towards the horizon as if seeing something there that was hidden from Lias sight. "She died some time after I turned six. My father then sent me up to Andragat, to become a dragon guardian like him."

"Sorry ... I didn't want to ..."

"Don't worry. It is long in the past, and I can understand why you asked." His smile carried something else, something she had never seen in his smiles before. It was ... warm ... sincere, not like the jesting ones, but one that came from the heart.

It made her smile as well, in the same manner and suddenly she felt a lot closer to him than before.

"So... how does it feel ... to see the world from the eyes of a dragon?" Janus shifted the bag on his shoulder, looking straight ahead once more, and his face got slightly red.

Lia cleared her throat, thankful for the change of topic, looking straight ahead and seeing how her father looked back at her. Was he suspicious of them? Or was there a speck of curiosity in them?

Of course he was curious. Who could not be curious? Everyone had to be curious, even she had been curious since the first time she had heard that one could take on the form of the dragon, but until yesterday she had not been allowed to do so. And out of fear she never did, even though the other boys had urged her to try. More than once.

"It was ... strange, but also ... natural." She concentrated, letting the memory of it all wash over her again,

feeling it again. “I felt the World below my Claws, knew that no one here could stand before my might. I felt the dragons flame deep within me and I smelled ... well, some of our brothers needed a bath. Urgent.” She had to smile at that. “Oh and I felt pretty hungry!” And then she remembered once again, that she had almost given into the instincts of the dragon. It was a reminder that she still had many things to learn. She shook her head and continued with her story. “It was exhilarating. I could feel the wind below my wings.”

“When you fly ... would you take me with you for a ride?” Janus was grinning from ear to ear. “I would like to see the world from your back.”

Her father cleared his throat very loud.

“High up in the sky, of course.”

Lia ignored that. “Of course, I would like to ... but ...” She looked to the side. “I still need to practice flying first. And I need to get accustomed to those wings and ...”

“I will be waiting until you are ready.” He draped an arm around her shoulders, making her feel special once again.

Once again her father started clearing his throat. Once, Twice, a few times more, but Janus ignored it completely.



They arrived in the small town on the base of the mountain as the sun was sinking over the horizon. Lia started taking in everything she could see as they left the mountain trail. She felt like being in another world: Trees larger than houses, Children, women and girls with long hair. Houses built of stone and wood right next to each other, stone paved streets, wagons, horses, men with lots

of muscles, men with lots of fat, men and women advertising things they wanted to sell, Men in strange black suits. Were these especially rich? Or from a different county? Perhaps they were just working for an especially rich person that had these suits tailored for them like some type of uniform, just like the robes she and all the dragon priests were wearing. Maybe they were members of a new faith that did not involve dragons ...

“Don’t stare”, her father pulled her into a doorway and a moment later they were standing within a room full of people. “It is getting late, we should find a room.” With these words he found his way past several tables, where people were either talking or drinking and everyone wanted to be louder than their neighbor, to get their point across. Nobody paid attention to her father, Janus or her.

Suddenly there was the smell of something nasty, stinging into her nose. Even worse than what she had smelled as a dragon, but she could not pinpoint exactly what this smell was. While she was still wondering, Janus found his way towards the bar and she followed him shortly after. At least all the noise seemed to be getting less intense the farther they got.

“So, a dragon priest, a dragon guardian and a mercenary go into a bar”, said the bartender smiling “sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.” He dried his fingers on a pretty dirty piece of cloth. His shoulders were broad and he had a massive physique, with strength that could probably hold up to any dragon priest or guardian she knew. A mustache hid the lower part of his face, while the short brown hair on his head thinned out already. “What can I do for you?”

“We need two rooms”, her father answered and gathered some ryu out of his pockets.

“150 ryu.” The barkeeper leaned forwards. “One hundred for you, fifty for the guardian and the priest goes free. I just need you to sign here”, he handed her a piece of paper and a quill.

Lia added her name on the paper, together with a stamp she had gotten before leaving. Janus did the same, although he had a slightly different symbol. The bartender would get the money for her and Janus’ stay at his inn later from the crown. It was a special arrangement for the “burden” the dragon priests had to bear for a long time by keeping the populace safe from wild dragons.

The bartender handed her the keys, as if she had asked for the rooms. As she took the keys, the Bartender called towards the back “Gertrud, please show our guests to their rooms!”

It took few moments until a woman entered the room from the side, her clothing only a bit cleaner than the bartenders and her physique not at all less imposing. “Do you like what you are seeing, your Grace?” She put her hand to her hips, pushing her ample bosom forwards a bit more.

“I ...” Lia was speechless. There were not any words in her repertoire that would have fitted this situation. Finally she averted her gaze as she realized that she was staring.

“Follow me please”, the woman said smiling, correcting her posture once more. “I am used to this already, so I know how to deal with our customers that are less polite. But I do not mind them coming back; it’s good for business after all.”

Lia followed her through a small staircase at the side of the room to the floor above. Suddenly she had a realization. Was it normal for women to have ... something like

that? Would Janus want her to have those as well? And ... why was she thinking this all of a sudden? It shouldn't bother her at all.

More than anything she wished her mother to her side. She couldn't ask her father as he was strictly against her being with Janus. Maybe she could ask someone else? Maybe even the woman before her? But then she would admit to the world who she was, alerting some of the more strict priests – and a hunting expedition after a corrupted priest was the last thing she would need on her heels.

“Here is your room”, the woman pointed to a door at their side. A symbol akin to the number six had been carved into the door, as well as on one of the keys she had been given. She opened the door, threw the other one to her father and fled inside.

“Will you need anything else?” The woman's voice penetrated the door with ease.

“No, thanks!” Lia turned around and locked the door. She looked about in her room, finding only a bed and nothing else. Sighing she sat down on the bed. Was there a way for her to hide the dragon sign on her body? Or was there a way to make all dragon priests accept her as one of them? After all she succeeded in all the tests that she was given. Why were the others not satisfied with that? Why, when the abbot, her mentors and her father were content with it?

A knock on the door disrupted her thoughts. “I need to talk to you.” It was her father.

“I don't want to talk right now”, was her only answer, just barely loud enough to be heard on the other side.

Her father went silent and after a few moments she heard his steps as he left.

Lias thoughts returned to her predicament. Maybe she should really speak with that woman about her prob-

lems? Maybe she was able to help her. But then again, she had lied to her, albeit indirectly. How would she react if that dragon priest was really a girl? And then there were her vows to consider ...

It knocked once again. "Lia?" Janus' voice resounded through the door, his voice a lot softer and not commanding, unlike her fathers. Lia took a few deep breaths and after a few minutes of absolute silence and calming her thoughts, she opened the door. Janus had waited all that time until she had been ready. Her heart felt a bit warmer once again.

"What has happened to you?" He looked concerned. "Ever since we arrived here you started to behave strange. Is it the dragon within you?"

Lia looked towards the floor. "How should she tell him? This was not a Problem anyone has had before her. Sixteen years she had lived a lie, as a boy ... and suddenly she had feelings blossoming in her that did not tie in with the life she had lived. But she could not just change all that, she was bound to this lie by her accident in the past. But ... would he be able to understand that?"

"Do you see me as a boy or as a girl?" she asked instead, looking straight into his face.

He owed her an answer for a very long time. Only then he answered. "I have known you for nine years as a boy and to be honest, I cannot change that view from one day to another. He scratched his own neck after admitting that.

Lia went back to the bed, sitting down. How could she have thought that he might answer something else?

"Is it that?" He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

Lia did not look at him, owing him an answer this time. How could she answer him at all? For her being

seen as a girl was suddenly something that felt more important than she thought it would be and telling him that ... he would probably think of her as crazy.

“To be honest, this morning I have been playing with your father a bit, but ...” He let his hand sink down, a seriousness in his voice that she had not heard for a long time. “I have felt something more than friendship towards you for a while now. It was weird for me, admitting to myself, that I had feelings for another boy. And now ...” He sighed. “Just give me some time.” He smiled. “Just, take it to heart, that I don’t care about your gender. I just want to be with you.”

Even though what he said were not the words she wanted to hear, they still warmed her heart. She returned his smile and nodded, embracing him in a hug, that he returned after hesitating for a moment.



The sun was barely rising over the horizon as Janus, Lia and her father left the inn. Lia felt a bit better than before, but there was still this nagging feeling that she had to do something at least. But she also knew that she should not try to push through things at the moment. Wise men observe first and decide after they got enough information. And she was lacking the latter. Some of her ideas included to hide the sign on her face that made it obvious that she was a dragon priest. And if she put down the robe and hid her red eye as well, then she could live as a normal human being.

Her father kept quiet. He didn’t talk about what happened the day before, didn’t pressure her. Maybe Janus told him something? She looked at them, shoving her own thoughts to the side. They had already left the

buildings of the town behind. Janus had locked his eyes on her. She felt a blush creeping on her face.

Then she looked at her father. He had only eyes ... for the surroundings? And then he stood before them, holding his hands out to stop them from going further. He stared on the way ahead.

Lia looked past him, noticing the half dozen men in full armor suits stepping on the road. Lia had heard of thieves before – but with full armor suits? That was very unusual. But they did threaten them with their long, blank swords.

“Finally. I have waited for a long time to see you again, Barnett.” Shivers ran over Lias back. She turned towards the source of that scratchy voice.

“Well, I am really glad to see you again, too”, replied her father in a tone of voice that dripped of sarcasm. Metal scratched over metal as he pulled his sword out of its sheath.

Lia saw the man standing behind her: A black leather coat hid most of his features, his eyes seemed to be completely black, as well as his short hair. She could see his sword hanging at his side, still sheathed. His hard features told Lia that he was one of those, that rarely smiled, if at all.

His eyes looked over Janus and her alike, lingering on each only a few moments. Lia put her right foot a bit in front of her, stabilizing herself for battle like her mentors had taught her. Janus did the same, raising his arms, ready to reply to any attack that was thrown his way.

“Three men? Phobos said you would never travel without your ... daughter.” The black man looked at his fingernails. “So ... which one of these two boys is her?” A moment of silence ensued, before he unsheathed his sword, pointing it on Janus at first. “Is it you?” Then his

sword pointed over to Lia, "or is it more likely that you are her?"

"My daughter isn't here. I am very sorry, that you came all this way for nothing."

"Don't lie to me!" The black one slashed through the air without hurting anyone. "I know that she is here. I am sure that I am looking at her." He raised his chin a bit. The ringing of armor from the six soldiers made it clear that they were coming closer. "Well, it should be easy to ascertain, who of these two is the girl and which one is a genuine boy. We just have to strip one of them."

"Be my guest. But I assure you, you won't find her." Her father seemed amused all of a sudden.

"It is treason to attack a dragon priest or their guards." Janus shifted both legs a bit forwards.

The sword that pointed on Lia sank towards the ground slowly. The black man looked at them questioningly, just before a creepy smile found its way to his lips. "I understand. Very clever, Barnett, very clever." He looked towards Janus raising his sword once again. His tone suddenly even more aggressive than before, shouting into his face: "Do I look like I give a shit about the crappy laws of this country?" Then he turned towards his soldiers shouting: "Take the priest alive, kill the guard. Barnett is mine!"

He lunged forwards with incredible speed, his blade meeting the blade of her father's sword mere inches next to her. Lia jumped to the side while both swung their swords once again, bringing some distance between herself and them. A moment later she was surrounded by three soldiers, the other three had surrounded Janus, raising their swords they charged at him, only to stagger back as flames surrounded the dragon guard in a circle.

They kept their distance, but their swords were glowing deep red at their tips.

Lia didn't worry about Janus anymore – he was a very capable dragon guard, the best one they had this year, to be exact. Instead she looked at the soldiers before her, taking a deep breath and breathing fire against her attackers. Pale blue flames erupted from her, enveloping the soldier before her in an inferno of flames. She heard a garbled scream before he sank to the ground, his armor glowing red-orange. She turned towards the next one. He made a few steps backwards, before stopping again. Someone grabbed her from behind an unusual warmth radiating from him, a red hot glowing sword only inches away from her neck. "If you don't want to be hurt, then hold still", whispered the man behind her, the remaining two soldiers standing in front of her, their swords pointed to her heart.

What was happening here? The soldier should have been roasted! She looked to Janus. Those three soldiers suddenly ignored the circle of fire, as if it wasn't there at all, their armors glowing red-orange as well, exactly like the one ... of the soldier ...

Suddenly she realized what was happening: The armor made these soldiers immune to fire! They knew exactly who their opponents were, they came prepared. Those soldiers around Janus slashed at him, their movements slow and strained. He had just enough time to jump out of the way. The flames around him died and as his shield evaporated the soldiers gained speed once again, they slashed at him, tearing through his robe, injuring him. They were given the order to kill him.

Her heart skipped a few beats. Instinct took over, her hand grasped the still glowing sword, her skin impervious to its heat. A strong pull janked the sword out of her

attackers hand, the soldiers in front jumping to the side. Her other hand grabbed the hand that was still near her neck, throwing the soldier over her back and onto the ones before her. She climbed over the pile of soldiers, noticing how Janus duck below another blow. He punched the air before him and wind, amplified by magic, pushed an attacker far from him.

Lia breathed fire onto the remaining two soldiers, their armors glowing once again. The swords fell from their hands and they sank to their knees, as if suddenly drained of strength. Janus ran away, increasing the distance between him and his attackers. He used the breather to cast another spell, a more complex one.

The three soldiers that were assigned to her managed to get free from the pile, picking up their swords once again, charging at her. Lia concentrated for a while, a ball of flame gathering in her open palm. Heat radiated from it, draining the soldiers strength, slowing them down.

A sword almost grazed her side, impaling itself in the ground. She looked around. The black one had cornered her father, hitting him on the head with the pommel of his sword. He sank to the ground.

She threw the ball of flame at him, anger clouding her decisions, but he swatted the ball away like a pesky fly. It exploded somewhere within the wood, setting dry wood on fire, the shockwave felling some of the weaker trees.

“Your stolen powers don’t impress me!” Raising a hand he started to chant a spell in a language that was unknown to her, his tone sending shivers down her back. “Aqure viara. Sa-Eio, pra olsa karpa sonos ...” Suddenly a gust of wind swept over her as if fleeing from the woods, from him, while he kept chanting. She couldn’t hear him anymore, she could only see that his lips were still moving.

As the wind swept up his cloak she could see the studded leather armor below it. Black fumes raised from the ground and she felt herself weaken. She sank on her knees, looking back over her shoulder, hoping that Janus finished his spell ...

Lightning connected his hands with the soldiers near to him, bringing them down, their silhouettes disappearing in the black mist. But the fumes found him faster than he could find a new target for his lightning bolts. He sank to his knees rather quickly, his spell drained of all its power.

Lia struggled against this dark power that threatened to overwhelm her consciousness. She noticed a soldier stepping towards Janus, seemingly unaffected by the dark mist, sword in hand. He was about ten steps away.

Nine.

Eight.

Lia panicked. She knew of one way she could probably save him. She sought out her seal, freeing the dragons essence within her to take on his form. The power that broke out from deep within overwhelmed her consciousness as a deep darkness washed over her ...

Second Seal



Janus closed his eyes for a moment. He couldn't escape anymore, he felt too weak to even lift a finger, the black mist draining his strength ... But then he heard a cry, close to a roar. He turned his head, seeing Lia change, her robe turning black, melting into her now black skin, arms and legs changing their form, Wings growing out of her back while her neck became longer and a tail shot out of her backside, swinging left and right while she increased in size rapidly.

The Dragon was much larger than any human, even taller than the trees. A roar escaped the dragons throat, a prank smashed the soldier that had been closing in on him. Then the dragon breathed fire, engulfing the remaining two soldiers in a pale blue flame. Janus could feel the burning heat even several dozen feet away.

He could see the magically enhanced armors melt, the smell of burning flesh and the pained cries of the soldiers. As the flames died down all that remained were statues of molten stone. The protection spell woven into the steel had gone awry. One soldier cried out of fear, stepping backwards, turning. As he tried to flee he was smashed into a tree by the dragons tail. The armor disfigured, the bark splintered and probably the bones of the soldiers broken beyond his capability to heal. Blood spilled out and onto the floor, vanishing into the ground.

Janus felt a shiver running down his spine. Was that still Lia or had the dragon assumed control, running wild, a beast only acting on instinct, seeing humans as nothing more than their next meal?

Another soldier charged at the dragon, his sword held high, crying in desperation. The dragon used another

prank to hold that soldier down, the dragons maw lowering itself towards his head ...

Janus heard another cry beside him. He recognized the black one shoving a dagger into the remaining soldiers back, right through his armor. As he ripped the dagger from the soldiers back he started chanting another spell. The soldier staggered, tried to look back at his assailant and fell down, blood piling onto the floor. The black one rammed the dagger into the pool of blood.

As the last life left that soldiers body all the blood turned black in an instant, turning into some form of crystal as a black orb formed at the top of the daggers handle. Slowly one side opened, revealing a big, blood red eye. His heart skipped several beats as the eye looked at him and then turned towards the dragon. The eye exploded. The shockwave caused a loose stone to strike him on the head. As his consciousness faded he noticed black veins trapping the dragons form.



Lia awoke to her own drumming heartbeat, feeling it pronounced within her right arm. She seemed to be laying on the hard ground, with something pressing into her back. It took several moments until she felt the rest of her body again.

The drumming heartbeat within her arm grew into excruciating pain, as if a needle was penetrating her skin. It stung and stung and stung again and again. Lia opened her eyes, tried to escape the pain, but something heavy pressed her down on the ground. She saw the face of the black man before her and a bloody needle in his right hand. His black eyes had locked on to hers and he stared at her for a moment, before his left hand curled around her neck.

As more adrenalin shot through her body once more she noticed that she was naked, several more needles had been pinned into her skin everywhere, as if pinning her dragons seal down. She could see them within her thighs, her breast and she felt even some on her neck.

“Don’t move!”

Lia couldn’t breathe or answer. The world started spinning around her as she tried to get free, flailing with her feet. She tried to grab his arm, to throw him down from her. It only made him press down on her harder.

“I told you not to move”, he growled.

She felt painful tingling within her body, paralyzing her muscles. She remembered vaguely that she had tried to transform into a dragon. She had to try again. To escape him and to ... What has happened to Janus? What to her father?

She had to try again ... but her seal didn’t follow her commands, it stuck to her skin, not retreating at all, really pinned down by the needles.

His Needle stung into her shoulder once gain. And then again and again and again. All the pain building and overwhelming her once more and she fell back into the darkness.



His head was pounding. Somehow he managed to open his eyes. The bright light seemed to be stinging into his head.

“Are you feeling better?” A woman came closer to him, looking slightly concerned. Janus remembered her as being the one from the inn. He didn’t remember her name. “I am so glad that you got that wild rampaging dragon. But how did he appear in the forest just like

that?" She tried to think of something. "Can they become invisible?" She looked at him questioningly. "I mean dragons have powerful magic."

Janus began to shiver. Lia had lost control before his eyes and she had just been inaugurated to priesthood. At least no one of the normal folk would know. He could only hope that the news would stay local. More and more of the memory flowed into his head. The smells ... the sights ... he couldn't hold the contents of his stomach anymore, plastering the floor beside the bed with them.

"Oh my goodness", the woman brought him some water and left through the door. He drank some of the water, regaining control over himself while the woman came back with a bucket of water and other tools to clean the floor.

"What happened?" She asked as she started to clean up his mess. "We found you and that mercenary in the woods, as well as some statues and three ... dead soldiers ... do you know where that dragon priest went to? I hope he is alright." Janus stared at her for a while, comprehending what happened slowly. Lia had vanished? "The mercenary left a while ago, mumbling something about a daughter he had to find." She leaned back, sighing. "Maybe the Dragon stole his long lost daughter that he met up with before leaving this village and the priest has followed him and now he needs to follow them as well ... it is kind of romantic."

And it couldn't be further from the truth. But Janus kept his thoughts to himself. Instead he got up, leaving her to her fantasies.

"Why are you all in such a hurry", she complained. "It is getting dark outside and you should eat something!"

"Thank you, but ... there is no time." He couldn't eat something nor wait any longer. It had been that black

guy. He got Lia and his spells were probably why she had lost control. He had to find out what had happened to her, if she regained control. He had to know if she was still ... alive. And then he had to find her father. He seemed to know that stranger. If he found him first, then it would be a huge step towards finding her.



Lia was feeling cold. Her whole body was shivering as she regained consciousness. She opened her eyes slowly. She was still lying on the floor, naked, but covered by her robe. Or the pieces that were left of it. She grabbed it, covering herself and got up slowly. Her left arm was still stinging and it got worse with every movement.

“Put it back on!” Her torturer sat a few meters away from her, leaning against a tree.

Anger shot through her. She took a deep breath and, instead of shouting at him, she tried to breathe her fire. But it failed to ignite. Instead she felt like a big spear was being shoved into her left shoulder, turning it in the wound to make it extra painful. She fell back to the floor, clutching it with her right hand, while she cried her pain out into the air above.

There was no spear, there was no blood, but the pain was excruciating.

It felt like an eternity has passed as the pain finally subsided, leaving her weak and gasping for air.

“The seal on your arm will deal you that pain every time you try to run or attack me.” The black guy looked smug, content with himself. “You should do as I say and put that thing back on or would you like another dose of that pain?”

Lia growled into his general direction, watching at her left shoulder. A black mark had been drawn on ... no it

had been drawn into her skin. What would happen if she tried to ...

“Yes, just try to transform into a dragon. I want to see the pain on your face!” The way he smiled made her throw up – almost. She walked behind a tree, putting the robe back on as best as she could.

“What did you do to my father? What happened to Janus?” Her shouting served only to get him angry.

“Be quiet!” He closed the distance between them, wrapping his hand around her neck once more. “You should thank me for stopping you. Otherwise you would have been the one killing them!”

Lia gulped. What did he say? She would have done ... what?

The black one shoved her to the ground, climbing above her. “You have cost me all six soldiers. I had to flee because of you. I will have you pay for that one day, trust me!” He growled at her before standing up and sitting back down at the place he had been before.

Lia shivered. She remembered that she had tried to transform ... did she succeed and lose control at the same time? She knew that she lost consciousness for a while ... Was that when the dragon had taken over? Had he been waiting all this time for just that moment? What should she do? She would be hunted by dragon priests for sure, if word of that came out. If only her mother or her father were with her ... Her hand sought out her necklace only to find it missing. She shot up again. Panicked she looked around searching for it. Had she lost it as she transformed? Or did he steal it?

She stared at him, anger in her eyes. All of this was his fault. Only because of him she had tried to transform into a dragon. It was because of his dark mist that she

lost consciousness and control. “So ... what will you do now?” She stood up once more.

“That is of no concern to you now! Got to sleep, we have a lot of ground to make tomorrow.” He looked at her almost indifferently, as if she was nothing more than a stone lying there in front of him. “And don’t try to flee while I sleep. You won’t come far with that seal ... and I can promise you that I will find you again and then you would wish you had never been born!”

Lia sat back down, her eyes still searching the floor and his neck in hope of finding her necklace. She hugged her own legs to keep herself warm, thinking about how she could escape him. This night would be best.

She sat there, waiting for a long time. He didn’t move at all. Did he fall asleep already? Or did he really not care if she just went and tried to flee now.

But ... was she really able to flee? Or was he right and she would feel that pain once again, if she got too far from him and that made him be at ease? She stood up, taking one step back ... then another. Slowly and quietly. His seal didn’t react.

Suddenly a hand closed down over her mouth, obstructing her breathing. The black stranger leaned into her. He somehow vanished from the spot he was in only seconds ago. She could feel his breath in her neck. “You cannot escape me”, he whispered. Then he pressed himself against a tree, her body close to his, his grasp on her mouth and nose becoming even stronger. “Be quiet, if you want to live”, he whispered even quieter than before.

Child of Snow



Her heart was pounding fast. Her ears primed she took in the absolute silence as she sneaked through the woods. Maybe she had finally succeeded in losing her pursuers.

The girl pressed herself against a tree, trying to get her breathing back under control. Still nothing. All around it was completely quiet. Only some leaves high above her were ruffled by the wind, sounding like distant ocean waves.

Some tension fell off her body. But she wasn't free of sorrow at all. She had to go further south. Only then she might lose her pursuers completely. She sighed. That plan sounded a lot easier than it was. She was a little girl. She would be noticed for sure, travelling this world alone.

She had to find someone she could travel with. She got back on track, thankful for the moon that lit her way even through the trees above. She could use the night to put as much distance behind her as she could before she got tired.

Following her instinct she found her way south. She knew that others navigated by compass or by the stars – but she had forgotten the compass and she could not navigate by the stars at all. The only thing that she did remember was that moss grew on the northern side of trees. It took her some time to find old trees that had moss on their bark. And every time she had to correct her way slightly.

Suddenly she saw something, pressing herself against the next tree once again, she squinted her eyes to make out details. A man stood there looking around carefully. He hadn't lit anything and was standing in as much darkness as she herself. Was that one of her pursuers?

She tried to make out some more details, concentrating on what she saw, she made out another person. That person was in the grasp of the first one. That was not one of her pursuers. It was easy to go around them. Who cared what happened there – she had enough problems herself.

But something compelled her to go nearer, to do something. She closed in on the two males, getting close enough that she could be seen despite the darkness and her dark clothes.

“A Child?” The bigger male looked surprised, but also sceptic. The smaller one was in the grasp of the larger one and not as bulky built as the other one. He was clearly held against his will. He had a few black rose-like veins painted on his face and around his eye. He seemed desperate to escape.

“Go away, girl. This is none of your business!” The bigger one indicated a gruesome fate for her if she didn’t turn and run. It would probably be the best to follow that command. But another thought came to her, changing her feeling to do something into a plan to help ...



Lia stared at the child before her eyes. Why didn’t she run? Why was there no fear in her eyes? She tried to tell her to run, but trying to say something, anything, just made his grip over her mouth stronger.

He raised his free hand once again, a black sphere forming at his palm, so black that it seemed to devour every last ounce of light the night had to give. She didn’t know the effects of that magic, but she guessed it was devastating.

Despite that the girl still stood there, not moving at all. Was she the crazy daughter of a lunatic? But she

seemed calm, confident and ... unimpressed. The sphere shot of his hand, missed the girls head only by inches, just to disappear into the ground behind her, leaving a hole there.

“So?” The girl looked at him challenging.

“Leave now, brat. Or the next one will hit!”

She shrugged and disappeared. She did not leave – she just vanished. His grip suddenly lost strength. He shoved Lia to the side and protected the area in his groin with one hand, making sounds in-between pain and anger. He looked around carefully, sweat building on his face and forehead.

Suddenly his neck seemed more important to protect than his groin. Lia wondered why until, out of thin air, black hair appeared. Thick strands of black hair had curled themselves around his neck, strangling him. The girl appeared only inches away from his face. He struggled to get the hair loose with one hand, wanting to grip her with the other. Lia could see how her hair just pulled stronger. His head got red, slightly blue ... then he lost consciousness. The hair of the girl fell off from him, as if nothing had happened.

The girl turned to Lia and looked up to her, innocence in person. “Are you all right?”

“Who ... what are you?” Lia wasn’t sure if she should be thankful or afraid.

“I am the one that saved you just now. How about a little thankfulness?”

Lia gulped. She surely was no normal child. “Thank you ... but ...”

“But? But what?”

“Why? Why did you help me?” Lia started to relax. The girl seemed not to be dangerous at the moment. Instead she looked to the unconscious male.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, looking first at the male and then at Lia. “I just had the feeling that you needed help.” The girls’ demeanor had changed. She seemed less secure in talking with her than facing the black man.

“Thank you, really”, Lia answered and started searching his body.

“What are you doing there?” The girl came closer, watching every move Lia did. As she finally found what she was looking for she felt the girls’ hand on her shoulder. Before she could take her necklace back the girl hovered in front of her face. “Is that yours?” There was tension, aggressiveness in her voice.

“It was my mothers.” She took the gem, and put it back around her neck. As she stood back up the girls’ eyes were still fixed on that small red stone.

“Do you really want to run around like that?” Suddenly the girl was eye to eye with Lia. Had she had a sudden growth spurt? Lia staggered backwards.

“Why?” She looked closer at the small girls feet, that were hovering in midair.

“You cannot run around like that. Not with the stone on display. Are you not aware of the danger?”

“What are you talking about? What danger?”

“You really have no idea?” The girl hovered back to the ground, her feet setting down softly on the ground.

“What is happening? What danger are you talking about?” Lia got angry at her. She had enough danger for the day, possibly for her whole life. Her shoulder began to ache again. Lia fought against her anger. The seal even reacted to her feelings. It made her helpless from one day to the next! Tears of desperation welled up her eyes. She didn’t even know if her father and Janus were still alive.

“You know ... I ...” The girl stared playing around with her sleeves, suddenly very insecure. “J... just hide it, please. It is for the best ... trust me.”

“Trust you?” Lia shouted. “Why should I trust you? You saved me, granted, but that is no reason to trust you completely!” She had to fight against her anger and her tears. She didn’t want to seem weak at all.”

“Maybe ... this is enough to get you to trust me a little?” The girl fetched an ice blue stone out of her own clothing and came closer. Close enough for Lia to take a better look at it. It was very similar to her own gem, only this one was formed like an ice blue flame. But the most discerning feature that changed her mind was the golden emblem deep within the stone: a dragon embracing an eye.

At that moment she started to suspect that the necklace was more than simple jewelry. But how much would it be worth? And why did her mother own such an exclusive piece of jewelry?

“Hide it and show it to nobody”, said the girl as she hid her own gem beneath her clothing once again. Lia did the same, as good as she could at least.

“How much is it worth?”

“It’s worth more than your life.” The girl turned around, “let’s go, before he wakes up.”

“Wait. There is something that I need him to do.” Lia put her knees on his chest, holding him down for now. She searched the forest for something she could use as ropes. Perhaps she could ... persuade ... him to tell her how to remove that seal.

“We don’t have time for that.” The girl suddenly started to whisper and seemed to hide behind a tree. Then she gestured to Lia to be absolutely quiet.

Lia wondered why the girls behavior suddenly changed like that, but after a few heartbeats of silence

she could hear muffled steps. Someone tried very hard to get as quiet as possible through the forest and as fast as possible. Then she realized that there had to be more than one.

The girl bit on her thumb, then she grabbed Lia by her arm, pulling her from the black man and away from him.

“We have to flee”, she whispered at as low a voice she could muster. “Now!” She ran, dragging Lia forwards. Just as she started to wonder why she followed the girl just like that, running through the woods, an unbearable pain exploded within her shoulder. She cried in agony, falling to her knees.

“What is it? What happened to you?” The girl turned around, looking over her as she clutched her shoulder once again.

“There! Someone is there”, shouted a voice from the woods. “We got her!” A loud crack resounded, then another one. She could feel the girl shiver as she snuggled up to her.

“We need to leave, please”, she pleaded with teary eyes, almost desperate.

Lia couldn’t move. The pain was too much and it was draining her strength. The more she struggled the worse it got. She was utterly helpless.

“Damn! Why ... why now?” The girl was close to tears. “Please, forgive me!” The girl didn’t run but instead her hand started to search through Lia’s robe. It took only a few moments until she produced the gemstone.

“There you are.” Someone foreign came to them. Lia turned around. She had seen those men before, with their strange black clothing. Right in Thethoria.

“Forgive me, forgive me”, the girl whispered, her voice barely audible. She clutched that gem close into her hands and started to mumble. “In Kagis ...” She couldn’t

make out more as she was suddenly engulfed by flames. The feeling of being burned mixed together with the pain in her shoulder, creating a cacophony of agony. She cried once again, her eyes staring forwards.

She could see her gemstone falling from the hands of the girl, still connected to her palm by the short string of leather. It pulsed with an orange glowing light, as fast as Lias heartbeat.

“I will never give up”, answered the girl without looking to the men.

“Shoot her in the legs”, someone cried. The girl vanished from Lia's sight, only the gem staying behind for a moment. Sparks fell down from it, setting the forest floor aflame. Flames that engulfed Lia as well, taking that pain off of her, suddenly a soothing warmth. “I will take care of them” were the last words she heard. Then thunder cracked and her consciousness faded once again.

Black Dragon



Darkness had fallen a while ago. Janus had lost Barnett's trail for quite some time. He still hoped he would be on the same way as Lias's father. That mercenary was like a phantom. He had experienced that when he was still in training and now again.

He recounted his options. He could quit his search and return to Andragat, telling the priests what happened and ... possibly start a rogue dragon priest hunt. The second one was to continue on his path to Cerinsagath, their destination, hoping that they might meet again there – or forgetting all of this has happened. The third one was to keep searching for them.

He knew deep within his heart, that he couldn't give up on Lia that easily. He felt something for her.

Suddenly he was startled by a large group of black men, running past him. He had seen them before, their black clothing made them almost invisible in the shadows of the night. But why were they hurrying that late in the night? They would reach the next city one or two hours after midnight with their speed, and no city would leave their gates open for that long.

As they ran into the woods he still wondered what was happening and he checked if all his belongings were still with him. Nothing was missing at all. It didn't take long, then he heard some loud cracks. He felt a shiver running down his spine. It was better to not get involved. He needed to find Barnett again.

An explosion startled him. He looked to the side, flames were reaching out of the wood, some trees were burning and then he heard the cry of a dragon. His blood ran cold. The head of a black dragon became visible,

reaching over the top of most of the trees. Pale blue flames escaped his maw, setting even more trees aflame.

He started running. There was only one possibility: A fighting dragon priest. But there were no wild dragons around. It could be his dragon priest, it could be her – Lia. It had to be her. He ran towards the flame dodging burning men that ran past him. He jumped through a wall of fire, seeing how the dragon jumped into the air and flew away, gaining altitude fast. The force of the wind the dragons wings created almost threw him to the ground.

He saw up towards the dragon, and saw a small girl riding on his back, flying further south.

Could that be Lia? Granted, it could be any other dragon priest – but those were mostly confined to their monasteries, teaching. Only few were travelling the land. And he couldn't imagine any of them transforming into a dragon to help a little girl against a horde of black men.

He hoped it would be Lia. If it was here it meant two things: The first one was that she escaped and the second one was that she was still in control of herself, only losing because she was attacked by strange magic.

He looked around. Only a few flames were still lit, the wind having blown out most of the fire once again. Then he saw the body of one man. He was unscathed and unconscious, but he was the one that had attacked them. Now he was sure that the dragon had been Lia.

He had found her first. Screw her father. He would follow her trail directly – and the trail of a dragon was much easier to follow than the one of that phantom.



His throat hurt. Every breath he took scratched hurtfully and it seemed unnaturally warm for him. This

damned child. What was that girl? A demon? He struggled to his feet and stumbled forwards. The forest was burning and all around there were distinctly charred corpses, all human.

The girl and his target had vanished of course. Far enough for him to not feel the seal anymore. But how? He rubbed his throat, coughed once again. The smoke made it harder for him to breathe. Slowly he left that burned out clearing, struggling to stay upright.

He growled over himself, that girl and the target he had been assigned. He had failed his mission. The first time ever in his whole life he had failed, utterly failed. He even boasted in front of Phobos that he didn't need a backup plan to just kidnap one little girl. That he was fully capable of getting her without so much as a hint of trouble. But then came the trouble and even though he had put the prisoner seal on her she vanished. Now he needed that backup plan.

As he finally left the flames behind he was able to take a deep breath. It burned in his throat and lungs, but it also gave him more strength. He heard bells ringing frantically in the nearby town. It would take them several hours of their night to try to put that fire out. Idiots. Why did they even care about that forest?

He kept moving away from it all, until he could neither see nor hear anything of the trouble that was a testament to his failure. Deep within the woods he sat down on a root, producing a black Sphere, somewhat smaller than his fist, out of his coat. He stared at the seemingly perfect surface of it and started to feed his magic into it.

The sphere began to glow in a pale red and his surroundings started to blur. It took only a moment for him to sit at the visitors' end of a desk. He knew that that

was only an illusion created by the communication sphere, but it still felt real.

“Penal?” The man on the opposite side of the desk put the feather back down. He seemed surprised to see him. He had short dark hair and watched over Penal with yellow, almost golden eyes. “What has happened?”

“I lost her”, he admitted through clenched teeth. He felt disgraced. He hated to feel that way.

“I see”, the other one answered. He seemed more disappointed than angered, like an understanding and good father. He hated that even more. “Then find Barnett again. You know enough about him to find him again.” He also hated his quick wits and seemingly all-knowing attitude. Because of them he was forced to serve him. “Bring him to me”, his friendly smile making him uneasy. It was that smile ... he was still afraid of it. “I know you won’t disappoint me a second time.” Penal felt threatened by those words. Still he nodded, accepting the new task.

“There is one more thing, Penal”, Phobos said as he started to put the sphere back into his coat. “Let me see how she looks like.” He put his hand on the communication sphere on his desk and saw the picture within his mind directly. Another smile appeared on his face as Penal put the Sphere back in his pocket and the scene vanished, leaving him back in the forest again.



As the sun climbed past the horizon, Lia was woken by the first rays of light. She yawned and opened her eyes. Far above her the leaves of the trees soaked in most of the light. She lay on something soft and a blanket out of some very soft fabric kept her body warm. She had never before awoken that peacefully, never felt that well.

Some birds sang a beautiful song and a small fire was crackling next to her. The smell of freshly made breakfast wafted over to her. She got up and saw the small girl sitting next to the fire, eating from a wooden bowl.

“Good Morning”, she said, smiling.

“What happened?” Lia shoved the unusual fabric to the side, scooting over to the fire and sitting down next to her.

“We fled.” She simply gave her another bowl and a spoon.

Lias Memory from the evening before were a blur of pain. But there was something more. “W... what are those stones?” She asked as some of her memory came back. “You know what they are and how they work!” She searched for her own gem. It was missing.

“I cannot tell you details”, the girl answered. “They are dangerous. I can’t tell you more at the moment.”

Lia wanted to say something more, but the tears in the girls eyes stopped her. She offered Lia the red stone once again, so she took it and fastened around her neck once more.

“I need to know more”, Lia finally said, “this artefact may be the only thing I have to defend myself. I need to know how it works.”

“It wouldn’t ...” The girl grabbed something below her own clothing. “No”, she shook her head, tears still running.

“Please”, Lia begged. “You saw that I couldn’t even run away.”

“Then ...” The girl seemed to shiver. “Let me protect you.” She took a few deep breaths. “I really can’t do anything else ...”

The girl wanted to protect her? She wanted to do that instead of telling her more? “Why? Who are you?”

“I ... am called Yukiko Artai.” She slowly looked into Lias eyes once again, her own eyes red from tears. “What is your name?”

“Lia Luxana Dias.” She sighed. She somehow knew that at the moment she couldn’t count on more information. Finally she took something from the soup that was cooking upon the fire.

“What do you want to do next?” The girl looked back down on her bowl while Lia started to eat.

“I need to find my father and ... a colleague of mine.” She had to know if they were still alive and well. The black man had said that they were still alive ... but she couldn’t know for sure. And she didn’t know what their plans were. Her father would probably try and find her, but Jan? There was a slight possibility that he had gone back to Andragat, to start a rogue priest hunt.

“Did you have a destination, a home?”

“We wanted to go south, to Cerinsagath.” That was one possibility, the other one was that they went back to Andragat or Thethoria, to regroup.

“Then let us go. We need to get as much distance between us and our pursuers as possible.” The girl got up, packing the cooking-pot and bowls and the blankets.

Lia continued eating her soup. She still thought about all possibilities ... Her father probably thought her still in the hands of that black man, so he would probably continue searching. Jan would possibly go back and ask for help, finding her ... and she hoped he wouldn’t organize a hunt. The black man ... would probably try to find them again ... maybe he even monitored Andragat and Thethoria, in case she decided to go back. For now she had to move forwards and could message them from Cerinsagath. Yes, going there seemed to be the best option, for now.

Yukiko waited until Lia finished her meal, then she took the bowl and put all of that into a chest ... That chest hasn't been there only moments ago! As Yukiko closed the lid the chest vanished into thin air. Was that chest another powerful artifact? Or was that a special skill Yukiko had developed? Who was that girl?

Lia took a deep breath, calming herself. In the Moment that girl was at least someone that could protect her and was willing to do so. For now she needed to trust her and maybe, just maybe, she had more hidden talents that could be useful ...

To Gajoan



Penal had found a Tavern on a small village next to the lands Border. He had a mug of Beer in his hand and waited. He waited on the meeting that had to happen. Barnett would search for his daughter, he was sure of it. So he would pass this point.

“Are ye only admirin’ that beer? Or are ya ‘fraid of drinkin’ it?” The bartender leaned over to him, smiling. “Trust the old Craig, tha’ beer tastes better if drunk!”

Penal looked up, squinting his eyes. He had already waited for an hour on Barnett and all that time he hadn’t had a single drop. This beer was only a decoy. He had to be at his best for that fight with Barnett. One mistake and he lost.

His stare seemed to get some sort of message across. The Bartender shrugged and went to tend to other customers. “Suit ya’self.”

Someone opened the door. The thirty-second guest that hour. Penal looked over his shoulder despite having done that thirty-one times without success. There he was. His head was bruised, but other than that he seemed fine. Penal got up and turned around in a fluid motion.

“Excuse me ...” Barnett saw into Penals eyes. Both drew their swords at once, spurted forward. Blades clashed into one another, a few sparks sprang away. The Bartender ducked behind his bar, other guests fled from the tavern.

“You fiend!” Barnett attacked blindly. Penal had no trouble blocking his swings, redirecting them into a table or a chair. He was consumed by anger. As another swing of his opponent struck into a table, Penal tried to hit him with his bare fist.

Barnett ducked to the side, wedging his sword out of the table in one go and swung again. Penal ducked under that one and tried an uppercut, he spun around and hit his hand with his fist, disarming him easily. He took a step back as Barnett rubbed his chin.

“Where is Lia?” Barnett began to grab something from his belt.

Penal didn’t answer, he swung his sword, bringing its broad side down on the head of his opponent. Barnett fell to the knees and then sideward, unconscious. He kicked Barnett once more to make sure, before unsheathing his sword.

This had been much easier as he anticipated. Had he aged or had the anger blinded him that much that he reverted to a beginner’s level? Barnett had been his equal in the past, the only man Penal respected ... and wanted to beat. Now he was a worthless nobody to him and he had to carry him back to Gajoan. He kicked the unconscious form once again. Then he returned to the bar, drank his beer and cried “Satisfied?” towards the Bar-keeper. Only then he went back to Barnett, took him by the legs and started to drag him out of there. At least it wasn’t that far to the border.



In the late afternoon they approached the next city. A tall stonewall hid all the houses of the citizens. It was a nice and calming view and the promise of a warm bed edged Lia onwards. The small girl instead stopped dead in her tracks.

“There is something we need to talk about.” Yukiko saw into Lias eyes. “Our pursuers will search for us: A small child travelling with a young man having a black drawing on his face.”

Lia squinted at Yukiko. There was a feeling there was something more to her words than she led on. "What is it?"

"We need to hide our true identities, wear different clothes and ... we need to hide that drawing on your face. I suggest that we play mother and child. No one would see through that."

Lia stared at the girl, following her line of thought slowly and carefully. "Wouldn't that be suspicious? I am too young to have a daughter as big as you." There was one part of her that truly wanted to go with that plan, that even anticipated it.

"That is part of our disguise. Trust me, a bit color here and there can go a long way to make you seem older than you are. But first you need new clothes ... I already got some that should be your size."

"You already got some? How long have you had this plan?"

"It formed during the night. And you were fast asleep", she turned around and summoned her chest. Lia got a look inside it. It was not only full of dishes and those blankets, there were some strange, green eggs, a dark green box with straps on it, clothes, even some ryu.

The girl found a dress, holding it in front of Lia from afar. It was a plain womens dress, a mix of several light brown colors, and in good condition overall. Still it seemed slightly used.

Lia shrugged and took the dress, glancing about. She searched for a place where she could hide while changing. Feeling insecure she found a small bush and hid behind that.

Changing clothes was an act in and of itself. Although it was a plain dress it took her several minutes to figure

out how to properly wear it. As she finally thought she was done, she stepped back into Yukikos sight.

“That looks good on you, now to the finishing touches. Would you kneel down for a moment?” Lia did so, after figuring out how. These dresses were a hassle. You had to mind everything and anything – how could someone properly pray or fight in these?

Yukiko came closer, her right arm touching Lias face carefully. She felt a tingling on her skin. “Don’t move”, she whispered while tracing over her seal, going slowly deeper, down towards her breasts. She could see that where she touched the seal it vanished, leaving her pale skin behind.

“How did you ...?”

“A basic illusion spell.” Yukiko stepped back once again. “That should be enough”, she nodded, content with herself.

Lia started to ask herself how she looked like within that dress and how Janus would react on seeing her like this. The thought alone made her blush slightly.

“Let’s go then”, Yukiko offered her hand and Lia took it, following the path towards the city with a mix of several feelings. She felt exited and afraid. Uneasy and content. They stepped out on the forest and followed the path towards the city. Lia glanced at the girl and down herself and back to the city that was plain in her view now. They closed the rest of the distance without saying anything to each other.



Janus had lost track of them once again. He had followed the dragon for a long time, the direction in which it was flying, but in the end it had been too fast for him.

It had been foolish of him to think that he could follow a flying dragon on foot alone. In the middle of the night.

She had left his field of vision too fast. At least he had found some kind of path once again. The night had been the worst of his life – he still felt cold, that blanket of old leaves did little to keep him warm. To top it all of he was itching almost everywhere.

He needed three things badly. One was a bath, the second one was new or washed clothes and the third ... he needed a new plan. He had hoped to see the dragon once again, but he had not. There was not even a guarantee that he would see it again.

He tried to think like Lia. Where would she go? She had taken on that little protégé, and went south for now. Her pursuers were coming from the north ... would she try to reach Cerinsagath and seek help from the monks there?

Suddenly he heard a noise, like a constant humming. It got louder by the second. As he turned around he noticed a green ... box ... coming closer. It was mounted on strange wheels that turned by themselves, propelling that thing.

He jumped to the side, watching that thing pass, wondering what strange magic was at work there, as not only one but three such things passed him. Within were men, mostly dressed in black. Two seemed to be at the front, another six or eight in the back portion ... and then he saw one of those dressed in black. It had been one of the men that had run past him the night prior, right before the dragon appeared.

He figured that he was one of the pursuers ... so if he pursued those pursuers ... then they might lead him to his target as well. It was a plan, better than none. And those three boxes left were unique and easy to follow tracks.

With renewed vigor he followed those things, hoping that this path would lead him to a town on the way where he could check off the other two things on his list.



As the sun was sinking below the horizon, painting the sky a deep red, the two girls passed the city guards and entered the city. Nobody seemed to notice them, no one approached them. Yukikos Plan was working and the unusual pair was accepted as normal.

The girl breathed a sigh of relief. They could sleep in a normal bed and they lost their pursuers. It felt good to be one step ahead of them. Even Lia seemed to relax. Yukiko was glad that Lia accepted the proposal, but before passing the city gates she got more and more tense and stressed, as if she feared to be exposed somehow.

Yukiko did not want to think about this anymore. The day had been too good to be thinking about minor things.

Her temporary mother seemed to drag her towards an inn, probably the first inn she saw. Suddenly Yukiko thought about a bath. She started to float, following Lia to the building, but got back down on the ground before anyone noticed her.

The inside of the inn was more like a bar. The noise was ringing in her ears and the smell of stale Beer stung in her nose. Of course she could not see much from her position. She could only hope that their rooms would be quieter than this. Sleeping in the woods would be, compared to this noise, more refreshing.

They found their way to the Barkeeper and the men kept their hands at their beers.

“Good evening.” The woman behind the bar smiled at them. “You are travelers I suppose? Where do you come from?”

“We are from A... Thethoria.”

“Another bunch from the north? I overheard some travelers saying that they saw a wild black dragon. To hear of one after all this years ... has it been very bad?” Yukiko started to smile nervously. Hopefully she wouldn't notice.

“I ... what?”

“I hope the dragon priests are already on to it. They have not been doing this for years ... I hope they still have it in them.”

Yukiko could see the questioning gaze in Lias eyes. She bit into her lower lip and looked up to the barkeeper.

“Enough chitchat. What can I do for you? I suppose you want a room and perhaps a bath?”

“Yes”, Yukiko shouted out before Lia could say anything else. The barkeeper looked at her with a silent smile, waiting for Lias answer. Again she was discriminated just because she looked so young.

“Uh... yes please.” Lia finally answered.

“Two hundred ryu for you and your daughter.”

Lia started to search through her belongings. She looked into a bag and stopped. Her hands moved slightly and her head got redder. She must have had another bag and that was missing, the one with her gold. Probably stolen by the one that had held her hostage.

“I will pay”, she shouted again and produced two silver coins from her clothing, putting them down on the bar. The barkeeper smiled again and took the coins.

“You should be aware of thieves, young lady. There are some rumors that a thief had been roaming in the north as well, stealing wealth, clothes, even bowls and

other things and no one noticed. Young girls are easy prey.”

Yukiko smiled broadly. “I know how to look after myself.” If someone would try to steal from her ... they would lose all they had instead.

“Very good.” The barkeepers smile was like a window to her thoughts. She did not take Yukiko for a danger at all. She probably even thought that she was not even capable of what she just said. Maybe she should show her ...

The woman gave the big iron key to Lia. “Your room is on the upper floor on the left. I will tell you as soon as the bath is ready.”



Lia sat down on her bed while Yukiko brushed through her long hair. She felt good. No one seemed to notice her different colored eyes and no one even suspected her of being a dragon priest. The minor setback of having lost her purse was put easily to the side. There were not many ryus in there after all.

Having no money at all could be a problem in the long run, but the girl was luckily able to pay their room. For the first time she felt really free and it was worth it. The only problem they had for now was the lack of money. She did get some from the monastery, but her supply was already lost and Yukikos would not last forever.

“Where did you get those coins?” She was curious.

Yukiko stopped brushing her hair for a moment, looking directly into Lias eyes. “I ...worked for them.”

“What work did you do? Perhaps I can do the same.”

Yukiko shook her head, lowering her brush. “No. I do not think that it a work that would suit you. You need some ... special skills for it.”

“Why do you think that I do not have those skills?” Lia frowned. The girl was probably right.

“It is not a job you just pick up.”

The girl kept another secret from her. “So, this is another point where I should trust you?”

“Y...” Yukiko stopped herself. She got up and sat down directly next to Lia. “Perhaps you are right.” She sighed and lowered her volume, speaking so softly that Lia could hardly make out what she was saying. “I’m a thief.”

Blinking she stared at the girl for a while, the words just sinking in. She was a thief? She took the things that they worked for without giving them something in return? “They are following you because of that, don’t they?” Her voice lost all emotion.

“Yes and no.” Yukiko snapped back. There was something strange, something that did not fit her voice or appearance at all. “Do not judge me that fast. Not everything is just black and white. For one I did only take what I needed to survive and that only from those that already have more than enough. It was the same case with these.” She held some ryus in her open palm.

“You are constantly running away. Find something else, make peace with them. This is sort of surviving cannot make you happy.”

“I don’t have a choice in the matter. It is the only way I have.”

“Why?”

The girl sighed again. “I am not yet ready to tell you. Please respect that wish.” She got up and sat down on her bed, vanishing beneath the blankets. “After all I am respecting your secrets as well.”

Lia felt as if she had been slapped by the small girl. Didn’t she know already all about her? Or was the true meaning behind the seal of her skin lost to her?

She looked down on her body. The dragon seal. It had been an accident. A terrible accident that happened four years ago ...



They were standing across each other, the little girl staring into Janus' eyes. Lia had assumed her fighting stance.

"Begin", her mentor said. He was standing somewhere within the shadows, watching his students from the shadows.

Lia was breathing calm and steady, waiting for her opponent to strike. Janus took the initiative, she blocked his attack, then his feet coming from the side, hitting back. He ducked, changed hands to hit. She sprung back, ducked beneath another attack, collecting her strength within her. An aura of fire enclosed her, protecting her and strengthening her attacks.

Janus fell back, evading her strikes. There were only few steps left and she would corner him. Suddenly he started blocking her fists and feet. Steam was raising every time they connected and then he hit her in her stomach. She stumbled backwards. Her fire died.

Janus tried to hit her again and again, making her retreat. She retreated further, increasing the distance between her and him. Suddenly the sun stung in her eyes. She had to do something quick or she would lose. Protecting her eyes with a hand she looked back at Janus. A cloud came to her help, blocking the sun out, giving her a chance to react.

"Dragon!" Someone shouted behind her. She looked up. It was not a cloud that came to her help but a dragon that had blocked out the sun. One of many. Possibly hundred or more.

“Aerith protect us”, one monk chanted.

“All dragolytes retreat into the monastery”, another monk ordered.

“What are you waiting for?” Janus passed by her. She kept staring at the majestic beasts for a moment longer, before turning and following him.

The Dragons were faster than her. One breathed fire, blocking her way. The shadow of the dragon vanished as fast as it appeared. It had to be a miracle that the fire didn't hit any of the monks.

Her legs trembled, shock paralyzing her as she stared on the red glowing stones before her, feeling their heat.

One monk jumped over the stones, took her hand. “Come on, Litius! Move!”

The dragon guards voice shook her awake and she followed him. He had passed his test shortly and was still young, one of the few that was suited for being a vessel to seal a dragon within. She could imagine her mentors preparing the ritual.

Running she looked around, seeing the other dragon priests change into white and black dragons, joining the ones above, defending the monastery from the onslaught of attackers. The sky seemed to be hell itself.

The dragon guard pulled her aside as another flame went down on the inner courtyard. “Damn it”, he looked around, searching for a new way to escape.

A black dragon landed before them, the wings extended he let out a roar. Lia could feel it within her whole body. Then the eyes of the dragon looked at her. “Where is it?” It was a deep, cold voice that resounded directly within her head.

“What?” The guard replied. Did he hear the same as she did?

“The Dragons Tear! Give ...” A white dragon rammed into the one before her. Another dragon fell from the sky, decelerated with a few strong flaps of his wings and transformed before he landed on the ground before her. The abbot looked at Lia for a moment and then to the guard behind her. “Are you ready?”

The guard answered with a nod.

“We assume that that is their leader. If we succeed in sealing him away, we might drive the army away.” The abbot turned around towards the dragon. “Litius, step aside”, he ordered and took a deep breath.

The guard pointed to a spot next to the wall. She followed suit and brought several meters between her and them.

The abbot positioned himself with a secure stand, spreading his arms. He started to concentrate a deep hum barely audible to her. The tips of his fingers began to glow in a deep red. Painting with his fingers he began to weave a net out of dark red magic within the air, starting with big holes and getting finer and finer every time he repeated the motions, the net itself growing and growing.

The black dragon on the ground roared, sinking his fangs into the throat of his attacker, breathing flames into the wound. The white dragon roared of pain and let go, he was thrown aside and the black dragon took to the air once again.

The abbot threw his net. Within seconds the net caught up to the dragon and wrapped itself around him, starting to grow as the magic touched his scales, as if a plants roots began to take root on his body.

Another black dragon flew down from the skies, his flames scorching the stones before her as well as the dragon guard. He screamed and ran ... just in the mo-

ment as the abbot turned and shot a red beam of energy at the place where the guard had been only moments ago. He missed and the magic searched another target on its own, arcing around slightly and hitting Lia in the chest.

Pain drilled into her heart as she was thrown against the wall behind her. Her body tingled all over as she felt her strength being drained from her body. As the magic subsided she fell to the floor. Her right eye began to sting, black mist took the color from her vision, letting it fade slowly. She could not move, not breathe. It was as if something heavy was lying on her and then the pain began to spread.

Then she couldn't feel her feet, her legs ... her arms. Her body got numb slowly. She couldn't see, hear or feel. She was trapped within nothingness.

Would she die now? Maybe the dragon had already overtaken her body and she was a prisoner within his mind. Trapped forever within this void. Alone for an eternity ... At least the pain was gone ...

A light came from the darkness, circling around her like an annoying fly, sitting down on her nose. It looked like a tiny white dragon. It roared, spreading its wings and breathing a tiny flame. He stared into her eyes.

"Fight!" The dragon shouted, before he exploded into thousands of stars. The light from them gave her new energy, chasing the darkness away. Suddenly she could breathe again, felt her arms and legs. She opened her eyes and saw the blue sky above her. The dragons above her were still fighting.

"I won't let you hurt her!" Her father stood above her, pointing his sword towards the abbot.

"Do you want to trap her for all eternity and condemn us to death? This is the only option we have." The abbot

had a knife within his hands that he pointed towards her. “Stand aside, Barnett. We took you in under the condition that you abide by all rules ...” He fell silent.

Lia stood up carefully, leaned against the wall, searching for a way out. She noticed the hole within her robe, almost the size of a fist, a black pattern beneath it, painted onto her skin. Somehow she felt like before.

“Well, she survived”, another monk came to them, smiling.

“Nergal, what do you want?” The abbot fixed him with a hard gaze.

“Are you all right?” Her father dropped his sword and kneeled before her. “How do you feel? Can you see me?”

Lia nodded.

“Let her live”, Nergal answered the abbots question smiling. “She survived the sealing. Maybe she will now live longer than we would all together?”

The abbot looked at her, putting the knife away. “We will have to talk later, Litus.” His voice told her of barely controlled anger. “His secret will stay between us, is that clear?” He looked at her father and Nergal. Then he turned, transforming into a dragon and joining the still raging battle within the sky.

A roar made Lia jump awake. It got constantly louder with time. Did the dragon follow her all the way? No ... that couldn't be a dragon. Even dragons had to breathe between roars. That noise was too constant.

"We need to leave." Yukiko whispered while staring out of the window. "How did they find us?"

Lia got up and looked out of the window as well. The roaring stopped and several men left a strange box that had appeared on the middle of the town square. Some ran into the inn they were staying at.

"Follow me!" Yukiko took Lia's hand and pulled her away from the window.

"But what ..."

"We don't have time!" Yukiko sounded like a panicked little girl.

"Yukiko Artai!" A voice resounded all through the room, powerful enough to be from a dragon. "We know that you are here. Surrender now and you won't be harmed!"

The thief glared to the window. "Forget it", she whispered once again and pulled Lia towards the left wall. She put a hand to the rough wood and a strange light blue glow flowed in waves through the wood. A moment later the phenomenon had disappeared already.

"Why don't you just give back what you stole?" Lia pointed towards the window.

"I told you already that these things aren't as simple." Yukiko pulled her through the wall into the next room. She did not even look at the guests there but ran to the next wall and cast the same spell again. Lia had barely enough time to put on an apologetic smile, then she was pulled through the next wall.

“We have surrounded that building! You cannot flee!”

“W... where are you going?” Lia looked back at the wall they just passed through.

“I have seen stairs at the end of the corridor that leads further up. From there we can get onto the roofs and flee to another building!” Yukiko took a turn and pulled her through another wall, running towards the steps before them.

The locked door at the end of those stairs was no hindrance for her magic, they just passed through it and found themselves directly beneath the roof. The air was thick, full of mold and dust and the darkness made it hard for her to see. Yukiko had stopped next to her. “How were they able to find us?” She started pacing. “It couldn’t have been a fluke. It was almost pinpoint accurate.”

“Should we really stay here for so long?” Lia somehow became nervous. She could hear steps from the floor below, doors being opened forcefully, someone shouted, someone cried.

“We will find you. Time is running short for you!” The man in front of the inn was still shouting with his magically enhanced voice. Some murmuring came up outside, the citizens were awakening from the ruckus.

“I know!” Yukiko were grinding her teeth almost audible. “But I need to know how they could find us! If I don’t they will find us time and time again!”

“Perhaps they are tracking the thing you stole?” She had read about scrying and tracking magic some time ago. She even knew that one of the monks, Nergal, used those spells very often because he misplaced his books. “Perhaps you should give it ...”

“YES! THAT’S IT! You’re a genius!” The girl did something else, cast a spell. She could feel the magic, but could not place it to anything she knew.

“Don’t hide from us. We will find you!”

“Follow me.” Yukiko took Lias hand and pulled her to the other side of the roof, to the wall there. A short spell later she peeked through the wall to the outside.

Someone knocked at the door. Then there was a loud bang. Lia could hear the lock falling to the ground.

“Jump!” Yukiko pulled Lia through the wall and a moment later the floor was missing below her feet. She fell. It took only moments for her to hit the ground. Somehow her reflexes kicked in to take the blunt of the fall only to her hands and legs.

As she tried to get up a ball of fire hit a man standing only a few feet away from her. The explosion was ringing in her ears, the heat stung within her wounds. “I told you to jump!” Yukiko landed next to her and helped her up.

“Surrender!” Another bang, some dirt flew through the sky. The shouts of the citizens got quitter all of a sudden.

Another explosion answered that one, Yukiko pulled her towards her legs and pulled her forwards through the wall of the next house.

Lia felt the stinging pain within her shoulder again. She had reached the limit. The seal would not allow her to move any further. Yukiko pressed herself to the wall they just came through. She couldn’t exactly make out what the thief was saying, but she seemed content. “They lost our trail. For nw. Can you stand?”

Lia tried to get up but the seal only hurt her worse and her vision blacked out. She lost her balance and fell to the ground.

“Wait for me. I will take measures that will take them off our trail for good.” Yukiko vanished around the next corner, leaving Lia alone with her pain.

Why didn’t she surrender? Why did she not just give that damned thing she took back? If she found out what

it was, maybe she could give it back herself. Maybe she would even thank her for taking that burden off of her ...



Yukiko bit onto her lower lip, sneaking through the seemingly abandoned house. That seal on Lias arm was a serious problem. It was easy for them to escape using her dragons tear, but she didn't want to use it that much, especially because a dragon was not really that inconspicuous, it was feared and if asked anyone would remember seeing one.

That fear was understandable after seeing Lia wreak havoc once. But now she knew that she had to protect her. They had to lose their pursuers once and for all. For that she had to destroy their vehicle. Getting another one here, through that narrow portal, would take a lot of time.

She opened another magical gateway and put only her forehead through, so she could see the other side. The soldiers had scattered, searching for her, making the townspeople angry. A few armed themselves with farming tools and swords, approaching the soldiers.

Yukiko pulled back. She didn't have much time before the situation started to escalate. She had to act in the right moment and then flee with Lia. If she acted too soon she would be discovered, if she waited too long the town would be easily conquered by the soldiers.

She summoned up her chest, taking one of the grenades she acquired before she fled. She counted a few more heartbeats, then she ran through the wall, pulling the safety-pin from the grenade and threw it.

There was a shot. The grenade hit the floor, rolled. It got even louder around her. A few more shots were fired.

Some of the townspeople screamed. Some men fell on the ground. The grenade rolled beneath the transport and came to a stop there.

Yukiko turned, ran.

The explosion lifted the vehicle partly from the ground; orange flames heated everything, raised into the sky and became black smoke. Yukiko jumped back through the wall and canceled the spell that made it passable.

She went straight back to Lia. The girl seemed exhausted but recovering. That damned seal. She needed a transport, to get far away from the soldiers.

“Can you stand?” Yukiko reached out with a hand and helped Lia up.

“What happened? There was a loud ... bang.”

“I just handicapped our pursuers.”

“You did what?”

“They won’t be able to follow us that easily anymore.”

“What is the point if we cannot escape?”

“I know just what to do. Just hold my hand.” At least she hoped that her magic would be strong enough to get them far enough. As Lia took her hand once more she cast a spell on the girl, making her hover.

“W... what is happening?”

“Just hold on tight.” Yukiko pulled her to the opposite wall she last came in through and opened another portal. “Ready?”

“For what?”

Yukiko started running as fast as she could. Lia tightened her grip on her hand as she ran as fast as possible through the dark back streets of the town. She only stopped momentarily to make sure she wasn’t followed and that she didn’t run into a soldier. She couldn’t maintain invisibility with Lia in tow.

As she reached a small wood she allowed her magic to fade and to take deep breaths. She relaxed for a moment as the first step of yet another escape had succeeded.



“Sir, sir!” A crazed, almost lunatic soldier disturbed his sleep. Annoyed he got up, looking at the man with squinted eyes.

“What happened?” He asked with a deep voice, making it clear that he had rather important news.

“Our men lost Yukiko Artai.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He squinted his eyes even further, studying the soldier’s mimic carefully.

He gulped, feeling very uncomfortable. “We lost the signal ... and the transport.”

“What do you mean by ‘we lost the signal’ and how can you lose a damnable transport?” Bradley stood up to his full size and looked down upon the soldier – even if it was only a few inches.

“The signal just ... vanished.” The soldier took a few steps back. “And the transporter ... well sergeant Leo thinks that Miss Artai got ahold of those missing grenades.”

Bradley shoved the soldier aside, making him fall. He left his tent grumbling. That little thief was even more cunning than he thought. He didn’t even think that she got ahold of those grenades a year ago to plan her escape just a few days prior. He thought he had in his grasp like a docile little dog. He wouldn’t make that mistake twice.

He went to the next tent, and entered it. “Rubenheim!”

A thin man, clad in a white overall looked up from his desk. His eyes were dyed red and his skin was pale. He never left the shadows and would probably burn like a

vampire if he did. It was still strange how he got from the portal to his tent without stepping outside.

“She realized that we can track the tear and is blocking the signal with her magic.” He smiled.

“Her magic? How can she have magic?”

“I suppose it was that incident ...”

“Nevermind. I want ...”

“... to know if we can devise a way to track her again? Well, maybe. But it won't be easy.” Rubenheim got up, a smile engraved on his face, always that one eerie smile. “There is many active magic in this world, making miss Artai into a needle within a haystack. Her magic is not that specific as the energy of the flame sapphire. But I won't stop you searching all possible targets.” He turned away and pointed at several sheets of paper on his desk.

Bradley couldn't make heads or tails of his drawings and writings, but he didn't need to. For now he had Rubenheim in his palm. He wasn't a docile little dog but a lion on a leash, and the leash was in his hands.

“Very well, I expect results. I need her!”

“As you wish ... Al.”

Bradley hated the way he talked. He had him on a leash and he was still trying to bite his wrist. He was the only one that wouldn't become a little dog or kitten under his treatment. He always seemed like he was playing with Bradley. Maybe he should tuck at the leash once. “Think of your family!”

“Oh, I am thinking of them ...” He sounded less amused all of a sudden. “I am thinking of them ... always.” Tucking at the leash had helped. Bradley left the tent with a smile on his lips. He needed to be careful, to contain his temper. He hadn't become Al just to lose it all because of it. It had taken him years. But those years were worth it. He would seize it all and never let go of it. At all costs.



Lia stared on that poster on the wall before her. It had been hung there neatly next to others, just outside on a wall next to the inn they were staying at: Wanted, Alive, dragon priest Lia Luxana Dias. Reward: 2 ruby ryu. Just atop of that was a picture of her, complete with her dragon seal.

She got dizzy. Someone had put a bounty on her head and she hadn't be found yet all because of Yukiko. But why? What did she do wrong? Was it the dragon order?

"Is this one related to you?" Yukiko pulled at her skirt, pointing to another poster. It was her father: Barnett Dias, Mercenary, alive. Reward: five crystal ryu. Only on that picture her father looked a lot younger. "How much is a crystal ryu? And a ruby ryu?"

Lia looked away from those posters. She had crossed the border, only to substitute some pursuers by others. "Ten crystal ryu make a ruby ryu", she answered, feeling her legs getting weak. "A crystal ryu is ... one hundred thousand ryu. A ruby ryu ... is a million."

Yukiko looked at her with her eyes wide open.

"Are you two interested in this reward?" A soldier stepped up to the board and took down her father's poster. He smiled at them slightly. "You don't seem like bounty hunters to me. Also ... she may look harmless, but a dragon priest can turn into a fierce dragon." He looked at the board again, sighed and turned to leave.

"Excuse me ... but why did you remove that other poster?" Lia looked up again, steeling her heart for the answer that might come.

"Someone caught Barnett Dias. That lucky bastard." He crumbled the poster within his hands. "Such a high reward for such an easy prey ..."

“Do you know why ... that dragon priest is wanted?” She had to know.

“What do you think? As far as I am concerned she seems to have misused her powers. Some even speculate that she shouldn’t exist and the wild dragon has overtaken her, making her a danger to all. But then again ... I don’t understand the ‘alive’ part of the poster as well. Same for him ... usually its dead or alive on criminals.” He left, waving to them.

Lia stared at the soldier. She could have answered the why part on her behalf: The dragon might break free shortly before death grabs her, making it important that a dragon priests death is a quick one.

Yukiko began to smile. “If only he knew that an even higher reward was within his reach.”

Lia didn’t smile at all. Her father had been caught. “I need to free him”, she whispered.

“Then we have a new target.” Yukiko didn’t object at all. “We will find the prison your father is in and free him.”

Lia got skeptical. “Why are you so eager to go?” Part of her feared that the little thief would sell her. It was a lot of money involved. The little girl could probably live the rest of her life in peace with that amount.

“Because you want to free him. I told you that I would protect you and I have the feeling we can’t go anywhere else until this is resolved.”

Yukiko was right. She needed to talk to her father, she wanted to see him alive and well. As much as she wanted to see Janus again.

“And since I am a master thief, it should be easy for us to just steal him from under their noses.” Yukiko reached out with her hand. Lia took it timidly, smiling. A part of her trusted the little girl with her life, after all she

could have sold her out to the soldier there and then, but she would still listen to her skeptical part as well: Yukiko was not dumb and it could be part of an elaborate plan. “Now we just need to find out where exactly that prison is.”



Janus had followed the tracks of that strange magic into a small town, where it ended abruptly. What he saw left him speechless. Men, women, elders and children were lying on the square ... dead. In the middle of it all were the burned out ruins that had been propelled by that strange magic. He took a moment to take it all in, trying to piece together what had happened here.

He gulped. It could have been that some of the magic backfired and caused this accident to happen. It could also have been that the dragon burned this thing and left, killing all those strange mages and the townspeople ...

No ... that couldn't be entirely right. It seems more as if those mages and the townspeople got into a fight. He moved slowly over the field of tragedy, hoping to find some signs of life. Maybe the burned out magic was the work of a dragon ... of Lia, trying to escape them once more. Maybe she lost control and the dragon took over ... being the leader of the black dragons he could have made the mages and the townspeople fight ... No, that wouldn't be his style. Still, what could have caused that much destruction?

He went to one of the houses close to the square and knocked. No one answered. He opened the door and looked inside only to find more dead bodies. It seemed as if the whole town had been eradicated. There were only

few dead bodies of those strange mages. Thinking back ... at least half of them were missing.

There was a chance that they had caught Lia already. But there was also a chance that all of this had happened because she escaped and these strangers demanded her to be given to them. In addition to the fact that he has not seen any of them return ... he left the house and turned south once again. His target was still Cerinsagath. Maybe he could find new information in the first town on the other side of the border. If she came by, someone has to have seen a dragon priest travelling with a little girl. He wouldn't give up that easily.



Lia shivered. She had seen a few villages and towns, but none of them could compare to the city of Fajoris. They had entered the trade-district and it alone was the size of a small village. There were men and women everywhere. They searched things, traded, argued. Even Yukiko seemed to be taken in by all this bustling, looking around while biting into an apple.

An apple? Where had she gotten that apple from? She didn't even have time to buy one.

"What are you doing there?" She whispered towards her companion.

"I am trying to find the best place to get some informations." She stepped aside to let a few people pass and proceeded to hide a small coin purse within her clothes.

"That was not what I meant." Lia pointed towards the apple that was already missing a large piece.

"Oh, sorry. Old habit." She had the decency to blush. "I should have gotten you one as well."

Lia rolled her eyes. "That was not what I meant either!"

The girl put a finger to her lips. "Not so loud." She whispered and looked around. Some people were already looking at them, but they soon lost their curiosity. "I got a bit carried away. I will stop doing this, promise."

Finally Lia nodded.

"But ... tell me, where is the problem if I take things from thieves?" She nodded towards the group that they just passed. They seemed to look around as well, searching for something. "They stole that coin purse."

"What about that apple?"

"That price ... much too expensive. He was stealing from each of his customers."

Lia sighed. She felt like losing that argument. But maybe they should give the coin purse back to its rightful owner? But then someone might call Yukio a thief. But then again, if Yukiko could take things that easily, maybe she could put them as easily back?

"Little girl", an elder man squatted down in front of Yukiko, "would you be so kind and give back what you found?" He had a long brown beard and a pleasant smile. Were it not for the length of the beard and the few wrinkles on his face she would have estimated him in his late thirties, but he was more likely to be in his early fifties. He was wearing brown clothing, so he didn't stand out at all. "Maybe they will show their gratitude to you."

Yukiko had been caught red-handed ... and now her face got red as well. She didn't like what happened there, but under the gaze of the old man she slowly approached those that were stolen from.

"You need to be a bit stricter with your child, child", he said to Lia.

She smiled nervously. Was there anything she could or should answer? "I", she started slowly, still searching

for some form of excuse that sounded plausible. “She lost her father at a very young age.”

The stranger got back up and looked down on her. “I understand that that is a very cruel fate. But you still need to reign her in or you might see her in prison one day.” He suddenly started to smile and spoke a lot softer: “There are better ways to visit the capital city.”

“The capital city?” Had he just told her where her father was held captive? She couldn’t be more lucky to get that information presented on a silver platter.

“Yes, Magneis, capital city of Gajoan, seat of our regent Phobos, and the place where he judges over those that have been accused before our law.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to have the prisoners in the same city as the regent?”

“Oh no, not at all.” He came a step closer, lowering his voice once again. “Phobos is half-dragon. He is powerful enough to subdue most criminals by himself and he still has a strong personal guard.” He stepped back once again. “I think I made my point. You need to be stricter with your little one.”

Yukiko came back in that moment, grumbling. “One simple ryu, one copper coin!” Nevertheless she put that one coin back. “They were rich. I have seen the contents of that purse. You should think that they would show more gratitude than that.”

“Doing the right thing should be gratifying enough, young lady.” The stranger bowed down and gave another coin to Yukiko. This one was golden. “And sometimes you will find that gratitude might come on different ways than you expected.”

Yukiko stared on the golden coin, not sure if she should believe what she was seeing right then. “T... thank you.”

“One moment please?” Lia spoke to the stranger once again. “You said the regent would be half-dragon?” The mere thought made her shiver. It would mean that some dragons interacted with humans, opposed to everything she knew. She remembered stories about virgins being sacrificed to wild dragons ... was he a result of one of those?

“Yes, he is.” He nodded. “In fact all of the four regents and kings are half-dragon.”

“All of them?” Yukiko got out of her stupor and had already put the coin away.

“Yes, you shouldn’t go near them or to put it more bluntly: Keep your fingers to yourself, young lady.” He turned abruptly and mingled back between the people before Yukiko could object.

“What do you mean?” She still shouted at the back of the man. But he didn’t pay any more attention to them.

“I know where we need to go”, Lia said while still looking at him. Somehow she had a feeling that this meeting hadn’t been random at all.

There was nothing, absolutely no clue, if he was still on Lias trail. Jan could only hope that she was still going to Cerinsagath and that they all would meet there again.

Still, there was a lot of doubt to that thought. Lia could find her father first and then they might change their plans. She could have been caught and brought somewhere else. And there had been no further sightings of a dragon.

He couldn't think like that. He couldn't give up that easily. He has managed to follow her this far and he knew her fairly well. For now he had to continue on his path and hope that he would find her again.

He sighed and looked around. He had just arrived in the next town and ... he had found her. Not her in flesh and blood but her in picture. Someone had hung up a wanted poster of her, which made it a clear sign that he wasn't the only one searching for her. With that bounty every able bodied man and woman would search for her. She couldn't go to Cerinsagath like that. But where else?

Those posters were issued by the regent. So it could be entirely possible that on arrival in this country she was captured and brought to the capital city. Two ruby ryu could assemble a crew capable of slaying a dragon. But how did she manage to get herself wanted here? She hadn't been long enough in the country to warrant such actions and the order would never work with such methods. No, if there was a problem, then they would go about it in secret. They would even deny her existence and use historical records to prove that she couldn't exist. Something was rotten.

He tore the poster down. He wanted to know what was behind this and to do so he had to travel to the cap-

ital city and speak with the regent. He had to put that search on the sidelines for now. There was still a small chance to find her there – alive – but she would probably try to avoid capture. She could be going everywhere, except back.

He put the poster into his coin purse and counted the ryu he had left. He could only hope that they would be sufficient to reach Magneis.



Bradley was seething with rage. He was the AI, the supreme ruler. And that ... insect had the tenacity to let him wait a whole week on a progress report!

How could he even hope to find a trail of her again? And it was all Rubenheims fault. If he couldn't find her again, if all his plans were ruined only because of that insignificant cockroach ...

He knew how to make someone feel pain. And there were more types of pain than just some wounds on a body. He had his family in his grasp, his loved ones. Maybe he should threaten him to kill them one at a time, one every three days he wouldn't get any progress. Yes, that was a good idea. Slowly approaching his most loved ones. That should be enough motivation.

He went over to Rubenheims Tent yet again. Somehow it was filled with things: Tubes with liquids, computers, generators, screens. At least it seemed like he hadn't been lazy all that time. He had worked on a smaller scale before but this ... Maybe he had found a solution to their problem?

He calmed his anger for now. The threat could still be his trump card. "Have you made any progress?" He let his displeasure show through his voice. He would stay

rock hard. One sign of weakness and it would be his undoing.

“I thought about the problem”, Rubenheim answered without acknowledging Bradleys mood. “I noticed that the problem can be divided into several aspects: First of all, we can’t find her because she is hiding. The second problem is that she knows magic and you can’t counter that. The third one would be that there are many humans on this side who can use magic and our soldiers will have problems countering that as well.”

“You do not need to point out all those problems: I want solutions for them!” He got louder his anger rising again.

“Ah, but specifying all parts of a Problem is a part of solving it”, Rubenheim answered in his calm smiling manner. “In fact, the third problem brought me the solution to the first one.” He walked past Bradley and connected some wires and machines. “I am pretty sure that our little thief has still problems controlling her magic precisely, which means that she will be hiding more magic than she wants to. Following that logic I build a small area-detector that detects all magic in one area. We only need to expand that area and ...” He started up the generator and it one screen came to life.

There were some letters and cryptic signs rushing over the screen and a moment later he got to see a map of the land. Slowly some glowing points lighted up on the map, growing quickly in number ... hundreds, possibly thousands.

“My detector barely gets to the border of this land and everything is fine here. So I am assuming that she got further away already, considering she was last seen here.” He pointed to a region almost outside the circle with all the dots.

“How long until you can get all of this continent in range?” He contained his anger. It seemed as if he really had found a solution to his problem.

“One or two days. I already instructed a few soldiers to set up two more detectors here and here.” He pointed to the screen again, this time outside of the imaginary circle. “I am in the process of constructing a third one.”

“Very well. I will await good news.” Bradley turned to leave.

“Have you already forgotten the other two problems?” Rubenheim sounded full of himself. Maybe he should execute someone to make his point. “She will escape you time and time again as long as you cannot counter her magic.”

Bradley turned around. “I assume you have found a solution to that problem then? Maybe another tear?” He was prepared to lose all his men while trying to capture her again. Even if one survived and she was back within his hands ...

“Yes, I have something that should increase your odds ...”



Yukiko could see the black city walls of Magneis on the horizon: The capital city, seat of the regent and more importantly the place where Lias father was held captive.

They had travelled for at least a week to get this far. While passing several towns and villages, Yukiko had a hard time keeping her fingers to herself. Especially since her coin purse had gotten significantly smaller and she wanted to change that. But in that large bustling city it shouldn't be a problem to find some thieves and get some ryu again.

“I have a bad feeling about this”, Lia got slower and stopped, looking at the city from afar.

“Why?”

“The city walls.”

Yukiko looked once again on the black walls. From where they stood it looked like a half-circle with three city gates that were distributed evenly along the wall.

The wall seemed pretty normal, except for a few black spots that seemed to drink all the light it could take.

“We won’t get into the city.” She seemed sad and without any hope all of a sudden.

“But the gates ... they are open.”

“As soon as we pass that wall, every magic will be torn from us. These gates are constructed as a magic void. No magic can exist within that space. There are a few cities like that, who have built their walls like this to protect themselves. The only magic that works within the void is dragon magic. It is an exception, made like this to let dragon priests travel safely into those cities. Either that or dragon magic is different from normal magic, making it immune to the effects of the void. And I cannot use my magic to disguise myself.”

“Then we should just fly over the castle walls during the night.”

“That won’t work either. The void is also above the city walls.”

Yukiko fell silent for a moment. “Well, you can use magic on the other side of that wall again, correct?”

“Yes”, Lia looked at her a bit skeptical. “What do you have in mind?”

“We will just enter the city without using magic and disguise ourselves once we reach the other side.”

“There are guards standing there day and night. It won’t be that easy!”

“Oh, I have some things that will make it easy.” Yukiko stepped to the side and into the shadow of a lone tree next to the road. “But you will have to do exactly as I say.”



As the sun was settling beneath the horizon it was time to set the plan of the little girl in motion. Lia had second thoughts and wrapped the heavy robe closer to her body while they crossed the last distance towards the city.

They would probably arrive shortly before they closed the gates. That late within the night there were usually very few people around and the less people they had to deal with the better it was.

“Are you really sure that your plan will work?” Lia asked once again.

“Yes, damn it! It won’t change even if you ask another hundred times more.” Yukiko sighed once. “And you want to help your father, right?” Lia nodded in reply. “Then you have to trust me.”

She had to trust her. Once again she wasn’t sure if she could, especially coming closer to the city. She got really nervous and there was even a tingling within her shoulder reminding her that there was no turning back, no second chance.

“Now”, Yukiko whispered and threw a small metal thing towards the guards. Lia did the same. Both objects hit the ground a few feet from the gate away and rolled slowly beneath it.

“Hey!” One of the guards shouted, almost leaving the safety beneath the wall. He was held back by another guard. A third guard behind those stepped backwards in-

to the city. Suddenly the metal things started to emanate a deep white mist within the gate. The third guard took a step back to the gate, curious ... then he couldn't be seen through the mist anymore. The other two guards suddenly stumbled, one falling backwards against the inner gate, falling fast asleep. The second one soon followed and another thud marked the third guard down.

"Don't breathe while crossing through the gate", Yukiko whispered. She took a deep breath and started to run. Lia did the same but went a lot slower. She could see how the nimble girl picked those metal things up, erasing their tracks.

She crossed the thick wall of mist, her eyes watering. Then she could hear the snoring of those three guards. These strange things had managed to put them to sleep. After following Yukiko into a small side road that seemed empty, she allowed herself to breathe again, rubbing her shoulder. She knew that she had gone close to her limit with that seal there.

"They will wake up in roughly one hour. Until then we will have found a nice place to stay within the city." She put her robe down and back into her magic chest. "Tomorrow we should get more information."

Lia took her robe off as well, giving it back to Yukiko. There were so many strange things in that chest. "Where did you get all those things?"

She closed the chest and remained still for a while. "It is a long story." She got up again and turned away from the vanishing chest. "One we don't have time for, now."

Once more she doubted that it was a good idea to follow the girl around. She demanded trust and trust again and gave no in return.

Somehow she got the feeling that she had no real choice since all this had started and it left a bad feeling

deep within her, making this an elaborate plan. But why? It still didn't make any sense.

For now she had to be careful. She had trusted that girl a little too much so far.

I nto The Dungeon



Phobos stared onto the documents. He had tried shifting things left and right, to make due with all supplies he had, but there were simply not enough. He couldn't increase the size of his army. Not by the necessary amount. Even if he raised the taxes beyond what the citizens would be able to pay, he couldn't hope to match his needs.

He needed his secret weapon, he needed the girl. Her strength added to his own would be enough. He would take her as his wife one way or another.

But somehow she proved more elusive than he had thought. Even with that high of an reward she had escaped capture. He knew that she wasn't back at the monastery anymore and that she wouldn't go back, for he had bait. Bait that she couldn't resist. The bond between parent and child was too strong and he knew Barnett good enough to know that he made a good father. But did she really know that Barnett was in his hands?

Someone knocked at the door and soon enough a thin man with white skin and a long robe came hin. "Sir?" He bowed humbly.

"Come on in, Serin." Phobos leaned back in his chair and smiled slightly. "What is it?"

"It seems that yesterday two strangers entered the city. Three guards fell asleep and part of their dream matched up. This can't be a coincidence." He closed the door behind him and came closer.

"The guards didn't leave their post?"

"They have been found within the city gate, well within the void zone of the wall. They claimed not to have left their post at any time and ... I believe them."

“The intruders could have pulled them there. But it seems more likely that they found a way to use some sort of magic within the void zone.” There was only one conclusion he could derive from that information: A dragon or a half-dragon entered his city. Maybe it had been her? But it didn’t match up with what he knew of dragon priests. There was no draconic sleep magic ... or was there? He had to gamble. “Serin.” He leaned closer over his desk once again. “I need you to notice our citizens that we will execute Barnett Dias the day after tomorrow.”

Serin gulped and got even paler than before. “What will we do about the intruders?”

“Nothing at all for now.”

The other one nodded and left his office.

“Well, this will certainly be interesting”, he said to himself as he took some more parchments from the stack. His instinct had never been wrong before.



The capital city was even larger than Fajoris. The noise and bustling was overwhelming and for Lias tastes too much. She was more accustomed to the quiet monastery.

“The dungeon is probably within the Castle”, Yukiko guessed after they had explored the city for hours and hours. “We will get very close to this lands regent.”

“What will we do then?”

“We will take as much precautions as possible to avoid that. Maybe we should take a look at some books in the library. Maybe they contain a clue on how to remove that curse.”

Lia nodded and found herself smiling. “A good idea.” She wanted to see her father again, but the ability to

wield her powers freely once again would prove useful, if they met the half-dragon.

“We should take as much time as we need. Your father has only been captured and not been sentenced to death.”

Lia nodded again, a shiver running down her spine. The poster said ‘alive’, so they still needed him. But why was she feeling so anxious?

They turned towards the library, which was one the other side of the large marketplace. They even got a good look from there onto the castle. You couldn’t miss it, even if you tried.

Every way lead up to that castle. But if you wanted to get out of the city you needed a map or the ability to fly. Of course a good sense of direction could help as well, but somehow Lia didn’t seem to have that.

Then she suddenly noticed that something had changed on the market place. The people gathered around the center as a man climbed onto a pedestal. He unraveled a scroll and began to read: “Hear this! Your regent makes the following announcement: Tomorrow within the morning hours the traitor Barnett Dias will be executed!”

Lia felt the blood within her veins freeze. She got dizzy and almost fainted where she stood.

“Forget the preparations”, Yukiko said dead serious, “we will go tonight!”



As darkness had fallen again, Yukiko was scurrying through the streets, keeping to the shadows. She didn’t look back, just relying on Lia staying behind her. For now she could only hope that she was right and the dungeon

was really within the castle and then they should be able to somehow free Lias father and escape.

Still, deep within her she had a bad feeling about this. As if they were running right into some sort of trap. But there was no way that Phobos could know that they entered the city. Maybe there was a different reason for him wanting to execute Lias father?

She dived into a shadow and signaled Lia to do the same, just before a Nightguard passed through the street before them, a small lantern dangling on a long rod before him. The orange light of the small candle didn't reach them at all. Then the guard suddenly stopped, turning around, clearing his throat.

Yukiko held her breath. Had she underestimated him and he had noticed them?

Suddenly he proclaimed with a loud voice: "Citizens of Magneis hear me right, it is now the second hour past midnight!" Then he turned once again and continued his slow pace along the road.

Yukiko almost cried out. She hadn't expected that, especially not his loud voice so deep within the night. She waited for several more minutes until she could be sure that she once again noticed every sound of the night only then she motioned Lia to follow her once again.

After a short while they arrived at the main plaza, but Yukiko followed a smaller parallel street towards the castle. They wouldn't even get into the castle by the main entrance. All the while she kept to the shadows until she reached the castle walls. She once again put her palm onto the rough stone and channeled her magic and put her head through it. There was no one on the other side, so she slipped through the wall and ran to the castle building.

A moment she they stood in complete darkness within the large structure. They hadn't much time left to find the dungeon. As she got her bearings Lia stumbled into her and they fell to the ground. Cursing silently she used a small light spell to illuminate the area. It only reached as far as a few feet, but it still was a lot more light than she would have liked.

"Wait a moment", she whispered and summoned her chest once again. She dug deep beneath the clothing and got the night-vision-goggles out. She put it on for a while and was pleased to notice that it still worked.

It was better than nothing, but she never had planned for a caper to have two members. Only one of them could see in the darkness with them. She should have taken one more as a spare.

"Here, put these on", she said to Lia. "And then carry me."



Lia hated that seal on her arm with a passion. Dragons were able to see in the dark and her magic would have allowed her to use the dragons' power within her.

Frowning she looked on as the girl got something out of that chest of hers. She put it on, touched some things here and there and then ... gave it to her.

"Here, put that on. And then carry me", she commented. It was silent but confident. She put it on and ... saw everything. Everything was strangely green, but it allowed her to navigate within the darkness. It was a strange artifact. Where did she get all these from?

"A ... dragon eye?"

"No, that one is a ... Well, I like the name, let's just call it a dragon eye."

What did she mean by that? Lia put the thoughts aside. Currently there was something more important. “And why do I need to carry you?”

“Because I cannot see without those ni... the dragon eye and I only have one.”

It made sense, but Lia didn't like it. Yukiko wasn't that small of a girl. Still, she complied and bowed down, so she could hop onto her back. Then she got moving.

She went as quiet as possible through the corridors, not very fast. Her shoulder started tingling already. She hoped to find stairs somewhere that lead further down, into the dungeon, towards her father.

Minute after Minute went by in that sheer unending path. Hour after hour. It felt like an eternity as she finally found a narrow stairway that went deeper down. She climbed them down carefully to arrive in a long corridor that had a row of cells on each side. In every one of them there seemed to be at least one person, sleeping.

Every now and then she saw an empty cell. Her father had to be down here somewhere.

A sudden noise made her turn around. Did someone just open one of those cells? Yukiko jumped from her back without warning her.

“Welcome”, a deep voice resounded behind her, definitely male. “You are Lia, correct? Let me introduce myself: I am Phobos.”

Phobos



“Welcome!”

Yukiko examined the broad shouldered man that had surprised them more closely. A small sphere was hovering next to him, illuminating the dungeon around them.

“You are Lia, correct?” He didn’t acknowledge her at all and looked on to her companion. “Let me introduce myself: I am Phobos.” A cold shiver run over her spine. What was the regent doing within the dungeon at this hour? He looked down on her. “Who are you, child?”

Yukiko didn’t answer, her mind desperately searching for a way to escape. Could they overwhelm him? Unlikely. Running past him and flee? Possible, but Lia wouldn’t make it and the narrow corridors ... She probably wouldn’t even leave without her father. Taking some surprise gadget from her chest was out as well.

The only thing that could work was magic. But her options in that were limited as well. With what she knew, they couldn’t just flee through a wall, as they were deep below the surface. They would only find dirt on the other side. Maybe if she did a surprise maneuver ...

It only took her a moment to slip into invisibility, as she had practiced that very well. She just got closer to him, aimed with her foot and kicked as hard as she could. It didn’t connect. Instead his large, strong hand closed in on her throat. It got harder to breathe. She tried to pry him loose, sinking her fingernails into his skin, her hair tried to loosen the grip of his fingers without success.

“Guests shouldn’t behave this way, no matter if they are invited or not.” He growled at her, staring in her face. Then he let her fall down again.

She was gasping for air as she felt tears in her eyes, tears of desperation. Once again she had been helpless.

“I don’t know who she is, but I know why you are here.” He looked once again to Lia. “Follow me, obey me and Barnett won’t be hurt. Can we agree to that?”

Yukiko looked to Lia, wanted to scream “no”, but the girl just nodded.

“Good”, Phobos looked down to Yukiko. “What about you?”

She didn’t look into his eyes. She knew how much Lia cared about her father and that she hadn’t any chance to flee. “Agreed”, she hissed between her teeth. The first chance she got, she would flee, together with Lia and her father. Even if he was half dragon, he wasn’t a match for her secret weapon!



Lia gulped. She felt uneasy as she looked into his eyes. What was it that he wanted from them? And ... why was he down here? A regent shouldn’t be down in the dungeons in the middle of the night. Except it had been a trap. A trap she was guided into, from Yukiko.

But that little display just now didn’t fit in with that story. But on the other hand, that one could have been played.

Lia had taken of the dragon eye. She had seen Yukiko turn invisible and Phobos grasping her out of thin air. He had to know where she had been, what she wanted to try

...

They followed him through the castle in silence, passing several passages and stairs until they arrived at the throne room. Two guards were flanking the door and effectively cutting their escape route.

Phobos sat down on the stairs just before the throne, his small sphere of light rising to the ceiling and illuminating the large room.

The regents face seemed hard, like a rough unpolished stone. His head could almost have been a dragons, just without the horns, normal eyes and a much more human color. His hair was very short and black.

“Well, I finally found you”, he said smiling. “Now, please, show me your true face and not that illusion.”

“How did you ...?” She looked once again to Yukiko. Something felt very wrong here. The little thief snipped a finger and her magic faded.

“How did I know you were in the city, that you would come to free Barnett Dias?” She felt his gaze examining her whole body. “Well, news reached me, that someone got into the city by putting three guards to sleep. That could only have been magic and the only type of magic that worked beneath the city walls is the magic of dragons.” He smiled, getting up and closer to her. “So, the intruder had to be either a dragon, a dragon priest or a half dragon.” He stopped right in front her and looked deep into her eyes. “Dragon priests usually don’t have any reason to sneak into the city, dragons usually don’t bother with humans at all and a wild one ... that would have been a carnage already. That leaves half dragons, but those are well known as they are regents, kings, imperators or high ranking officers. You were the only one left.”

She gulped. She didn’t want to correct him on that assumption. “What do you want from me?” She asked instead, a bit of fear in her voice.

“I want to make you my wife.”

He hadn’t asked. He had stated a fact. “Why me?”

“Hasn’t Barnett told you?” He backed off slightly, surprise in his voice.

“What is it? What hasn’t my father told me?”

Phobos began to smile and sat back down on the stairs. “Your ... father.” He began to laugh. “Yes, of course.” He calmed down after a moment. “Barnett Dias is not your father”, he explained, serious once again. “Your father is a dragon, which makes you half dragon as well. That is why you will be my wife!”

“No”, she took a step back. “That cannot be.”

“It is. Think back. A normal human girl wouldn’t survive the sealing of a dragon within her. Or do you still think that you were the first of many to come? That things have changed suddenly? No”, he shook his head, “it is because you are half dragon.”

She noticed Yukiko next to her, looking at her with huge eyes.

“I am not half dragon. I am a normal human being.” She got louder, taking another step back.

“Why do you reject being half dragon?” Phobos seemed truly curious. “You should be proud to have the blood of a dragon flowing within you.”

“Barnett is my father”, she answered, her voice getting some resolve back, “not some dragon I have never seen in my whole life.”

“I see”, he got up and climbed the few stairs to the throne. “The truth is that Barnett is your uncle. He is your mothers brother. I have never seen your father myself. I just know that your brother and your father parted after an argument. If you want to know more, you should ask Barnett yourself...”

Suddenly there was lightning behind Lia. Light blinded her, thunder was cutting into Phobos words. She turned around. Lightning was spawned from thin air, crushing into walls, floor and ceiling, the cacophony almost making her faint.

Two persons stepped out from that thunderstorm and then everything was calm and silent once more.



Yukikos ears were ringing; her eyes were still seeing those flashes of light although everything had stopped again.

It took long moments until she could finally see something again. Some sort of shadow that came closer to her. She stumbled backwards, fell and crawled further. Was that Bradley? But how? She had done everything to hide herself from him!

The shadow came closer. Yukiko turned and pulled the veil of invisibility around her once more. She scrambled to her legs. Then she heard some word spoken. She stopped and turned again. That wasn't Bradley. The man came closer. It seemed as if he could see her as well, despite her being invisible.

Suddenly a sword slashed in between her and the stranger, forcing him backwards. Phobos started to attack the other male, who pulled a sword himself from out of his back, a sword that was almost as long as he was high. "Who are you? What do you want?" She made out Phobos voice over that constant ringing in her ears.

"I want the same thing as you: The dragon tears."

"What are you talking about?" Their swords crossed and Yukiko could hear the ringing of their blades.

"Don't play dumb with me", the stranger grumbled. He was a head higher than Phobos and bald. To make up for his loss of hair he was wrapped in clothing that was made out of scales. "You have collected two of them!"

Yukiko looked for Lia. She had taken a few steps back as well. It was only a short sprint to get to her.

“Nina, get those tears”, the bold one ordered and swung his sword again. The blade scratched over the ceiling and still gained momentum. Phobos jumped to the side, barely dodging the blade. Yukiko jumped as well, as it was almost as close in hitting her as it was in hitting him.

The other strange girl closed in on Lia. She grabbed her at the arms, her hands searching for the gem hidden away under her clothing. She noticed the girl with short, brown hair. She wasn't clad in any armor and seemed utterly uninterested in what she was doing.

Yukiko ran once again, jumped on Lias back and got ahold of the tear before that Nina girl could. She jumped back down from Lias back and started chanting those fatal words: “In kagis et seris infinis chikara kaiho!”

She could feel the warm pulsing of the gem, the magic power that cursed through her and activated the gem that now connected her and Lia. She could feel her power over the other girl that awaited her orders. It felt incredibly good, even though she knew what she was doing to Lia.



Lia felt an incredible power cursing through her body all of a sudden. Not even the seal on her arm was able to do anything against that power. She felt once again free ... until her freedom was taken only a moment later. Flames wrapped around her, attacked the girl before her. She pulled her hands free from her attacker and ... tried to hit that girl, all without her consent.

Her attacker ignored those flames as she wrapped herself into a coat of wind and lightning. Lightning that didn't even touch Lias body. She could hear the blades of those two men clashing. They were still fighting.

Lias fire started to spread, setting curtains on fire. But none of those flames touched Nina. She was protected by wind while her lightning twisted and curved to either floor or ceiling.

“Give me those tears”, the stranger shouted, barely audible over the crackling of wind, lightning and flames. The stones around Lia started to glow orange red.

“You will never get those tears”, Yukiko shouted somewhere behind her.

“Do you think you can stop me, little girl?” His sword parted the air and the girl cried in surprise and fear. It was only a moment then those two blades began their song of death once again.

Lias flames somehow became sentient all of a sudden. They crawled over the floor to the big man. Strong wind interfered with them, protecting him.

Then there was a loud bang. The swords fell silent for a moment and the stranger got some distance between him and Phobos. Lia could see a deep scar on his chin.

“As you wish. You leave me no other choice than to wage war with you! Nina!”

The girl fell back from Lia, standing before the bigger man with her arms outstretched. “We will see each other on the battlefield.”

Once again thunder and lightning threatened to overwhelm her senses and then ... their attackers had vanished as fast as they had appeared.

Lia turned towards Phobos. Something had still control over her body, moving her against her wishes.

“Let us go”, Yukiko said behind her. Lias flames were still within the room, burning a bit higher as if to emphasize the words.

Phobos threw his sword to the side and closed in on Lia. "It seems as if you forgot that I am half dragon. Those flames don't hurt me!"

"What about a dragons flame?" Yukiko tried to bluff, but there was something in her voice that spoke of uncertainty. Lia felt her seal unwinding. She had that much power over her?

Phobos stopped. "Fine, you win, little girl." He looked past Lia. "But, I have certain conditions."

"I am not interested in your conditions! You can't force us to do anything!"

"Don't forget that I still have Barnett in my hands. Or do you want to condemn him, without having heard my proposal?"

Lia felt her heart beating faster. It still responded to her emotions. Her lips didn't obey her. She couldn't say a thing, couldn't do anything.

"We could just march down into the dungeon and free him and there is nothing that can stop us."

"How about the fact, that Barnett isn't within the dungeon? Do you really think I would leave him there, when I use it as a trap for you?" He smiled.

Yukiko kept silent for a moment. "Name your conditions. I will decide after I heard them."

"Very well. The first thing I want is ... an explanation!" He pointed towards Lia. "And the second thing ..." Phobos sighed and slumped down on the stairs. "I need your help."

"I ... that is ... you want ... what?"

"Oh and put the flames out as well, would you? If you help me, I will let you and Barnett go in peace. You have a regents word on that."

Lias flames started to die down and with them all the other flames that were still flickering and eating away on

paper, wood and curtains, died as well. Lia felt her seal tightening once again, putting her dragon back into the deepest core of her heart.

Yukiko stepped beside her, staying far away from Phobos. "I accept", she explained and put her right hand forwards. As she opened her palm a small red gem fell down from it, just being held by a leather strap. An inner fire burned within it, making it glow a fiery red. "And you really don't know what this is?"

"No." He shook his head.

"This is a dragons tear. She allows the one who holds it complete control over one individual. Besides that they release immense magical powers. The battle you just witnessed was a minor example of that."

Yukiko still held the gem where it was, as if to bait him.

"I see." He sighed and let his shoulders slump down. "But that makes it even more important that I need your help."

Yukiko stared at Phobos a while longer. After a few long moments of silence, she took the gem back in her hand and whispered a single word: "Fuuin."

Lia felt the power flowing backwards, freeing her once again, giving her back into the slavery of the other seal on her shoulder. Still, it was in that moment that she understood why dragon priests sought the assistance of their brothers when the time was near. A sudden chill went through her whole body.

Yukiko looked up to Lia. "W... what is your decision?"

"MY decision?" Lia stared on the little girl, full of hatred. "There is no 'just trust me' anymore? Oh yes, I forgot you can control me just like that!"

The girl gulped. "I ... I am ..."

"You wanted to decide anyways! Why give me now the chance of a decision, when there is none. There never

has been one!” She turned and ran through the doors. She didn’t even notice that the guards weren’t there anymore. She bit down hard in an attempt to ignore the pain rising in her shoulder.



Yukiko shuddered. “But ... I hadn’t had any choice myself”, she whispered more to herself than anyone else.

She felt a big hand on her shoulder. Surprised and afraid she turned, looking into Phobos serious face. “You misused her trust.”

“What do you know?” She tried to protest.

“Trust is something very important. I need my citizens to trust me and I trust them to be honest with everything they do. But trust is even more important in a friendship.” He kneeled down before her. “I sense that you have been through many more things than you should have, things that made you into who you are. I do not ask you to trust me, but maybe you can trust her and tell her these things. Maybe she will then understand, why you had no other choice.”

Like her father he took her hand into his. “Give the tear back to her and talk to her.”

Then he stood up and left her alone, with tears running over her face. It has been so long since she had a father and that father would have hugged her now. She looked a while on Phobos back, saw him climbing those stairs to the throne and getting out a small chest from under it.

She didn’t understand him. He seemed so intent on making Lia his ... why didn’t he exploit her weakness, why didn’t he use the knowledge he gained against them? Why?

She turned and ran through the doors, following more her feelings than her other senses until she found the dragon priestess sitting on a wall, legs close to her body, hugging them and herself. She cried quietly.

Yukiko came tentatively closer. Carefully she held the tear on her palm out to Lia. "Please, listen to me", she begged.

Lia looked up once again, her tear filled eyes full of rage. She took the tear from Yukiko. "What do you want?"

"I... I know how you feel", she answered and sat down before Lia. "Just listen and let me tell you, what happened to me ..."

She brushed the hair of her little doll, wanting it to look perfect. Something in this house had to look good at least. After some more minutes of carefully brushing that hair she held the doll up. “Mama?”

She turned and looked to her mother. She was staring outside the window, not reacting, not saying anything, her gaze spoke of sadness.

Yukiko got up and went over to her. “Are you okay, mama?”

“Oh, sorry”, she said smiling, as she turned towards her. “I just prayed to god. I begged of him to make your life happier one day.”

“But I am happy being with you.” She let go of her doll and hugged her mother’s side.

“I am also happy when you are with me”, she answered softly. Her voice was as soft as her big hands and her hugs. “Now, go play a little more. Your mum has something she needs to do.”

Yukiko nodded and got back to her doll. “What did you do?”, she scolded her. “You got dirty!” Then she started to clean the dust from the dolls skirt. It took her a while to get it as clean as it was before and she proudly looked at her prized possession again.

Something broke behind her, glass falling to the ground. Yukiko turned only to see a small star hovering within the room. Fascinated from the soft blue light she forgot about the doll and let it fall again.

“Yukiko! What have you done ...” Her mother stood in the doorway and looked at the blue, shining star.

“Look! A star has fallen from the sky”, Yukiko exclaimed and grabbed it. The light of the star vanished

and a shock grasped Yukikos body. All her limbs were tingling and something very, very cold touched her heart. Everything went black and then ... there was silence.

She dreamed she flew over an ocean of ice, still feeling warmth despite the cold, warmth that reminded her of her parents. It was like travelling to another land like in her mother's story ... only much more real. It was wonderful and somewhere on the horizon was the glittering blue light of the star she had touched.

But before she could go near it, everything faded and she opened her eyes once again. Her mother was hanging over her, her face distorted by sorrow, tears dropping down over her cheeks and onto Yukikos hands. And then a smile found its way back onto her face.

"Yukiko, dear? Are you all right? How do you feel? Speak with me!"

"Mama", she whispered, feeling a bit weak all of the sudden. But it was enough to be hugged by her mother once again, feeling her warmth and love.

Yukiko tried to hug back and then she noticed that she still held onto the star.

"Can I keep the star?", she asked tentatively.

"I ... yes, you can keep it", her mother answered sobbing. "But don't ever touch another one, hear me?"

"Yes, mama", she answered, even though she didn't know why. Still, she was happy. She had a star all for herself and she would never let go of it.



She took a deep breath and pressed the star close to her body. It was a ritual for good luck she always followed before going to 'work'. Her mother had fastened the star to a leather strap, so she could carry it with her

at all times. She wore it like a necklace and put it beneath her clothes.

She felt secure with it. She hadn't had one problem with any of her 'jobs'. Sadly her luck seemed to select only certain aspects of her life. Her mother had gotten ill, and from day to day it got worse, especially since her father had died.

She didn't know, who was responsible for it, but one day soldiers had come to their house, deep within the night. They had taken them from their beds, out onto the street. The leader of those soldiers shouted the judgment out onto the street for all to hear: He was a traitor in their eyes and they would execute him right there ...

Yukiko's star was still lying beneath her pillow and she begged and begged for it to stop this, but it had been too far away to hear her.

She witnessed how they blindfolded him, put him in front of the next wall ... Her mother begged for mercy and was ignored ... they shot. Yukiko saw her father fall to his knees, the life fleeing his body fast. Her heart started to ache, threatened to stop beating altogether.

She couldn't move. Her limbs felt like they were paralyzed. She wanted to run to him, to stop whatever was making the floor red ...

She had hoped that it was all only a bad dream and that she would wake up from it soon. It had to be one. Then she heard her mother beg that someone should shoot her as well. She was hit by a soldier and sank down, quietly sobbing. The soldiers made signs to one another, spoke ... but nothing of that registered in her mind. They vanished as quickly as they had come. She stumbled forward, trying to wake her father, she tried calling to him, shaking him ... but those big warm hands never moved again and they stayed cold.

After a long time she gave up and stumbled to her mother. She called for her as well, shook her again, fear rising in her that she would be cold and wouldn't move as well. But after a short while her mother woke up and hugged her ...

Because of that she started keeping her star close to her at all times, especially at night, especially when she started to raise the income of her family.

Her neighbors saw them as outcasts. They all avoided them as good as they could, probably out of fear to be seen as traitors themselves.

Yukiko could see her life in ruins and it hadn't really started at all. At least she had an ally. She had her star. And as long as she had it, she wouldn't give up.

She hushed close to the corner and looked around it. There was a large wall across the street and between her and her target house. Judging from the size of it, they had clearly enough money. They probably wouldn't even notice if some of it suddenly got missing. She had at least a use for some of it!

Things were harsh and she couldn't lose her mother as well. She had been powerless as she had seen her father die, but now ... now she had acquired enough talents to change something, to help her mother and herself to survive.

She had learned to hide in the shadows, to become practically invisible. It certainly helped that no one paid attention to her as the daughter of a traitor.

The moon shone enough light over her target to asses it. It was a very large house, about the size of three other houses and then had even two wings to its side, which were about the same and it was three stories high. About twenty-five poor families could live in that house.

The upper balconies were reachable by climbing through some rose-bushes. All those thorns could hurt her, but it was the best route to take and it was the perfect time, too. The lights had gone out a while ago and the residents should be fast asleep by now.

She sneaked across the street, jumped and pulled herself up to the top of it. She quickly looked around, to make sure she hasn't been noticed, and she jumped down into the garden, rolling a bit and changing the momentum from the fall into a forward sprint to one of those roses.

She climbed up the thorny ladder and reached the balcony fairly easily. It had been a good idea to take the less thick ones. She looked through the large windowed doors into the room. It was deserted.

A small hard wire and some dexterity later, she opened the balcony-door and slipped into the room. Carefully she closed the door again and dived into the shadow of the wall.

The room was full of chandeliers, drawers, cupboards and pictures. Judging from their exquisite form they must be very expensive. Yes, this family was very rich. Probably she could even take some more than usual without anyone being the wiser.

She sneaked down and into the corridor. Counting the doors, one, two, three, she arrived at her destination. Judging from what she has seen at other times this had to be the families private office and thus the room that held the interesting riches.

She opened the door and smiled to herself. She was spot on. Staking your target out beforehand is just the right thing to do.

They had a desk, a few bookcases full of folders and books. There were also some pictures and ... seeing that

they all had the same ideas, behind one of those pictures was the wall safe.

Looking behind them she soon found the target picture and took it down. It was hard work getting the large, heavy picture down without letting it fall or making too much noise. She put it in front of the desk and fetched the chair. Putting her ear to the cold steel of the safe she started turning the number-combination. Click, click, click ...

She thought sadly about the one that had taught her that technique. He had been sentenced to serving several years in prison. Well, he didn't have a star on his side.

There it was the third 'clack'. She turned the handle and opened it. In it there were several envelopes and private letters. The jewels and letters were pretty much worthless but in here there must be ... yes, there was an envelope with money in it, unbound money, probably uncounted. And the numbers on those pieces of paper were big.

She searched for a few smaller ones – still pretty big – and took them out. She hid that money in her black suit and put the rest back to where she found it, careful to place everything back the way she found it. She closed the safe and hung the picture back to where it belonged.

She moved the chair back to its original position and smiled. Going that extra step has always been worth it. And with the money in her suit she was good for a few weeks.

She hushed back to the corridor and went back the way she came, counting the doors once again. She stopped on the fourth door. Light was flickering through the gap below the door. She gulped. Had someone noticed her come in and was now waiting for her?

She pressed herself against the wall and listened carefully.

“... will take care of that.” That deep, rough voice was very unique.

“Well, I certainly hope that you are more competent than others that have tried, telling me that they have searched for years! One even fled to the other side!” There was anger in that voice. He had a hard time to speak quietly.

“You know, that you can count on me. Have I ever disappointed you?”

“I hope so! This last trump card is our only hope to win this war! And if we find one, we will be able to find the rest as well!”

“My men are searching everywhere. It should only be a matter of days until I can present you with it.”

“A few days? We might not have that much time! I don’t know if we can hold the border for another forty-two hours!” Something cracked. “I hope that new weapon can ...”

Youkiko breathed a sigh of relief. They hadn’t found her out. But her escape-path was blocked. She had to take the second balcony with the much thicker rose-bush. She needed to go two doors back, if she wasn’t mistaken. Carefully she sneaked to that door and opened it. It squeaked in its hinges. She stopped. Hopefully it wasn’t loud enough to reach the other room!

What was she thinking? They couldn’t have not heard it! She jumped into the room. A hiding place. She needed a hiding place!

She couldn’t use the cupboards and everyone could easily look below the table. The only place she could try to hide was the couch. The space below was pretty narrow, she could only hope to fit there!

Steps! There were steps in the corridor! She jumped behind the couch and started crawling beneath it.

Flickering light alerted her of the men now present within the room. She begged of her star that those would not look beneath the couch. She held her breath as one of them went slowly through the room.

“There is nobody here!” The other one said, tapping the floor with his foot.

“I am sure this door was closed as we came up here”, it was the one with the rough noise. He opened a few cupboards and looked inside.

“It got windy outside. The wind probably opened the door”, the other one commented. He seemed very impatient.

“Yes, that is probably it”, answered the other one and went to the balcony. “It seems that our housemaid is a featherbrain. I need to get a new one.” The window squealed as he closed it.

“See? There is nothing here!”

“I am just a bit careful. Others have reported of some missing money.” He slowly went back through the room, close to the couch.

“They probably miscounted or have finally payed their taxes. Now, to get back to the other issue ...”

“I will start everything immediately. You should have come to me earlier, then you wouldn’t have problems right now.”

“Who do you think I am?”

“I know, who you are and I know what I can say to you. You need my help, not the other way around. I will get you what you want.”

Both left the room and the door was closed once again.

“I will give you two days. If I do not hear from you until then, I move to Plan B.”

Yukiko held her breath for a while longer before allowing herself to breathe. She stayed beneath the

couch for a long time. She just escaped these two men and she begged of her star to let her escape the premises as well.

She waited a while longer before she went to the window and opened the door. Hopefully that one didn't squeal as much as the window did. She moved the bolt to the side and opened it carefully. It didn't make a sound. She was lucky again.

After sneaking out on the balcony she closed the door behind her, using the same trick to move the bolt back and then she started to climb down through the roses. She could feel the thorns scratching through her clothing and her skin. She bit into her lower Lip, trying to ignore the pain.

Finally she jumped the rest on the ground and looked over the still garden. Without skipping a beat she ran over to the wall, climbed over it and jumped back down on the other side. Breathing heavily she pressed herself to the cold stone. She did it. She was slightly injured and she would need to fix her clothing, but they would be carefree for at least a week.

Feeling especially well she vanished into the streets.



She arrived home at dawn. Her caper had lasted longer than she wanted and she was tired. She sneaked in through the door and to her room.

"Young Lady!" The voice of her mother stopped her in her tracks. "I thought I told you to not do this anymore? What will you do if they ever catch you?" She came closer and the stern tone of her voice softened. "I don't want to lose you as well." Yukiko turned and saw her mother coming closer, her eyes filled with tears. "You are

the only one I have left”, she whispered and embraced her in a hug.

“I’m sorry.” Yukiko returned the hug. She had tried to be stealthy about it. She knew they needed that money or otherwise she would lose her mother. She needed some rest!

“Now be a good girl and change”, her mother told her. She held her at arm’s length and smiled.

Yukiko returned the smile and started to turn, only to turn back as her mother coughed. There was blood on her hand. She was coughing blood!

“Mama?” Yukiko suddenly had a bad feeling.

“It’s just a cold. Don’t worry about it.” She wiped her moth clean and proceeded to hide her hand.

“A cold?” Yukiko stared at her mother. She was only a child, but she knew that coughing blood wasn’t normal for a cold.

“Go change, my dear. Your uncle is coming for a visit and you want to look good, don’t you?” She stroked over Yukikos hair and smiled.

“My uncle?”

“Yes, you deserve something better than this, my little angel.” She pressed a kiss on Yukikos forehead. “Now go.”

Yukiko shivered. What did she mean by that? Didn’t she want Yukiko anymore? Had she gone one too many times on a caper?

“I love you”, her mother whispered and left her alone. With a very bad feeling she went to her room and put the money below her pillow, then she changed into a long black dress. Its sleeves hid her wounds and its color showed her mood perfectly. Then she took the small brush that once belonged to her doll and brushed her own hair. After that she bound it into a pony-tail and looked into the mirror-shard.

“I am ready”, she called and went over to her mother’s room. She was laying in her bed, smiling peacefully, her eyes were closed. “Mama?” Was she already asleep again? She got closer to her unmoving form. Normally she had a very light sleep, so why didn’t she answer? Something was strange ...

She felt her knees shaking and came close to the bed. She took the hand of her mother into hers and whispered: “Mama, I am ready.” Her voice was weak and almost choking on tears. There was no answer. “Mama, please”, her voice was on the verge of breaking. “Don’t leave me.” She pressed down on her mother’s hand. There was no reaction. “I need you ... please ... wake up! I won’t do this anymore ... promise!” The hand started to get cold.

She knew that her mother wouldn’t come back anymore. Her father hadn’t come back as well. This wasn’t right. This couldn’t be right! “Mama!” Tears rolled over her cheeks and fell down on the bed. She shouted her name again and again and again.

Exhausted she collapsed on the bed, sobbing quietly to herself. Alone. She was totally alone now.



Yukiko awakened once more as someone stepped beside her. He pressed her head with his large warm hands close to his body.

“I am sorry”, the stranger told her with a soft, but deep voice. “If only she had written me sooner.” His hands were shaking and she felt hot tears dropping onto her head.

He stayed with her, sharing his warmth and sadness with her until the sun approached the horizon and turned the sky into a yellow-orange color.

“Let go of her”, he finally told her.

Yukiko obeyed and opened her hands, letting go of her mothers. Her mother still held on to her, the cold unmoving hand not wanting her to go at that moment. She once again felt the pain and sadness coming back to her.

Desperate she clutched the stranger. He hugged her once again and removed her mother’s grip from her hand. His embrace ended only as she calmed herself down once again. Then he took her hand into his and guided her outside.

Yukiko looked back once again on the unmoving form of her mother, then she followed her uncle without saying a word.

Outside waited a small black car. He opened the door and let her climb onto the backseat. Then he opened the front door, took one lonely flower from the bouquet and went back inside. She was alone for several quiet minutes. She took out her star. Why? Why hadn’t it protected her mother as well? Was it because she wasn’t close to her, because she stole something?

She sobbed again as her uncle came back. He quietly sat behind the wheel, started the car and drove away.



They drove for several hours. Yukiko just stared out of the window, watching the things that were happening on the street. Things got less and less busy as the darkness increased and the sun was replaced by the moon.

She didn’t talk with her uncle at all and she still felt like keeping quiet. Although she was in the same car as him she felt alone. The two most important people in her life had left her much too soon. She had felt a strong

pain deep within her and it still throbbed, although she started to feel numb.

Soon they left the city and suburbs, driving through fields, soon approaching a small wood. Finally they stopped in front of a tall fence.

She kept watching as a person approached her car. He was dressed in a green suit, which would very much cloak him if he tried to hide in the woods. He spoke to her uncle, looked at some papers and wrote some things down. Then he stood tall, put a hand to his head and the car started up again.

They soon approached a small building. It was only one story high and reminded her of her own house. He opened the door and she followed him out of the car. There were only a few buildings around, a few streets and lots of trees. Was this her new home now?

“I still need to do some work”, her uncle explained. “I wanted to get you home first, but I am very late.” He smiled slightly.

So this wasn't her new home. She wasn't entirely sure if she should feel happy about it or not.

“There is a small room you can sleep in, why I work.”

Yukiko shook her head. She didn't want to sleep.

“We might have some things you can play with.”

She shook her head again. Even though she felt alone, she didn't want to be completely alone and he seemed nice enough.

“Can you promise me to keep close to me?” She nodded. “Don't touch anything?” She nodded once gain. “Fine”, he gently took her hand and they entered the small house. The corridor was almost pitch-black; only a bit of light was shining from some stairs that lead down. The inside of that house so far was less decorated than her own home. She could see, why no one would like to light that up.

They climbed the stairs down, story by story. It was very unusual to go this deep below the earth. She was a bit afraid of the things that they might encounter there. She gripped her uncle's hand a bit harder, thinking that it might have been a good alternative to play something. Maybe he was guiding her down towards hell itself.

She gulped and clutched her star with her other hand, begging it to protect her.

They stepped down the last flight of stairs and stood in a brightly lit corridor. Two soldiers were standing at the far end, saluting them.

Why was her uncle collaborating with those that had killed her father? Should she stay away from him?

One of the soldiers looked down on her, his eyes stern. She got closer to her uncle and decided to stay there.

"She is with me", he said.

"Very well, Major", the soldier shrugged with his shoulders and let them pass.

They arrived in a big room; a few men were standing there and discussing some things fiercely. One of them came over as he noticed her uncle.

"Major Artai, we have been waiting for you."

"Excuse me being late", he answered, "unfortunately my sister died today."

"My apologies. Who is the small girl?" The stranger nodded into Yukikos general direction without even looking at her.

"My niece, Yukiko. I promised my sister to look after her." Then her uncle started to whisper to the stranger. Yukiko couldn't make out any more words. Then she stared at the man that had greeted her uncle.

"Good, very good", the other one said. "You will join our little discussion, after tending to her then?"

“It will just take a moment, Major.” Her uncle kneeled and looked into her eyes. She looked back, wondering what that meant. “Is something the matter? Have you seen that man before?”

Yukiko shook her head. She hadn’t seen him at all, that was the truth. But she recognized his voice. It was part of that impatient, condescending voice, which somehow helped her escape. Still, seeing him now made her uneasy. It was not his appearance, he was average looking and wasn’t especially ugly or something like that. No, he was too orderly. His short black hair was better trimmed as the grass in a noble’s house, his face had hard features, absolutely symmetrical and his eyes ... he had cold eyes, very cold eyes.

“You can look around, but don’t touch anything, okay?” Her uncle put a hand on her shoulder as she didn’t answer. “Do you understand me?”

Yukiko nodded, looking through the room.

“Good, I am counting on you. This won’t take long, promised.” Her uncle left her and joined the others in that discussion of theirs.

The room itself was full of strange apparatuses, which she had never seen before. Some were full of gears, blinking bulbs and wires. It was also covered with even stranger things. But in a corner of the room there was something that didn’t fit into the room at all. It was some kind of stone gate, just standing there, freely, not leading anywhere. But it was connected with even more wires to other machines. Where there were no wires there were certain symbols engraved into the stone.

She soon got bored of it and her eyes found another strange thing. Two wires that were shaped like a V were standing on a table, an arc of lightning travelling up between them to the top, vanishing there and then a new

arc ascended from the bottom. She spied some weapons on the next table, the kind of weapons that killed her father.

She looked back on the lightning arc and watched it, fascinated. She listened to its crackling, smelled the stern air emanating from it.

A loud bang startled her. Yukiko turned to the source of the noise. Two men had started to argue loudly with one another, shouting. She couldn't even make out words as both tried to outshout the other.

"Gentlemen! That's enough", the stern stranger ending the argument with his voice alone. "We should pause this until your heads have cooled down."

While the two arguing men kept fighting each other with their eyes, her uncle came back to her, sighing.

"One Moment please, Major Artai", the impatient man put a hand on his shoulder. "I would like to talk to your lovely niece for a moment." He sounded friendly, too friendly.

"As you wish", her uncle kept walking towards her.

"Alone", he was kept back once again, with a hand. There was that commanding tone once again.

"Why ...?" Her uncle stopped in his tracks, took a deep breath. "I will be waiting outside."

No. He couldn't leave her alone! Not with that man!

Her uncle didn't hear her silent protest. He didn't look back and left the room.

"You are wondering, why I want to talk to you, correct?" The stranger walked over to her, pulled a chair over and sat down in front of her. He was smiling friendly. Yukiko felt a shiver run over her spine.

"I knew what you did yesterday ... about two hours past midnight", he whispered. "I saw you running from the house, little thief."

The more he said, the worse she felt, the closer she was to tears. She shook her head slightly. He couldn't have seen her, her star was protecting her! She grabbed it, clutching it with her hand.

"You have a pretty necklace there. May I look at it?"

Yukiko shook her head again. She wouldn't give her star to anyone.

"I won't tell on you", he said friendly. Maybe she was misjudging him? "But I have a condition. There is an artifact I want to have and someone with your talents shouldn't have any problems fetching it, right?"

She started to shiver. He wanted her to steal something for him. Something he wanted out of greed. It was wrong. The whole thought was utterly wrong. She looked to the side. Hopefully he would give up, noticing that it didn't bear fruit.

His fingers touched her chin, forcing her to look at him. "The alternative is, that I imprison you. It is dark, cold and wet there. Do you want that?"

She shook her head.

"Good, then let's get to it right now. The sooner you get me that artefact, the sooner I forget about you trespassing and stealing." He smiled, stood up once again and went over to the stone portal. Yukiko followed him, knowing that she didn't have a choice in that matter. Why hasn't her star protected her?

The impatient man pulled a heavy lever. It sparked as it made contact, a deep buzzing sound filled the room and the stones on the portal started to glow in a deep orange-red. Electricity coiled around the stones, jumping from one side to another, the air between the stones started to glimmer. Between them the scenery changed and she could make out a green field, bathing in the light of the moon.

The stranger went behind her and pushed her forward and through the portal. For a short moment everything felt ice-cold, as if she had jumped into a lake in winter. But just before the cold could start to burn her skin, everything had stopped. They were standing on the field she had only just before seen.

Unfortunately the stranger was still behind her, his hands on her shoulders. He forced her to look to the left and between a few sharp and high stones she could see a large structure. Judging from its size it was a few miles away.

“Somewhere down there is the eye of flows. It is a purple opal, surrounded by two silver waves. Just about the size of my hand.” He put his hand in front of her eyes to drive the point home. It was large, but hard and cold, very cold. “I do not care how you get it”, he explained, forming his hand into a fist, “but I want to hold it in my hand. If you bring it to me, I may think of giving you a reward. Don’t disappoint me!”

He waited behind her a few moments, not saying anything. Maybe he wanted to be sure that she hadn’t any more questions; that she understood what he wanted. Then he turned and vanished through the portal. A moment later the deep buzzing went quiet.

She sank to the ground, shivering. She thought the cold she had felt before was grasping her very heart. Sobbing she called for her mother, hoped that she would answer, that this all was only a bad nightmare. But no matter what she tried, she didn’t wake up. This reality held her captive ...

As she had no more tears, she followed the destiny before her. The first rays of the sun lit up the field, as if to taunt her. She kept on trotting down the hill and towards the large structure. Hour upon hour went by and it seemed to her as if it wouldn’t come any nearer.

At noon she arrived at the doors to the building, breaking down, exhausted. She hadn't eaten for more than a day. She was hungry and thirsty. She let herself fall into the soft grass. Her thoughts began to wander. If she died now ... maybe she would see her mother again? Her father? Somehow it was a calming thought. She wasn't afraid at all.

"Help me", someone cried near her. A few feet were rushing around her. Naked feet.

"A girl? You don't want to ..."

"We have to help her! As soon as she is better, she will leave again."

"I do not like this idea."

"She is only a child! What do you think she will do?"

"I am only thinking that we should be careful." The one sighed. "She is strangely dressed."

Someone helped her back on her feet. "She is conscious."

"Are you well? What happened?" Someone asked.

"Hungry", she managed to say, "and thirsty."

The man nodded to some of the others and they vanished through the gate.

"I still think it is a bad idea."

"Just help me to get her onto the courtyard. The eye won't judge us for helping." She was lifted onto the back of the other man and was carried through the gate. On the other side she was put on a stone bench.

Tired she looked past the men and onto the open courtyard. What she saw made her hold her breath. She had to be dreaming!

Several men were standing opposed to each other, between them were stones floating, moving fast from one man to another as if thrown, but every time, just before it could hit one, it stopped midair and flew back the way it came.

“What is that?” Yukikos voice was still weak.

“Soup”, the man next to her answered, a wooden bowl in his hand and in it a delicious smelling soup. Just for a moment she forgot what she saw and started eating.

It tasted as good as it smelled, even if slightly strange. She emptied the bowl within a minute and held it out for seconds. “May I get some more?” She asked friendly.

He took the bowl and gave it to another, who went away. “How did you come here? Where are your parents”, the man next to her inquired.

Her mood got dampened immediately. “They are dead”, she answered, looking onto the dirt floor. She felt hot tears welling up again.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” He sounded genuine and seemed uneasy sitting next to her.

She fought her sadness. Why had she had to lose her parents? It wasn’t fair!

She quietly ate the second bowl as it was given to her.

As she finished she looked back into the courtyard. “Would you teach me the trick with those stones?”

“No”, the man answered. “Even should I want to, I am bound by the laws, to teach you the way of the eye.”

Her fantasies about stopping that impatient man, to force him not to tell anyone, died instantly. “I understand”, she answered although she didn’t understand at all.

“I am allowed to offer you to stay for the night. But you have to go the next day. The eye doesn’t take kindly to strangers.”

Was that why the impatient man wanted her to steal the eye of flows? But if it didn’t take kindly to her as well, what should she do then? She only had one chance, to find out. “Thank you”, she answered and tried to smile.

“Poor girl”, the man stood up. “Follow me. I will show you a room where you can stay for the night.”

He waited a moment until she got up as well and followed him. Curious she looked to the men again, but she couldn't make out a movement or anything that gave their secret away.

A few men scowled at her as she went through another big door deeper into the complex. The narrow stone corridors were lit by few torches and window slits. She wondered why. Were there no bulbs around?

The man guided her to a small chamber that was barely lit by the sun. Inside were two large blankets, nothing more. They didn't even know of beds. “You may rest there”, he said friendly enough.

She nodded as she could use some sleep. Deep inside she was hurting that she had to take something from these nice people. If they would have allowed her to stay, things would have been different. Tears were rising once again into her eyes.

“I'll ... come back later, when dinner will be served”, the man mumbled, closing the door behind him as he left.

Yukiko laid down on the lower blanket, pulling the upper one over her body. Was there no way for her to stay in this world and hide? There was nothing for miles and even if she went into one direction and got lucky to find someone, who would take her in?

Her tears quietly dropped onto the lower blanket. Closing her eyes she once again begged from her star and prayed to her mother, hoping that help might come to her.



Yukiko awoke from a nightmare. The details were fading fast, but she was sure the impatient one had been in it, laughing maniacally.

Moonlight was lighting her chamber and a tablet filled with bread and fruits. He had come back as he promised.

She crawled over to the food and took some bread. She hesitated a moment before biting into the bread ... a moment later she felt like being in heaven. It was so soft and delicious. Tears of happiness streamed down her chin ... and turned into bitter tears. Why did she have to take from these people?

She just ate enough bread and fruits to satiate her hunger. Taking the eye of flows would already make her appear greedy.

She opened the door carefully and sneaked into the corridor. Of course she had no idea where she had to search, so she followed her intuition on this one. She followed the barely lit corridor in one direction, hoping not to run into anyone. She hadn't had time for her usual stake-outs.

The building seemed empty, as if everyone inside had vanished overnight. The girl kept being careful, exploring the corridors, sneaking through the shadows. The night was the time for thieves for a reason.

After a while she found a great wooden door. The picture of a stormy sea was carved into one side and the calm land on the other side, in the middle something fell from the sky separating but also joining the two pictures together. It was beautiful.

She didn't stay for long and went through the door, only to stand in a large, brightly lit room. It was not only lit by a few torches on the side of the room, but also by the tip of the pyramid that stood within the room.

Platforms were built on top of one another, separated by stone columns. Right on the top of this pyramid hovered a bright purplish-blue light. That column was the only one that connected down to the floor.

Was that the eye? The target she had to steal? She gulped and took a step forward. Somehow she felt drawn towards the light and started climbing. It didn't take her long until she stood right next to it, watching the bright light intently.

It was the eye as it had been described to her, a purple opal, surrounded by two waves of silver. It hovered there and turned into the directions of the waves, spinning slowly without anyone having touched it or anything attached to it. It was like pure magic.

She reached for it, wanted to touch the treasure, take it.

"I thought so", a voice startled her. She stopped in her motion. "Back away from the eye and you won't face a harsh punishment!"

Yukiko cursed under her breath. She had been careless. She had been so fascinated by the target that she hadn't checked. Her hands sank and she turned.

"Very good", the man smiled. He was the one that had been against her staying. "Now come down from there." She didn't move. She failed. "Now move, come down from there!" The man got impatient and made a step towards the pyramid and then ... he stopped. In between his anger she noticed something else ... he was insecure. "Come down her you damnable brat!" He made another step forward and was repelled. He came to stop a few feet away, lying on the stone floor.

He couldn't come close to the eye and with him down for the count, she had another chance! She just had to grab it and run. She turned and grabbed it, her right hand getting hold of one of the waves.

For a moment it felt like a warm ocean wave washing over her. Then that touch turned into a deep burning sensation, that seemed to consume her hand and then her arm. She felt a shock through her whole body. Her eyes found the spot where her hand had grabbed the eye.

The one wave oozed across her skin like liquid metal, crawling up her arm and starting to cover her whole body.

She tried to pull her hand loose, but it was as if it had melted into her hand already. She couldn't move away and watched helplessly as the metal crawled up her arm, burning her. She cried out. From pain. From fear.

"The eye is punishing you", the man snickered, laughed. "Now you will feel its full wrath!"

There was suddenly wind within the room, the man looked around, puzzled. Then there was bright lightning from the opal, and a noise of shattering glass. She looked once again at the opal. Its pieces were carried away by the wind, the silver of the waves was resting on her arm like a second skin.

"What is happening?" She turned again to look at the man. His voice had changed and his appearance as well. He had aged and looked like an old man. An old man with fear in his eyes. A moment later he changed into dust and was carried away by the wind as well.

The wind grew into a storm, breaking the stones of the pyramid apart, the stones of the ceiling above her, the walls.

The silver on her skin started to burn again, glowing red-orange. She could see steam raising from her arm and dissipating in the wind, as the pain became unbearable and she lost consciousness.



Something cold was drilled into her cheek, bringing her back from the darkness.

“She is coming to, Major Bradley.” The cold thing vanished and Yukiko opened her eyes. What had happened? Her Arm wasn’t burning anymore and the wind had died down. She could see the clear blue sky above her.

She moved her arm. It didn’t hurt, it hadn’t vanished and there was no silver covering it. Instead she had a strange mark on the back of her right hand.

“Good morning, Yukiko.” The voice of the impatient man caused a cold sensation to run over her spine. “I hope you slept well.” She moved slightly and saw his face. He smiled broadly. “It is a strange location to sleep. You should have found a room for the night.”

The girl looked around. There were some stone walls, mostly overgrown with plants. Just some walls were all that was left from the large structure. Even that stone pyramid was in ruins, covered with cracks and broken down. “What has happened here?”

“That, young lady, is what I want to know as well”, the impatient one answered. “But there is something even more important: Where is the eye of flows? Be a dear and give it to me.”

“The eye ...” it broke apart before her very eyes. But she couldn’t tell him that, could she? He probably wouldn’t believe her. There were not even splinters of it lying around. “I don’t know.”

“And you suppose I should trust the word of a little thief?” His smile vanished. “You have one more chance to tell me where you have hidden it.”

“I haven’t hidden it at all”, she started to cry, tears of desperation running over her cheek. “I don’t have it.”

He grabbed her clothing and pulled her upwards. With a single aimed grip he tore her star from her neck.

“Give it back! That is my star!”

“I take your ... star as compensation for the eye. I don't think you can complain.” He let her fall to the floor. “Lock her away.”

“Give it back!” Yukiko came back up, tried to get her star back, but she was held down by soldiers.

“Get her into our special dungeon until she remembers, where she hid the eye.” He didn't even turn to her and climbed out of the ruins. The soldiers grabbed her below the arms and followed him.

“Give it back”, she started to cry, hot tears dropping towards the ground, while they dragged her back from the ruins and through the gate again.

The journey back took them several hours. Hours in which Yukiko started to hate her life. In a few days she had lost everything dear to her: Her father, her mother and now her star.

The basement on the other side of the gate was dark, her uncle was nowhere to be seen. He had left her as well.

Major Bradley turned to her once again. “I am benevolent, so I will give you another change.” He held her star in front of her eyes. “Where is the artifact?”

She didn't answer. She knew that she couldn't change anything. He would punish her as well, if she told him that it was destroyed.

“Very well, get her into one of the cells.” He ordered and left them. The soldiers just dragged her further, one story deeper and threw her into a small round cell with a glass door.

She couldn't hear anything and she saw the soldiers arguing. One shrugged with his soldiers and then they left. The silence was deafening ... until she heard water dabbling. She stood up, her heart beating up to her

throat. Water was running into the cell she was standing in, first collecting into a small pool on the bottom, growing larger and larger. Why?

The water was cold, stealing the warmth from her legs fast, climbing higher and higher. She began to cry for help. Nobody heard her, nobody came.

The water climbed higher and higher, enveloping her whole body. Soon she had to struggle to keep her head over water. She moved her legs, but they felt numb from the cold. She started to gulp water, gasped for air. She panicked, tried to pedal faster with her legs. A burning pain in her legs made them stop. She sank down beneath the surface. Her instinct wanted her to breath, but she knew she couldn't. She tried to hold her breath while trying to get over her cramping legs. Then her strength faded, she gulped water.

Everything jerked, the water started flowing somewhere, she gasped for air, started to cough. There was water in her lungs.

“Have you lost your mind, Bradley?” It was the voice of her uncle.

That is Colonel Bradley for you, Major!”

Most of the water had vanished, but some of it was left in her clothing, still stealing her warmth. Everything was just so cold, so very cold ...

“That promotion, doesn't give you the right to do this”, her uncle was furious. She could feel his big hands and the warmth of his body.

“Thieves don't have any rights in this country, regardless of age.”

He told him ... he told him! What would he do now? Would he leave her there? Would he put her back in that dreadful cell and let her drown? Everything was so cold and it was hard to breathe.

She could make out some noise and there was some light before her, a weak light. But something held her back, didn't let her go to that light.

She was so cold ... why couldn't she move to the light? She was frozen to the ground. That is why she couldn't go. She tried to escape, but her strength was failing her.

Then the Light vanished and the ice that held her turned into fire. Flames started to engulf her and that terrible heat seemed to burn her. Then she started to hear some voices again. "High fever", "improbable", "a few days", were some of the words she understood.

Hours went by ... or days, maybe even weeks or months? Suddenly the fire around her died down.

She opened her eyes once again. Far above her was a wooden ceiling. Someone had put her into a warm and dry bed; her black clothes had been replaced by a white nightgown.

Her uncle had saved her. She tried to grab her star that should have been on her breast in order to thank him. It wasn't there and the painful memory of Bradley stealing it, brought tears to her eyes.

A door creaked. Her uncle was standing in the door frame and looked at her, his eyes wet, a smile on his lips. "You are alive", he whispered. But somehow it seemed as if he had gotten ten years older. He stumbled closer to her and hugged her hard. "I am so sorry, so very,very sorry!"

He whispered those words again and again and again. Finally he released the hug and put his hand to her forehead. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Why was he crying? He seemed so glad before to see her being better and now ... he seemed sad. Finally he leaned back, fetching a small chest. He opened it before her eyes, pulling her blue necklace from it.

She smiled, relieved. He had gotten her star back. She wanted to jump up and hug him, but he just shook his head, starting to speak those words of destiny, words that burned themselves into her memory.

She saw how her star lit up, a gleaming bright blue light within the darkness of her room. She could see shining waves of water rushing down on her, engulfing her.

She tried to move back out of fear, crawled backwards, one step, another ... and then she couldn't move any more. She was held in place. As she saw her hands move without her telling them to, she started to realize that she was a prisoner within her own body.

Prisoner



Yukiko felt as if her whole body was packed in between balls of cotton. Her fingers tried to find her blanket, but she didn't even feel it. She couldn't see it either, her sight was extremely blurred and to top it all off, her ears were permanently ringing. When she got something to eat, everything tasted the same ... bland and bad and her sense of smell had left her a while ago.

How many days has it been since her uncle came into her room with that blue stone? She had given up on wanting to flee, every time she was held back by the words and the light from the stone, forcing her to follow him.

She could hear the door opening despite the constant ringing in her ears. Fear gripped her hand like a cold hand. She felt already as if her body was wrapped in ice, as always when that stone was activated. Thought her hands were moving, despite her wanting not to move at all, saw the ice shooting forth from her body, drilling into the target bodies.

“So, this is where you keep your newest secret weapon?” It was a man, another stranger and he seemed curious.

“I am sure you will be surprised.” The voice of that man alone seemed to take every warmth out of the room.

“What is with the scene and this strange suspense? Reveal it already!”

Yukiko pulled her blanket closer to her body. She wanted to somehow protect herself, to not hear the words. Bradley just jerked the blanket off of her. She kept her eyes closed, waited.

“A ... child?” Silence. For one moment, then another ... “Have you ...” Another moment of silence ensued. “No,

that is not her. She looks completely different. What are you playing here, Bradley? I hope for you that this is some kind of joke.”

“A joke? Oh no, this is far from a joke. It is just that this weapon seems very harmless ... without the remote.”

Yukiko used her hands to block out every sound. She didn't want to hear them, not from him!

She couldn't do anything, she heard his voice directly within her head, noticed how he enjoyed speaking every word, savoring the moment on his tongue, making her a mere doll: “In kagis et seris infinis chikara kaiho!”

The invisible shackles embraced her body softly. Then she opened her eyes, her body no longer shivering. She looked around, taking in the scenery, noticing the smile on Bradleys face. Normally it would have caused a ripple of fear to run down her spine.

“So? I have to admit that she looks less afraid now, but I do not see how it will help us with the war.” The one man closest to her put a hat on his head and turned around, nodding to the other stranger. “Our Boss hates jokes, especially bad ones.”

Yukikos right hand raised, a spear of ice formed in front of her head and drilled itself through the body of that man.

“As I told you before, this is not a joke.” Bradley looked to the other man. “Do you want more proof?”

The other one gulped. “I am inclined to hear you out”, he answered and used a tissue to wipe the blood from his face. “I suppose you have prepared something to demonstrate her power?”

“But of course, if you want to follow me?” He left the room first and the stranger followed him. Yukiko was the last to leave.

In front of the house there were some dummies made out of hay and even a tank. Yukiko set foot on the demonstration field.

“I hope you brought warm clothing”, Bradley commented and pulled a hood over his head.

Yukiko felt the ice running through her veins, leaving her body and dropping down onto the dirt. The floor cracked open to reveal a pale blue light, those cracks rapidly finding their targets. About fifty of them were speared by ice shooting out of the ground, the ice immobilizing the tanks, covering them within a thick layer of frozen water.

The sky became black, the upcoming wind only helped to cool down the field even more. Lightning struck, it began to rain and the rain quickly became a hailstorm.

Yukiko could see the stranger out of the corner of her eye. His eyes were opened in fear and he clutched his hat in one hand.

The weather calmed down as fast as it got back, leaving the demonstration battlefield in a frozen mess. “Not even ten seconds”, the black man whispered. A moment later he seemed to find his posture again, removing sweat from his forehead with a tissue. He looked over to Bradley. “How many of these weapons can you procure?”

“For now only this one”, he answered and removed his grip from Yukiko. She felt the shackles fell off of her, making her fall over onto the cold ground. Every ounce of power had vanished from her body.

“I can conclude that there are more than one of these weapons? How likely is it that one of our enemies has one?” The stranger got closer to her and put a hand to her forehead. It was rough and big but also warm.

“It is very unlikely. They might find one component, but they will never find all three parts necessary to operate it.”

“Very good.” The stranger left her and went back to Bradley. “Would you kindly hand me the remote? I will talk to the AI to have you join our circle.”

“I am awaiting a positive answer”, Bradley said as he handed her stone to him.

“I am very sure that the answer will please you.” The stranger now recited the words that made her into his slave. Power cursed once gain through her body and she stood up, going to a black Limousine. She hopped into the back seat and a moment later the shackles were removed from her once again. She fell to the site, exhausted. The stranger put his black jacket onto her upper body and sat next to her in the car.

She could still see Bradleys cold eyes on her and then on the stranger next to her. He turned as the driver started the car. Yukiko hoped she wouldn't see him ever again.



“Come with me!” The gruff voice of the man woke her. She had a headache and there was no time to recover at all.

The blue gem hung before her eyes as a warning, just outside her reach. She reached out desperately, wanting to get it back, but the man didn't let her get it. She looked at him angry, but he just signaled her with his hand that she had to get out of the car.

She had no choice. For now she could only hope that he would treat her better than Bradley, if she followed his orders.

As he held a hand out to her, she took it, and followed him, not without stepping into a puddle. They slowly went around the car.

“You want us to negotiate with a child this time?” A man in grey clothing looked at her.

“Maybe he wants to turn and brought his daughter with him?” Another man whispered to the first one – loud enough that everyone could hear it.

“The AI gave me every right to negotiate with you”, Yukikos jailer spoke. “You may call me Olsen, general Ruhn.”

“What is it you want to do with that child, Mister Olsen?”

“You will see later, General. First I want to negotiate the conditions of your capitulation.”

“You are kidding.”

Olsen didn't answer.

“You sent us a message that you wanted to negotiate the conditions of capitulation!”

“Yes. But we never mentioned who is to waive the white flag, is that not correct General?”

“I see. The AI has gotten crazy and wants to see his land die.” He turned. “What a waste of time.”

“Don't be so harsh, please wait a moment.” Yukiko saw him grabbing harder on to her gem. “You should know already that we tend to be serious.”

“My secretary is more capable of bluffing than you, even if he whispers his comments too loud to even be able to bluff.” The other man opened the door to a car for the general.

“In kagis et seris infinis chikara kaiho!” Olsen let go of Yukikos hand as blue flames started to envelop her body.

The general hesitated while sitting down, looking at the girl that made a few steps towards him, a bit of fear now visible in his eyes.

“Have you ever thought of the possibility that this is a bad bluff, because I never bluffed in the first place?”

The blue flames crept across the floor like a carpet of water, spilling where Yukiko was standing. The tires of the general’s car lit up with flames. He jumped out, only to see the car burning with flames a moment later.

“I see, that girl is a new weapon.” The general managed to smile, despite all his sweat on his forehead. “I just need to destroy it.”

“Then, my dear general”, Yukiko made a few steps towards him, “let us see if I am faster or your tanks.” Yukiko shuddered deep inside. Olsen could even speak through her.

“Fire!” The general called, turned and ran, jumping over some of the blue flames. His car burned into a block of ice. The earth began to quake, ripping apart, the cracks glowing blue. The general stopped in his steps just before ice shot from the ground, creating a prison with bars of frozen water.

“You are the guest of honor for this small demonstration. We can’t let you leave just yet.” Olsen was grinning broadly, holding Yukiko’s makeshift necklace into the air above him, it was glowing a bright blue.

“Fire already”, the other man shouted.

Several detonations made them flinch as their cannons burst, a thunderstorm on the ground. Only a few shells made it towards Olsen, crashing into a thick wall of ice before they even travelled half their way.

More ice broke out of the ground, spearing through several tanks. Ice grew around that other man, enclosing his feet and slowly his legs and the rest of his body. As his heart was enclosed in ice, Yukiko was sure that he would die soon.

The blue glow finally faded, the general's army was defeated. Only the general himself was still alone, shaking from both fear and cold, probably. The snow below him slowly turned yellow.

Yukiko stepped towards him. "Now, to get back to negotiating your capitulation", she said and touched one of the ice bars. It burst, making a hole big enough for him to climb out – or her to get in. "I trust you will accept us making all the rules?"

The general nodded. Smiling she returned to the Car and got back in on the backseat. The shackles fell off of her. Olsen came back to her a few minutes later. He looked at her and stroke over her head, without saying a word.

Exhausted she drifted to sleep as the car started up once again.



Her hand was burning, a deep pain that seemed to extend to her whole body, it seemed to be everywhere, as if every limb and organ of her body hurt.

The eye was still punishing her after all that. She hadn't had any choice in the matter!

She awoke to her own scream. Her body was hot and she sweated. A dream. She slowly got up and looked at her right hand and the sign there. It glowed red and gave some light within the deep darkness.

She had been locked away once again. At least her body didn't feel numb anymore. For how long had she been asleep? Maybe she was getting used to it?

She put the blanket aside and got up, her feet feeling every nook and cranny of the uneven wood below her. She heard the wind blowing and steps from before the

door. She could see everything despite the darkness. She looked back at her hand, the red glow had vanished. She started to wonder if this all was only a cruel joke or if she had really been presented with a chance to escape.

Yukiko pulled her hairpins from her hair hidden just before her ponytail. She sneaked towards the door and used them to unlock it. Her heart was beating fast as she slowly opened the door.

No one stood there. Her new guard had left, probably thinking that she wouldn't wake up and escape, not knowing that she had been a thief in her past.

She felt like the luck of her star shone once again upon her. Her star! Where was her star? Was it still with Olsen? Should she risk searching for it?

Whatever she decided on, she couldn't stay where she was. She closed the door behind her and ran down the dark corridor. She could only hope to not be somewhere below the ground anymore. It would more than complicate her escape. Around the corner she suddenly saw a window. A bit of light shone through it, but it was an indicator that she was above ground. She went to it and looked outside, standing up on her toes to see the ground below. She was almost triumphing deep inside.

On the other side of that window was her freedom! She only needed to get her star, she couldn't flee without it, couldn't let it stay with any of these men. She had to find Olsen and take her star back. But where was he? She had no other choice than to search for him.

She took a deep breath and another, before she ran and started to search the house. Most of the rooms of the upper floor were empty, but lined with expensive interior and none of them had her star. She guessed that it was very likely that Olsen still had it with him.

After an hour of searching she found a door guarded by two men. To see inside that room, she had to find another entrance. Perhaps she could get in through a window? But maybe that one wasn't Olsen's room. Maybe someone waited inside there?

She thought about leaving her star back where it was. It was not only the last thing she had from her once happy family, but it was also the one thing that had tortured her. A part of her couldn't leave it.

She went back and entered one of the rooms next to that one. It only took a few moments and she was outside that window, climbing over the sill to the next room. The window was opened slightly, but not far enough to let her get into it.

There was someone sleeping in that room. The person seemed ... bigger than Olsen. Not in height, but in width. She concluded that he wasn't the one she was looking for. But where was Olsen? She had almost searched every room and the sun was coming up at the horizon. Her time was growing short, too short.

She resigned and decided to leave without it for now. She could come back later and steal it then, for now she would enjoy her freedom. She jumped down from the sill towards the ground below and ran through the grass to the nearby woods.

She leaned against a tree, catching her breath. Looking back she decided to try and find it once again in the next night. They probably would start searching for her and she had just to avoid them until they were past her. They never would think of her coming back and stealing her star the next night.

Maybe she should climb the tree and escape from there to another one, to mask her trail. For now she took in the silence around her and smiled.

“In Kagis”, someone said directly within her head. “Et Seris Infinis”, she started running again. She was nowhere near it, why did she hear them? “Chikara Kaiho!” Her limbs got heavy in an instant, the magical shackles taking hold of her and she stopped.

She turned like a puppet and went back towards the house. Why couldn't she escape this prison?

Soon she stood before Olsen once again. He didn't say a word, but she could see that he was angry. “Come with me”, he ordered her, but set her free again.

Maybe if she was fast she could steal her star from him and run again. But what would happen if she didn't succeed?

He looked again at her. His gaze almost let her blood turn to stone. For now she would have to follow his words and not make him angrier. She had to wait, even if it was hard. She nodded and followed him back into the house.

“Ah, Mister Olsen”, a broad, tall man with a mustache and several rings came down the stairs. “You were outside at this time in the morning?”

“It was necessary. It seems as if she had an urge ... to run.” He took his hat off and smiled towards the stranger.

“A weapon with an urge to run?” He lifted an eyebrow. “You had warned me that she is very unusual, but running?”

“Yes, Al.” Olsen took a step to the side, pushing Yukiko forwards. “This is her.”

“You jest, don't you?” The Al looked her up and down. “Does she have a name?”

Silence. Olsen couldn't answer the question. Yukiko looked down. He was nicer than Bradley, but for him she also was just a weapon, a thing.

“Tell the Al your name”, Olsen said and put his hands on her shoulder, squeezing them.

“Yu...” she gulped. Her voice was a bit raw. “Yukiko.”

“That is a girl”, the AI observed. “Out of flesh and blood!” He looked back and forth between her and Olsen. “What is this trickery?”

Olsen held out her star once again. “She becomes a weapon with this artefact and when she does, nothing can stop her. General Ruhn capitulated before her, letting us choose the conditions.”

“General Ruhn? Very interesting.” The AI began to smile himself. “I got the message from Portras already. The next country on our list should be Sanzein. After she rested, you should go to the west and end this war there.”

“As you wish, my AI.” Olsen put the hat back on and stepped aside, taking Yukiko with him. The AI went by them without saying a word, vanishing outside. Only after he was long out of earshot, Olsen bowed down to Yukiko. “What do you think of breakfast?”

Yukiko looked up to him. What was he trying to do? She nodded, testing the waters. Maybe he wasn’t that bad. But maybe he just wanted to earn her trust, not wanting a repeat of what happened tonight. She looked at his back while following him.

“Don’t disappear on me again. It will cause trouble for us both”, he said. So she was right. He wanted to earn her trust to protect himself. She wasn’t that important to him. Trouble for them both ... she couldn’t be in more trouble as she already were. She would try to flee again, but this time not without her star. That much was certain.



On the way back from the front the mark on her right hand started to glow again, taking the rest of her power.

But this was the first time she didn't feel any pain. Instead her hand just vanished from in front of her eyes.

She muffled a cry. The eye wanted to punish her further, to let her vanish without trace.

Olsen looked back at her and slowed the car. "What is happening to you?" Somehow he showed sorrow in his voice and turned back to her. He put a hand to her forehead. It felt a lot warmer than her. "Hey, stay with me", he shouted and grabbed her shoulders.

To vanish was a very strange sensation. It didn't hurt at all, just a strange tingling on her strange. A nice tingling.

"Come back this instant, young lady", he hit her with his hand. The tingling vanished instantly as the pain shoved every other sensation aside. She started to cry. "I am sorry", he said and caressed her head. "I can't let you vanish."

Yukiko looked back at her hand. It had reappeared. Had he just saved her life? Or was there something else? She tried to remember that nice tingling feeling, the soft touch to her skin.

The mark on her hand reacted and started to glow again. Her hand vanished once again before her eyes. She let go of the feeling and it returned instantly. She looked back to Olsen, who was still very concerned. Had she just learned to turn invisible? Had destiny provided her with a new opportunity to escape?

"Thank you, I am fine now", she answered and started to smile.



The AI waited in front of his house as they came back. "Very good, Mister Olsen. We are making very good

progress. Our goddess of destruction is working hard towards our goal.”

Someone opened the door for her and she left the car. She had to wait until the night before implementing her plan. Maybe she could use the time to find out where Olsen was sleeping.

“Come with me, we have important things to discuss, one of them being which country we will conquer next. They will regret, ever messing with me!” The AI’s voice changed to a menacing one, like sandpaper being rubbed over a rough stone.

Yukiko followed them, listening intently on everything they were saying. It might help her to find her target the next night.

“We need to be alone”, the AI suddenly told his guards. They looked at him questioningly, took a hold of Yukiko and turned to leave.

“The girl will be staying at my side”, Olsen said, authority in his voice. The guards looked again towards the AI and as he nodded, let her go.

“Explain this, Olsen”, the AI wanted to know as the guards were out of the room.

“The girl has the tendency to vanish. I want to keep her in sight.”

The AI looked on and lifted an eyebrow. “Very well. I think it unlikely that she is the spy.”

“A spy?” With this the AI had both of their attention.

“There are some rumors about Yukiko here, and the problem is that most of them are true.”

“So we have a traitor amidst our most trusted men.”

“Our neighbors want to keep peace all of a sudden, but I know from my own spies, that they sent agents to steal that stone. Their secondary objective is to assassinate either me or her.” The AI nodded towards Yukiko.

Yukiko gulped again. Now she was targeted by some strangers that wanted to kill her. She had to flee with her star and couldn't waste any more time.

"I see", Olsen answered. "I propose that we should not meet again in person. If an assassin strikes at least one target should be safe for a while."

The AI nodded. "Maybe you are right, if we were together and one of them would get hold of the blue gem, he could easily kill me as well. Olsen, you are one of my best men, I trust you to do the right thing. You know what we are trying to accomplish."

"Yes, sir", Olsen nodded and turned. He took Yukiko's hand and led her out of the room and up to her own. Soon she found herself waiting for the night again. Sighing she sat down on the bed and was startled by a strange sound. She put the blanket to the side and found a piece of paper. It was an exact plan of the building's interior, depicting all rooms and who was staying where. Could she trust this plan? Was there really someone out there that wanted to help her escape?

She looked at it again, comparing the layout with her memory. The plan seemed accurate. She could only hope that it was right on where Olsen's room was, and with that, her star.



Finally, after a long period of waiting, the lights in the corridor outside died. Yukiko waited about an hour longer, before unlocking the lock and sneaking through the house again, the plan committed to her memory. She took the most direct route to Olsen's room, using her new skill to sneak by the guards that were posted outside the AI's room.

Two more corners later and she stood before her target. The door was locked as well, but that didn't stop her. She kneeled down and worked on unlocking it.

Suddenly she heard steps. Taking a step back she let her tools vanish in her hand and concentrated on staying invisible.

A moment later of the guards stood in the corridor behind her, looking straight through her at the door. With a puzzled look he kept staring, then shrugged and returned to where he was. Yukiko went back on unlocking the door, opening it and slipping inside, just before the guard returned to check on the corridor once again.

She looked around in the room, hoping that Olsen wouldn't wear her star around his neck. Then she saw it, sparkling in the moonlight. It just lay there on the small table besides his bed. She sneked closer and closer, one more step ... only one grab.

She hesitated. Somehow this all was easy, much too easy. But then again, the chance to escape was right before her eyes, she had to grab it. Carefully she picked up the blue gem, fastening around her own neck once again and vanished into invisibility once again. The only thing left to do, was leaving the house.

Olsen suddenly got up, his hand searching for the gem in vain. He looked straight at her. She made a step backwards, meeting the wall behind her. The tingling on her skin became weaker and she concentrated more on letting it stay.

He grabbed a pistol from below his pillow and looked around the room.

He couldn't see her! He mustn't see her. She had to keep her invisibility up. She couldn't give up now or he would see her.

“Shit!” Olsen got up and ran to the door, finding it unlocked. He looked on the corridor. Should she try and follow him outside or should she wait here and escape through the window? She had to decide. Fast.

Olsen ran out onto the corridor, making her mind up for her. She had to be fast. Yukiko ran to the window, unlocking it with few practiced moves, opened it. Cold wind greeted her. The door slammed shut. Shivering she looked behind her. Olsen wasn't inside the room, not yet. She climbed through the window, down the sill, letting herself fall the last few feet.

Her legs hurt as she came down. She fell backwards. The next she saw was Olsen at the window. He looked like a haunted ghost. Then he just shot randomly. She shivered, hearing the bullets impact somewhere close. Her concentration broke, she felt herself becoming visible. She concentrated again, hoping that he hadn't ...

“There you are!” Damn! She got up and ran, hoping that darkness and invisibility would protect her.

A muffled noise let her turn around again. Olsen had jumped down from the window and ran towards her. Yukiko started running again as fast as she could. He couldn't see her, mustn't see her! Perhaps she could hide beneath one of the cars! She changed course and noticed that Olsen kept on running straight. He had lost her.

Then he stopped, turned and ran once again towards her. How was he doing that? She kept on running, her target was not far.

Suddenly someone stepped into her way. His hand got ahold of her, his fingers digging into her skin painfully.

“So we meet again, good evening, Mister Olsen.” Yukiko recognized the cold voice immediately.

“Bradley”, Olsen breathed. “How did you find here?” He raised his gun and aimed on the major.

“I would be careful, were I you. You do not want to destroy the hope of our land?” Bradley yanked her arm into the sky, disrupting her concentration. “Though I am quite surprised, I didn’t know she could do this.”

“You are trespassing.” Another shot disturbed the silence of the night. Olsen sank down on his knee, clutching his leg.

“I know that I am trespassing and that the Al wouldn’t let me near him ever. I am just not one he can control like a little dog, right, Olsen?” Bradley threw a small pistol to the side. “But I can’t have that. He stands in the way of my plans, so I will have to take his place.”

Bradley ripped Yukikos clothing apart. Her instinct told her to protect her star immediately, but he was far stronger than her. He had it within his hands in a moment and spoke those words. Only as the spell got ahold of her and shackled her once again, he let go of her.

“You should have known, that I wouldn’t give up a weapon like this, if I had no means of getting it back.”

Yukiko went towards Olsen, smiling a smile that was not her own.

Olsen raised his gun. “Let me release you”, he whispered and targeted her heart. Before he could press the trigger, his hand and the pistol were enclosed in ice. He screamed.

“Any last words”, she heard herself ask.

“I ... heard you”, he answered her softly, just before his face turned into ice, white crystals blooming on his skin.

“And now, we shall settle this once and for all, Al.” Bradley sent Yukiko to the other side of the house. She

could just see the red backlights of a car, leaving fast. “You won’t escape me”, Bradley hissed. He whistled and a green car stopped next to him. On his sign the driver got out and made space for him, Yukiko climbing on the front passenger’s seat. The tires screamed and Yukiko was pressed into the seat as they accelerated fast. “Now I need to know how far her range is”, he murmured and her head started to tingle.

A thick icicle missed the car in front by a few foot. Bradley grinned, shifting gears and accelerating further, the engine howling with stress as he somehow maneuvered around that icicle to follow his target with unsafe speeds.

He got a bit closer and then another thick icicle hit the car in front of them. They lost control and the car hit a tree.

As Bradley’s car came up next to the other one, the engine was still letting out steam. He looked into the windows of the other car an evil grin on his lips. She was once again his prisoner. She shouldn’t have tried to get away from Olsen. She had doomed him and herself by doing so.

She screamed without her body reacting to it, only a tear found its way out as desperation got ahold of her once more.

Freedom



Lia looked quietly at the girl. Most of her anger had vanished while she told that story, the tears in the girls eyes and her own feelings telling her that it was all true.

“This”, Yukiko held her right hand up so she could see the mark there, “keeps me prisoner in the body of the twelve year old girl, who foolishly touched the eye of flows.” Taking a deep breath she let her hand sink down again. “It made me unnatural. For all of them I could only be a construct, some sort of weapon. They all hated and feared me, while Bradley kept playing the mighty ruler, the one that had me under his control, the one that kept them safe.”

Lia gulped, the last of her anger vanishing as she could understand the feelings and frustrations of her companion more and more.

“Only after thirteen years I discovered my ability to go through walls. With that new hope I started planning my escape once again. I found out that I was somehow able to use some sort of magic that Bradley didn’t know about.” She shivered. “Then, as we stepped through the portal, I gathered all my courage, stole the tear and ran.” Another deep breath as she relived those moments. “The Soldiers shot at me, they wanted to kill me. I barely escaped into the woods right before Bradley got his soldiers back under control and I my own powers.”

“I didn’t know”, Lia didn’t know what else to say. What could she possibly reply after hearing that story? It all felt true. The girl behaved at several occasions older than she looked.

“As I saw your tear, I knew you had the same problem. I didn’t want you to go through the same destiny as I”,

tears were running down her cheek now. “I never have wanted to do to you, what I had experienced. I wanted to protect you ...”

Lia tried to get a lump out of her throat, tried to gulp it down.

“Forgive me. Please, forgive me”, Yukiko said with a quivering voice, tears dropping down on the stones below.

Lia hesitated. The rational part of her warned, that this story could have been made up, but her other part just wanted to hug tat girl. Yukiko kept on begging and crying, making her rational part loose. She gave in and hugged her. “I forgive you”, she whispered, but those words only served to make her cry even more. She stroke over the girls back, comforting her quietly.

Should she ever meet that Bradley-guy, she would have a talk with him. From dragon to man. But before that, she had something else to do.



Yukiko put her arms around Lia, didn't want to let her go, as all her emotions poured out of her. She remembered her gentle mother once again, the hugs, her warmth ... if only she could go back to those times, to forget Bradley and all he had done to her.

She kept close to Lia, hoping that this moment would last forever now. She felt warm and safe within her arms.

Lia stopped hugging her much too soon. “Why have you never told me?”

“I couldn't”, she answered truthfully. “All those memories ...” Her hand grabbed the clothes in front of her heart, constricting there, wanting the pain to stop. “They hurt”, she whispered, leaning against Lia once

again. Her warmth somehow helped against the agony she felt.

Lia put once again an arm around her shoulders, pulling her a bit closer. She sighed once more and they just sat there, enjoying each other's presence until the pain in Yukikos breast finally faded and her tears stopped.

Lia got up some minutes later, holding her hand out to Yukiko. "Come, we have some things we need to discuss with Phobos."



Phobos put the small chest back under his throne. He had contacted his generals and mobilized his troops. He needed to be careful and he couldn't allow himself to underestimate Dikon. He himself was exceptionally powerful and he had also an army.

Phobos had some powerful allies, too. He had to get those two girls to work with him. If they were loyal to him, he wouldn't have to fear Dikon.

They had to deal with that other girl and he could get Penal to deal with Dikon. Then there was also Felix, who would support him. With these conditions they had a fighting chance. If there now was a dragon on his side ...

"Phobos?"

"Yes?" He turned around to see that Lia and Yukiko had returned. He smiled and folded his arms before his breast. Just feign superiority. Now he just had to handle this right and he would have two allies for the battle to come.

"You wanted us to help you. Now we have a few conditions that we need to talk about." Lia was the one talking, taking charge. Yukiko hid like a frightened child. What had happened between those two?

“What are those?”

“I want your word, that my father and my uncle will stay safe and that you will release him.”

“Very well”, he answered, a smile on his face. He had predicted this much.

“Then I need you to remove the seal on my arm.”

“It will take an hour, tops, and you will be freed”, he answered truthfully. A dragon priest on his side could very much turn the tides, especially if she was able to utilize her full potential.

“And the dragon tears won’t be used in this battle!” The authority in her voice was unexpected. She ordered him not to use them, but he couldn’t let go of it that easily. The enemy was using one and without an equally powerful artefact, he would lose the battle.

“I cannot accept that one”, he answered sternly. “You know that our enemy will be using his.”

“I have a proposal to make”, Yukiko had the courage to step forward again. “I will steal our enemy’s tear.”

Phobos looked at her. That was something that he hadn’t expected at all. He hadn’t even thought of that. “How do you want to do that?”

“I am a thief. I will find a way!” She stood as high as she could. Proud.

Phobos sighed. “You shouldn’t be proud of being a thief”, he answered. “And knowing him, you should have a plan or two beforehand.” He sat down on his throne. “Especially considering that the battle will commence as soon as we meet each other on the battle field and we don’t have any possibility to teleport to him. So how will you take his tear?”

Yukiko sighed, her shoulders slumping down. “I think that he would be distracted enough during the battle, to steal it unnoticed ...”

“You won’t get near him unnoticed. We both can see you very good, if you try to become invisible.”

“Maybe we can create additional illusions that would trick him, if there would be an army that only he sees?”

Phobos intertwined his fingers and leaned forwards. “That might actually work. If he sees multiple of you he might be distracted, trying to find the real you, giving you the opportunity to steal the tear.” He started to smile. “And I know exactly the person, who would be up for the job.”

Yukiko seemed not that thrilled to work with another person, but it seemed the best plan at the moment. And they needed to free that girl as well.

“I accept your conditions.” He nodded once and looked into Lias eyes. “Now, my fair lady, we shall marry in three days.”



Lia slumped her shoulders, she had completely forgotten that crazy plan of his. “What is, when I don’t want to?”

Her question had completely taken him off-guard. He let his hands sink, staring at her. “What do you mean?”

“I ...” She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. “I love someone else.” Lia wasn’t even sure if it was really love or if she just used her feelings for him as an excuse.

“What ...” Phobos seemed at a loss for words. “We shall talk about this again, after the battle is over.”

“A battle! Finally!” Someone passed Lia and his voice woke bad memories. A black leather coat, black hair ...

“In a few hours. Dikon won’t hesitate in the slightest.”

“Good!”

“You are ...” Lia gulped. He was the one who left her with that seal on her arm.

The black haired one turned, looked at her and Yukiko, his smile vanishing instantly. “You ...”

“Penal!” Phobos voice cut into whatever he wanted to say. “These are our allies!”

“I see.” He still seemed as if he wanted to kill them where they stood.

“I need you to remove the seal from her arm again.”

His face drained of all color he turned around. “That girl is a menace! Our troops will be in danger!”

“She is a valuable asset to our troops.”

“The dragon had control of her, only that seal is keeping us safe!”

“Trust me, we will be safe even then.” Phobos stood up and came closer. “She won’t hurt you or any of us and she has the dragon under control.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know that she is more than she seems to be.”

Penal grumbled and turned. “Get naked!”

Lia made a few steps back. “You are crazy!” she pulled her clothing even closer to her body.

“I need to touch the seal to remove it!”

Lia looked to Yukiko, who shrugged. Then she pulled a part of her clothing off so he could get to the seal. “That should be enough!”

“Yes, it is enough.” Penal came closer, grinning. “This will hurt”, he said and drilled both middle and index finger into her skin. “Very much!”

As he let go and turned away, she started to feel the burning sensation once again, the pain caused by the seal. The heat permeated her whole body, as if she was burning alive, the flames taking her air, she couldn’t

breathe. She sank on her knees, becoming weaker and weaker by the moment, her vision fading and then ...

It ended. She didn't feel any pain anymore. She took a few deep breaths and looked upon her shoulder. The edges of the seal were glowing orange-red, eating away at the black mark until her shoulder returned to the way it was before the seal had been placed on her.

"She recovered too fast for a human", penal grumbled. You never thought of telling me that she is half dragon as well?" He glared at Phobos.

"It wasn't necessary for your mission", he smiled.

Penal curled a fist but didn't say anything more. He looked over her and Yukiko. "She should rest the few hours before the battle begins or the dragon will overwhelm even her. The seal has stolen all her power."

"I will see to it", a young man in a white robe came in and helped her up.

"Thank you, Serin", Phobos nodded and turned to Penal again. As they left she didn't pay any attention to what they were saying anymore.

He lead her through the many corridors of the castle and into a room with a big, soft bed. As she sat down he nodded once and left her alone.

“Your excellency”, a friendly male voice woke her from her dreamless sleep.

She struggled opening her eyes. She still felt weak and would rather stay in bed the whole day, but then she noticed movement next to her. She turned her head, her heart pounding all of a sudden as certain memories rushed back.

She sighed a breath of relief as Yukiko stretched and got up. Serin stood a moment longer in the doorway, nodded and left, closing the door behind him. A few candles lit up the room and a look out of the window told her that the sun wanted to stay in bed a bit longer. She has to have slept a few minutes ... but it couldn't have been much longer.

She stemmed herself onto her arms, getting up as well, her blood taking a bit longer to do the same. Finally she tried standing up. It took her a few moments but then she managed to stand alone and walk around without falling.

“You should dress in your robe”, Yukiko commented. She got something white out of her chest and threw it to her. It was clean, washed and ... repaired.

“It took me a few hours, but I think you will need it”, she smiled.

Lia had to smile as well, changing her clothes and into the robe. The little girl probably did it as an apology. She took a deep breath, no concentrating on her own seal, trying to loosen it – it worked without any pain. She was free, finally!

She tightened the seal once again, reveling in the newly won feeling of freedom and feeling inner strength well up in her, empowering her.

Yukiko was still wearing that skintight suit although she had other clothing within her chest, Lias lend clothes were a part of them.

It knocked. "Yes", Lia and Yukiko answered.

Serin opened the door, a smile creeping onto his face. "You are quite fast. My wife takes hours before we can leave the house." He winked and turned. "If you will follow me? Phobos is awaiting you within the courtyard."

They followed the young man through the corridors of the castle down and into the court. The sky had started to change color into a lighter shade of blue, as the morning started to dawn.

"We are late. All the others have left hours ago", Phobos told them and smiled despite what he had said. "We'll just have to rush after them." He made a few steps towards Lia. "Good to see you feeling better once again."

Lia nodded. He seemed to be genuinely glad about that, but she just couldn't forget that she was somehow forced into all this.

"We need to go", Yukiko exclaimed getting a bit closer to Lia while looking around in some sort of panic.

"Correct, time is of the essence." Phobos went to the middle of the court. "We should fly towards the border. Follow me."

Follow him? Was he able to fly?

"Hurry", Yukiko begged.

Phobos scrunched his forehead and looked over to the castle gates. They were open and the guards were nowhere to be found. "What is that?"

Lia looked over to the gates herself, noticing the thing that just came in. She had seen it before. It came to a screeching halt in front of Phobos. Several men got off and one, whom Lia knew from description.

"Bradley", hissed Yukiko and hid behind Lia.

“I am sorry things took so long. We had to persuade the guards in order to see you, but now that you are here things might go a lot smoother. I guess you are the master of this castle?”

Phobos looked at him, without showing any emotions. “Who are you to enter my castle without permission?”

“I am Emperor Bradley, ruler over the whole continent of Alais.”

“I never heard of such a continent.”

“But of course not. Just be assured that we are less primitive than you are. Still, you and I are rulers, so you won’t deny me a small favor, will you?”

“What if I will?”

“Well then I have to use force to get what I want.”

“You are threatening me?” Phobos voice had a grumble within it that caused some of Bradleys men to retreat.

“I propose to do business, nothing more. I just want something back that is rightfully mine. A little trinket, nothing of importance, but it has been within my family for generations.” Bradleys gaze met Lia and Yukiko behind her.

Lia grabbed her magic. She knew better than to interfere now. Phobos needed their help, so he had to handle this. Part of her wanted to “talk” to Bradley now.

“That filthy little thief back there is hiding from my just wrath. Just give her to me and I won’t impose on your time any longer.”

“Just to make sure that we both mean the same thing”, Phobos answered. “That little trinket is about this large”, he held his index finger and thumb two inches apart, “blue and is in the form of a wild flame?”

“Yes, exactly that one. I just need that one back. I would even pardon her, if you gave it to me.” Bradleys eyes glittered.

Lia shivered. Before all of this happened, she would have taken it from her and given it to Bradley in that instant, not knowing the past of it.

“Well, I can’t give it to you, as it is in my possession now.” Phobos turned and dismissed them. “Leave now and no harm will come to you. We shall move out n...”

“Kill them all, leave only that girl alive”, Bradley ordered. The soldiers raised their firearms., targeting Phobos.

Just as she wanted to unleash her dragon, Phobos body started to grow. Wings ripped his clothing apart, scales grew all over his skin. He was changing into a dragon.

He took a deep breath as those firearms shot all at once at him.

Fire left his maw, flames hot enough to turn some of those soldiers into ash right away. Yukiko squealed. After a few long moments the flames died down, making Bradley the only one still standing. He was gasping for breath and seemed weak. Still he managed to fume and shout: “You will regret this.” Then he turned and left the burning wreck of the thing he came in, behind.

“Serin, get some Soldiers to catch him. I want him to answer for what he did here.” He turned towards Lia. “Follow me, we have no time to lose.” Then he spread his wings and took to the skies.

Lia nodded and took Yukiko on her back. “Hold on tied”, she told her and released her seal. It took her only moments to change into her dragon form, which was about twice as large as Phobos’. She almost didn’t fit into the whole courtyard.

She stemmed her pranks deep into the dirt and jumped upwards, following what she had seen and learned from textbooks. Spreading her Wings as she left

the castle walls behind, she flapped them a few times and went even higher. It somehow was a familiar feeling, as if she was born to fly and it was wonderful.

She followed Phobos' example and flew higher and higher, before following him into a dive to speed up.

"You know, there is something I do not understand", Yukiko shouted suddenly over the wind. "How did Bradley survive?"



"We'll arrive shortly."

Janus woke from a shallow sleep and set back up. His body protested and hurt. Only now he surmised that it hadn't been a good idea to sleep on the hard wood of this shaking vehicle. This had been the fastest transport he could find to reach the capital city.

He looked forwards and admired the large city on the horizon, a castle rising up over all other towers and buildings and above the castle a small and a large dragon rose even higher.

Only a few more hours and he could investigate what Lia ...

"Oh, Phobos is leaving the castle with another dragon", the old man next to him observed. "I wonder what happened. Always these pesky politics."

Janus blinked, looked at the man and back to the dragons, straining his eyes. He had a bad feeling about this. The larger of the two dragons had something ... or someone on its back.

Lia flew away from him. Once again. He clenched his teeth, resisting the urge to get up and run after them. He couldn't catch up to a flying dragon. Frustrated he slumped back. At least he had come closer to Lia and he

could still gather Information. Lia was wanted by the ruler of this land, but ... it was that ruler that flew away with her and she followed him out of her own free will. Well, he still could have somehow coaxed her into doing his bidding, but then again, it was possible that they returned.

The only mystery left was that person on her back. Maybe he could ask for an audience and question Phobos personally on what had happened there.

The decision to stay in the city was supported by the fact that he gave his last money to the man next to him for this single ride. That greedy old bastard.



Lia was flying for about an hour, getting more and more proficient at what she did, as Phobos started to slow down. A large, green and grey field became visible in front of them. At the nearest edge she could see about a few hundred armed men. On the horizon, the other side of the field, she could see another army, the armors of their enemies gleaming in the morning sun. It wouldn't take long until both armies met somewhere in the middle.

Between it all she could see two tents in the midst of the men. Phobos steered to the smaller one, slowed down further, landing close to it and changing back, all in a fluid motion.

Lia just stopped her flight forwards with her wings, furling them in and letting herself fall. Her pranks dug deep into the ground as they cushioned her fall. After changing back, there were four deep indentations left.

"The next time", Yukiko coughed a few times. "Try a gentle landing? Oh and you certainly need a saddle." She breathed cold air onto her reddened hands.

“A saddle?”

“All your scales are sharp around the edges and flying with you like this is a health hazard.”

“I am not a horse.” Lia hadn’t even noticed Yukikos weight.

“Follow me.” Phobos entered the smaller tent.

Inside the Tent four men had gathered around a table, a big map on top. Besides Phobos there were Penal and the elder man, who caught Yukiko stealing.

“I told you to keep away from him”, the man smiled.

“Felix”, Phobos sighed, “you knew of my plan and wanted to steer them away despite that?”

“I did that because I knew of your plan”, he smiled, “but they came anyways. I also want you to keep away from Dikon. I don’t think that he will use his dragon powers, but ... there is always a chance he does and then it will become very dangerous.”

“Why?” Yukiko came closer and hovered next to the table.

“Dikon is part white dragon, whereas Phobos here is part black.”

“What is the Problem with that?”

“We don’t have time for that now”, Phobos grumbled.

“I’ll keep it brief”, Felix answered and looked to Yukiko again. “Half-dragons miss something that real dragons and also dragon-priests have: An innate ability to control their magic, their emotions beyond the scope of what we see or feel. For example, right here on this field, about four hundred years ago, a black and a white half dragon clashed, their flames imbued with the magic of night and day, of black and white, of darkness and light. As those flames touched they developed a destructive power that destroyed not only the two half dragons, but great parts of their armies as well. I guess you noticed that nature still hasn’t recovered here.”

“He won’t use his dragon form. He hates dragons too much to change into one of them”, the fourth one on the table said, then motioned towards the map. “He doesn’t need to either, he has an advantage in numbers. We couldn’t mobilize nearly as many men as he did in that short of a time.”

“Wonderful”, Penal seemed somewhat happy about that. “More victims for me”, he grinned. Lia felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

“The most important thing first: Felix will be working with Yukiko to get Dikon’s tear. Lia will help us from the sky, while I will be fighting Dikon. A large dragon should more than make up for our disadvantage in numbers.”

The blonde looked around questioningly.

“Be careful with your dragon powers”, Felix told her with a stern expression, “and keep a cool head. Even though he hates Dragons, we cannot know, if he might use his powers, when painted into a corner.”

Phobos nodded and turned towards Penal. “You can stop the enemy mages, maybe even Dikon, should he decide to change. I don’t care how you do it, just do it.” Penal nodded, smiling broadly. “Then I guess, you have a few preparations to make.”

Penal left the tent, not in a hurry at all.

“Everyone else knows what to do?”, Phobos asked.

“I will incorporate the dragon into our strategies”, the tall man answered.

“I’ll leave it to you.”

He nodded and left as well.

“I’ll speak with Yukiko, then. I guess she knows the plan already?”

Phobos and Yukiko nodded at the same time. Felix offered his hand and they both left the tent. Lia was the last to turn and leave.

“Wait a moment.” Phobos put his hand on her shoulder. Yukiko stopped as well.

“Don’t worry, he won’t hurt her”, Felix said and they both left the tent.

Lia was alone with him. What was his plan?

“Apart from our contracts, I want you to promise me one thing”, Phobos said. “Keep away from Dikon. Even if he should come after you, don’t face him, flee.” He took a deep breath. “He can easily hurt you, big time. Even as a dragon.”

Lia nodded slightly. Why was he telling her that? Why was he so concerned about her wellbeing? Wasn’t she just a tool for him? Something he wanted to own?

Phobos nodded as well. “Thank you”, he said and left the tent before her, joining his army outside.



Bradley fumed. As soon as he got that dragon tear back from that filthy little thief, they both would pay for what happened to him. Maybe he should skin him alive as a dragon, fashioning himself a scale-mail from them?

His skin was still burning and the little gem in his gloves had broken into pieces. At least they did what Rubenheim said they should do: Protect his life. They had thrown up some kind of shield that protected him from most of the heat and from turning into ash like his subordinates.

His Vehicle had burned to a crisp and he was fleeing on feet from his pursuers. It would take him days to get back to his beachhead. He counted the bullets within his magazine once again. Three left. He had already killed eight. He could only hope that the next search-party wouldn’t find him, he was one bullet short.

But his luck had been running dry already. Why did he have to meet this dragon in human form? He pulled

the gloves from his hands and threw them down, turning his foot on them left and right. That's what he wanted to do with that dragon as soon as he could. He would live through a hell of pain, for a long, long time, only then he would be allowed to die.

First he needed to get back to the beachhead. It was somewhere in the northwest, just behind the border to this country. At least he wouldn't have to go all the way back to the gate.

There was a sudden noise and something in the distance made Bradley look closer. A car came driving towards him, only to stop a few meters in front of him. The driver got out and Rubenheim stood there, aiming a pistol on Bradley. "I see you failed once again", he commented dryly.

Bradley had his hand on his pistol, ready to raise it on a moment's notice. "Traitor!" This was the first time he had seen the pale man outside of any rooms, beneath the sun. He didn't burn at all. "You won't save your family like this!" Rubenheim was crucial to his plans, he couldn't just shoot him like anyone else, but if he had to ...

"Ah, yes, my family", Rubenheim smiled. "I finally found a way to rescue them, you know?" He still held the pistol in place while fetching something out of his white coat. It was a translucent little gem, formed like a tear and there was something golden glittering inside ...

"You ... found a dragon tear?" Bradley's throat felt very dry all of a sudden.

"Oh yes. And since I told you the words ..."

Bradley fumed, his finger wrapping around the trigger. "I will let your family go, if you give me that tear." He hoped that he would take that deal.

"You are right", Rubenheim let the pistol sink down. "You will help me free my family. I'll even give you some

more information.” He tossed the tear to Bradley. “Now, if you follow this plan exactly, nothing can go wrong ...”



The armors of the enemy army gleamed in the morning sun. They were so many, many soldiers! Lia couldn't even fathom that one dragon alone was capable of fighting a part of them, let alone all.

“We should start”, Felix smiled to Yukiko. “Dikon will see and get some nice surprises.”

The girl nodded. She waited a few more moments, while Felix started to cast a spell, then she started to run and vanish into thin air.

“Lia”, Phobos stood a few feet to the side, watching the enemy army. “It is time for you to transform.” He smiled broadly. “A true dragon in front of them and their leader seemingly losing his mind ... I bet we win this without many casualties.”

Lia could only hope that he was right. She had learned how to fly pretty much by instinct, but fighting as a dragon? It was something she would have learned on her pilgrimage, in Cerinsagath, and those battles would have been battles against dragons, not against humans.

As she started to change, she knew that there was no turning back anymore. She took a few steps forwards as her dragon body started to form, making her grow larger and larger. A moment later she was setting all four paws into the dirt below.

Her dragon eyes looked upon the battlefield. She could see Yukiko ... one of many. She seemed to glow in a deep dark red. She was already half across the field. That girl was fast!

Her eyes went to Yukikos target. Dikon was standing there, his army behind him. His eyes met Lias, as if he just ignored the girl approaching him. Suddenly he drew his blade and said a few words to the girl next to him.

Green light started to envelop him, lightning struck out of the air and into the ground and then ... he stood right before her, swinging his sword. Lia was able to dodge it, taking a step back, making herself a bit smaller than she normally was. His sword left a wound in her front right flank. It hurt. Very much.

She breathed fire. Dikon had already run to her side, his sword digging deep into her flank. How was he able to move that fast? She tried to ignore the pain and started to fly. She had to flee, she was unable to do anything against the dragon slayer.

“A coward dragon?” Dikon grumbled beneath her. “Yes, you are all cowards! Killing my father, my wife and fleeing from rightful justice!”

Lia tried to ignore the man’s words, but something within her stirred. Something reacted to his voice. She lost control over her body, bit by bit. Her head turned towards Dikon without her wanting to do it.

The dragon slayer was fighting with Phobos and a moment later that girl from yesterday was fighting phobos.

Lightning struck. Gajoans ruler stepped back.

Lias body roared, Fire enveloping the dragon slayer. She had already lost control. She really wasn’t able to control the dragon!

“Killer!” The dragons thoughts reverberated within her thoughts.

“I am only seeking revenge”, Dikon shouted, as if he had heard the thoughts as well. The fire hadn’t even touched him.

“You will die for what you did”, the dragon growled.

Dikon jumped into the air, wind from below letting him jump higher. The sword pointed at her.

Lia started to fight the presence, to dodge to the side. The dragon didn't bulge at all. Pale blue flames engulfed the dragon slayer. Lia could feel their heat even through her own scales, heat that was reflected to her through the wind.

The flames only manage to slow Dikon down. His blade hit her throat, cutting along into her shoulder, before gravity claimed Dikon once again.

Lia kept on trying to gain control once again.

She never noticed a third presence growing stronger within her, until it was too late and she was thrown into a deep darkness.



Dikon had vanished from before her eyes, shortly before she was even close to him. They hadn't thought that he would teleport as soon as he saw Lia as a dragon. Yukiko turned, running towards Lia, while she tried to keep her distance from the big man, breathing fire.

Despite the overly hot flames he came close, wounding her deep. Blood black as the night was dropping down to the ground, while the wings started to beat slower and slower. She sank towards the ground. Why hasn't she fled already? The power of the dragon tear made him a more than even match for a dragon. He could probably defeat one without even getting hurt in the process.

She had to do something! If only she had her dragon tear! But the red gem had been somewhere beneath her robe and now beneath her skin.

Suddenly the dragon began to shrink. In a blink of an eye she had shrunk to half her initial size, changing back into a human. Had she surrendered?

Yukiko started to run even faster, her breath becoming shallow. She mustn't give him her tear! Not even to save her life!

She even used her magic and dropped the invisibility to increase her speed. She got to her limits and tried to go beyond. She could feel a burning sensation on the back of her right hand.

She looked at Lia once again. Or did she? Yukiko stopped running at full speed, slowed down more and more, staring at the girl standing before Dikon.

She looked like Lia, but her skin was pitch black, her hair white as snow and a few golden lines glowed along her throat, down her right shoulder and arm, as if her skin there had been torn and raw power was glowing beneath.

She didn't wear any robe, stood there naked, staring at her arm. She seemed puzzled, ignoring Dikon.

The half dragon attacked once again, trying to hit the girl with his sword. Lia caught the blade with one hand, holding it in place. Dikon tried to pry it loose, but the sword didn't bulge, as if locked in time and space.

Lia stared at him, her face distorted by rage, her eyes glowing golden. She opened her mouth and a low ringing sound could be heard and felt. It went through Yukiko's whole body, although she was at least a mile away.

The fight between Nina and Phobos stopped as well, the green aura around the girl vanishing.

"Nina, attack her!" Dikon shouted and the girl ran towards her, a small blade within her hand. She swung it and the blade was thrown back, as if she had struck on metal.

The low humming sound reverberated again from Lias throat, causing a rift to appear somewhere in the air above. Golden light shone through it, while a few more rifts started to open up. Dikons sword shattered. He let go of the blade, stumbled backwards, fell, and crawled further away from her.

The tone continued, causing the rifts to grow and more to appear. Yukiko shuddered. Whatever was happening there couldn't be good.

She started running again, running towards her friend. "Stop that! Come back, Lia", she shouted at the top of her lungs.

The dark Lia turned her head and closed her mouth. The humming stopped, the golden light on Lias cheek began to flicker and died.

Her skin reverted to normal as her robe grew back out of her skin. The golden cracks turned red, becoming blood that started to flow and drop towards the ground.

Yukiko arrived as Lia sank to her knees, catching her before she fell to the side.

Dragon Tears



As Lia came to, she stared at a hanging ceiling made of cloth. Her head hurt and she almost couldn't move at all.

"She is awake", someone said beside her, before his face became visible. It was Phobos.

A moment later Yukikos face appeared next to his. "You are still alive", she sighed happily.

"Of course she is still alive", Phobos answered.

"Of course' my ass", a third voice said. Felix came into view. "Her wounds were grave, even for a half dragon. It took me hours to mend them." Then he started to smile. "Are you okay? I hope I haven't made a mistake while trying to fix you."

Lia felt a cold shiver running down her spine. Everything still hurt, but felt okay. "I am fine", she answered, "I think."

"That's good", he smiled and motioned for a chair, which followed his gesture obediently. He sat down next to her bed. "There are a few things we need to discuss." The smile had vanished from his face.

Lia had an idea what that was. She had lost control. She hadn't been strong enough. The black dragon had swatted her consciousness aside like a fly, had taken control. And then there had been ...

"The black one." Felix looked into her eyes. "Every mage on the field has felt her presence, feared her. Even Dikon was overwhelmed by his fear of her."

Lia shuddered. This foreign thing that had awakened within her.

"So you do remember", Felix observed. "I hope you know what consequences await you now."

"The final seal, death", she answered.

“Oh, no. I won’t go that far. For now you cannot use any of your dragon powers.”

“I”, Lia sighed. She had managed to get free from one seal. Now she had to be careful using her powers or she might just turn into some sort of demon. Maybe she should talk to the priests to get the final seal underway.

“This is for your and our protection. For now I think you should be fine, if you refrain from using them.” A smile crept on his face. “There is something else we need to talk about.” His hand found its way into one of his pockets. And then he ... started to search. He started to pat over his entire robe, becoming more and more uneasy. “Where ...” Finally he relaxed and smiled again. “Found it.” He showed his hand again, currently formed into a fist. “We need to talk about the dragon tears”, he said and opened his hand. On his palm there was a small black gem in the form of a tear.

Yukiko gasped. “Another one? How many ...”

“There are five of them”, he studied the faces of all present. “For now we have four. Lias ruby tear, Yukikos flame sapphire, Ninas emerald breath and my onyx eye.”

They all stared at the old man.

“You know a lot about these ... tears.”

“I started reasearching them as one found its way into my hands. Thirty years ago it fell like a star from the sky. After observing it I took it and then I started to search for information, mentions and such and I found them.” He put the onyx eye back into his robe. “I read a legend on how they came to be, read stories about her powers, I even went to the dragons asking for knowledge.” He leaned back in his chair. “The knowledge I gained is, that we will be freed from them as soon as we gather all five of them and reassemble the astral diamond, which will then be given back to the dragons to keep it safe.”

“We only need to find the fifth tear then?” Yukiko seemed to shine from hope.

“The thing is ... the fifth tear should be here already”, Felix sighed.

“What do you mean?” Lia got a bit higher up, keeping the blanket close to her.

“The tears are connected by magic, seeking each other. This is why you two met, this is why we met. Because of them we met with Dikon and the fight between him and Phobos ensued.” He looked at the half dragon with a stern face. “Though that fight wasn’t instilled by them.”

“So the fifth tear will find us?” Yukiko hovered so close to Felix that she almost was in his face.

“It should be better to search for it”, the mage answered and pushed Yukiko back. “It should have found us already.” Felix started smiling. “But don’t worry, I have certain means to do so. Oh, and Lia?” He turned towards her. “We will do something about that problem of yours as well. I think that as soon as we can relocate the dragon from within you into another dragon priest, there shouldn’t be any more problems. We only need someone willing to take on the dragon from you.”

Lia gulped, her heart suddenly beating a lot faster as someone came to mind. He would do that in a heartbeat. She was sure of it. But where was Jan and what was he doing?



Jan put the iron back into the fire, using his magic to heat it up more than coals and bellows alone would be capable, bringing it to glow orange-red. He started tempering it with his hammer, slowly forming it into the requested shape.

He was working at a forge to earn money. He had spent his last coin to arrive in Magneis, following Lia. For now he hoped she would return to the city. He still needed to earn some money to stay at an inn. If Lia didn't return, he needed money to travel further south. Maybe then his father could help to find her ... if he wouldn't start a campaign to kill her.

The blade started to cool down. For now he had to concentrate on his work or the blacksmith would yell at him again. He had the unique ability to keep it hot for a longer time, allowing him to temper and form it more easily, to create a higher quality blade, but that worked only if he concentrated on the work. Even then he only made blades good enough for a master apprentice. That didn't stop the blacksmith from selling them as "dragon forged" blades.

It served him to earn money a bit more easily, so he didn't complain. It is not that anyone could tell the difference.



"Well, if you know someone willing to take your place, then that will save us a lot of time and troubles." Felix said as they went past the various tents at the edge of the battlefield. "Still, I think we should tackle the problem with the dragon tears first. I have a bad feeling concerning it." A moment later they arrived at another big tent. Within the tent were two large cages. In one was Dikon, raging at everything and everyone in range, then he saw Lia. His face went immediately pale and he scrambled to the far side of the cage.

"What are you doing with that demon?" His voice was weak and shaking, his eyes fixed to her.

“She isn’t a demon”, Felix answered and opened the other cage. Nina growled at him. “What do you want? What did you do to my father?”

“He is your father?” Yukiko looked at the tall man, then to the girl and finally to the dragon tear within her hand – the emerald breath.

“Give that one back, it doesn’t belong to you”, Nina snarled.

“You know what this gem is?” Yukiko hid the stone somewhere on her body.

“Of course I know what the emerald breath is. It is the key to our revenge!”

Lia shuddered, making a step forwards. “What revenge?”

“The dragons!” Nina got louder for a moment. “They killed my mother!” Tears welled up in her eyes as she got calm once more.

“You ... want to eradicate all dragons because your mother was slain by a wild one?”

“It wasn’t a wild one”, Dikon shouted, getting a bit closer to them once again. “It wasn’t a lone dragon.” He still kept his distance from Lia. “One day the whole sky was full of them, seeking her.”

Lia shuddered again. She had seen a similar scene in her past.

“They came from nowhere, attacking us without a warning. One of them broke through the windows into the room where my father, Lily and Nina were.” Dikons voice quivered. “My father tried to protect them from their fire, but it burned him and my wife. I was only able to save my daughter!”

Lia saw the girl crying, her tears dripping down to the floor. Somehow she just went to her and embraced her, pressing her against herself.

Felix made a step closer towards the other cage. “Could it be that Lily was ... the one who was in possession of the dragon tear before Nina?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Very much.” Felix sighed and took a step back. “The dragons are the ones that were tasked with guarding the tears. They knew that the tears should come back to them eventually, but they never did. So they searched for them and given the history ... they didn’t try diplomacy first.”

“Returned to them? History?”

Felix sighed. “A long story. The thing is that the dragons tried to protect us and themselves from the power of these stones.”

“I don’t care! They killed Lily! Without reason!”

Nina began to cry once again.

“They also attacked Andragat”, Lia said to him, “killing priests and guardians ...” She kept Nina close to her as she looked to Dikon. “You already had your revenge on the dragon that was responsible for her death. Further revenge won’t bring Lily back, it won’t fill the hole in your heart. Trying so hard you might even lose another thing that is important to you.”

“She is right”, Felix said. “The dragon tear doesn’t make you or her invincible. You were willing to risk the your life and the life of your daughter, only to seek revenge for her mother? You should keep her safe instead.”

Dikon slumped down, tears now showing within the eyes of the proud man.

“I was fine with that, I wanted it, too”, Nina answered whispering.

“I know that he is strong and the dragon tear could have given you the power to triumph even over an army of dragons. But at what price? Maybe a ruined country, maybe you would have lost your father, maybe someone

else would have gotten ahold of the tear ..." Lia continued the words that freely flowed from herself, making Nina lean into her.

"We will need to take your daughter with us for a while", Felix said, while stepping close to the other cage. "We need her help to find the fifth."

"The fifth?" Dikon looked up again. "Nina always only felt four."

The girl nodded slightly within Lias arms. "Even now I only feel the four that are close to us. It was only when two of them came together that I could pinpoint their exact location."

Felix looked at her as if she just had turned into a giant fire elemental. "We ... need to hurry." He ran out of cage and tent.

Dikon came closer to the cage, his hand outstretched, but he stopped short of reaching through, still weary of Lia. She looked once again at him, leading Nina out after Felix. She could understand his feelings for revenge. They were just ... human. But she had learned that she couldn't let those feelings rule over her, otherwise she would open herself to the dragon.

But there had been something else on the battlefield ... as if the emotions of the dragon had overwhelmed her and then ...

"We need to head back to Magneis." Felix broke her line of thought. "We should be able to find the fifth tear there with Nina's help."

"What will you do, when you have all five of them?" Nina looked to Felix.

"Reassemble the astral diamond, getting freed of their influence and give it back to the dragons."

"No!" Nina freed herself from Lia. "I don't want them to have control over it, over me!"

“They won’t get control over any of us. The connection between us and the tears will be severed as soon as the diamond is reassembled.”

“What if not?”

“Even then it is safest there. They had custody of it before and it was safe for more than two hundred years.”

Nina looked towards the ground full of tears. “I can’t believe that.”

“We will decide as soon as we reassembled the diamond.”

Nina nodded once more, clinging to Lia. She didn’t really understand why Nina got like this all of a sudden. Was it that one hug? Her father had a completely different reaction, which made all of this very awkward.

“Do you know why Dikon fears me that much?” Lia got closer to Felix to better talk with him.

“There are many more who fear you, those who have a deeper understanding of magic. But Dikon ... he had a magical blade made of dragon steel. It could cut through dragon scales, it was thought of being indestructible ... it was a holy sword ... and you destroyed it. With your voice alone.”



Yukiko bit onto her thumb again and again and again. Bradley had certain men and those had the knowledge to track a tear, so they would also have the ability to hide one. She could only conclude that he was the one who had found that tear.

But why hadn’t he used it already? Or had he? She didn’t know its abilities.

“Felix? Do you know the abilities of the fifth?”

“What do you mean?” The old man turned and looked at her quizzically for a moment.

“So far the tears I have seen have been tied to a certain element”, she started to explain. “Mine was clearly using water, whether it was liquid, ice or steam, Lias was fire and Ninas ... air and lightning.” She kept her thumb close to her mouth so she could start biting it again, if Felix’s answer wasn’t satisfying.

“The fifth one ... is known as the dragon heart, the bringer of peace.”

“What does that mean?” Lia spoke the question that was on Yukikos tongue.

“The dragon heart can protect and even nullify magic.” Yukiko started biting her thumb once again.

“Sounds like he can’t do much damage with it”, Lia said smiling.

“I am not so sure. I have read several variations on how this protection has been interpreted. Some tell of just nullifying magic, others from blocking or from reflecting ... and then there are those that say it simply killed the ones that tried to use magic.”

She stopped gnawing on her thumb for a moment. That was bad. If he really had that tear than he would have them within a moment’s notice as soon as they met again. Judging from the incident in the castle he probably already had it, but was still learning what it could do.

“What”, Lia gulped, “what will we do, if it kills users of magic directly?”

“Well, then we are the only ones capable of taking it. The tears bonded to us will protect us from death.”

“But they won’t protect us from bullets”, Yukiko mumbled, biting onto her thumb again. She needed a plan. They needed one. A good one and before finding Bradley!

The Astral Diamond



Jan was awakened by loud voices coming from the street. It was still dark outside. Why was it that loud? Sleepy he donned his dragon guardian robe and descended the stairs into the inn below. He wasn't the first that had been awakened by the commotion, so he had a bit of trouble getting to the front door. As soon as he got there, someone put a long circular rod on his breast.

Three men were standing there, clothed in identical clothing. The one in the front raised his voice. "This city is now within bucarian control. Rebels will be terminated immediately."

"Bucar?" Jan stared at the man with open jaw. He had seen those men, that clothing, before. Those were the ones chasing Lia!

"What is that bucar? That doesn't even exist", someone shouted behind him.

A loud bang was the answer. Someone cried. Jan turned. A man had sunk to his knees, a hand clutched to his breast, his shirt turning red. His hand fell to the side, allowing him to see a gaping hole within his body.

"Any more objections?"

All other guests scurried away from the door.

"You?" The man in front of Jan used his rod to stab him in his breast.

"No", he answered calm. He couldn't do anything right now. He didn't know what type of magic they used or how strong they were ... and those strange wands ... or weapons ... It was too risky. He made one step backwards. Things would change as soon as the lord of the land came back. A half dragon wouldn't be that impressed by their display.

“Retreat into the house and close the door! Everyone that is seen on the streets will be shot on sight”, shouted the man in front of Jan. He closed the door diligently and turned.

“Why haven’t you done anything?” A woman behind him whispered. He wasn’t a dragon or an archmage, but that probably wasn’t the response she would accept. Instead he settled for something dumb: “Those were no dragons and I am not able to change into something that can withstand these weapons. If you want more dead people, you are free to try yourself.” He left them alone and went back to his room.

He had to wonder if dragon scales were sturdy enough to withstand these weapons. He could only hope. He had to leave this in someone else’s hand, he wasn’t powerful enough. He had thought about doing something. It had just been a moment ... using his magic, overwhelming them ... but he couldn’t get in touch with his magic. The drop dragonblood he had been infused with, wasn’t strong enough to fight against ... whatever it was that was laying on the city.

Lia would have been able to do something, but it wasn’t one of her tasks. Neither was it his.

Still ... if they were chasing Lia, it was for some strange reason. He should try to find out more. He opened the window, looked outside and climbed onto the roof with a few seconds.



They were riding since the early dawn, having left the camp before sunrise. Felix was riding in the front, then Nina and Lia, while Yukiko was in the back – on the same horse as Lia. She was clutching onto Lia with every

one of her limbs. Even her hair was clutching onto Lias arm.

The little girl, that had stood up to half dragons, fought with a menacing men, who had ridden on the back of a dragon ... was afraid of horses. It was somehow ironical.

Lia had the feeling she was flying over the fields, although she was only on the back of a horse. These three horses were the fastest ones they could find.

Still the sun had climbed above the horizon and was long past its highest point as the city came into view. And something was wrong. Big black ropes of smoke were rising from behind the city walls.

“The city is burning”, Felix observed.

“He is already there”, Yukiko said bitterly, clutching closer to Lia. “Bradley.”

The mage stopped his horse, Nina and Lia did the same.

“Who is already here?”

“Bradley. It can only be Bradley.” Lia felt Yukikos grip tighten around her. “And if he has the tear that suppresses magic, we have not much of a chance to get it back.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“He was already there, he survived Phobos flames ... I tried to find some sort of plan to steal it from him ...” Tears were running down her cheeks. “It’s impossible.”

Lia looked to Felix and answered in her stead. “Our enemies seem to have weapons capable of hurting us from a distance.” Yukiko had told her in detail about pistols and other firearms. “They even have things that explode like a fireball-spell and you don’t even see it before it explodes.”

“All of that works without magic?”

Lia nodded in answer. Yukiko began sobbing behind her. “We still don’t know if that was really caused by Bradley”, Lia turned towards Yukiko.

“He has to be it! Who else can just get past that wall?”

Felix looked back to the city. “Any half dragon, but ...”

“But?” Lia turned towards him again.

“I know enough talented mages that would have stopped him. They should also have been able to stop any fires by now. Any half dragon would have to have come with an army, probably sieging the city beforehand. But there wasn’t enough time to do so and there is no camp in sight.”

“See?” Yukiko had tears streaming down her face. “Let’s flee from here”, she begged shivering.

“It’s too early to give up hope. Even if they have powerful weapons, our enemies are still humans, right?” Felix started to smile.

“You have a plan?” Lia tried to read it out of his face.

“I have a plan”, he answered proud. “Even an emergency one, if the first one does not work. But let’s try Plan A first. I am sure Yukiko can answer me a few more questions, if it comes to an emergency.”

The girls sobbing had gotten quieter and she had stopped shivering. Lia felt her nodding slightly. She had found hope once again.



Jan dived into a narrow passage and pulled himself onto the roof once again. He laid there flat to the surface, holding his breath, waiting.

“What’s up?” One of the soldiers shouted.

“I thought I saw something”, the other one replied. Then silence ...

“Must have been your imagination.” The first one said.

Then he heard steps again, slowly getting quieter. Jan started breathing again. That had been close.

He hadn't accomplished much so far. The academy was burning, a few smithies and all barracks as well, even one inn. Someone had resisted at all those locations. He was killed and the rest was burned.

Phobos probably didn't know what was happening. Blocking all magic and confinement to their houses prevented the citizens from notifying him. For now he could hope that someone had escaped like he had and was working on a way to contact him.

Travelling merchants were being admitted to the city, then imprisoned and their wares confiscated. He got to know the name of their enemy, but he still had to find out where Al Bradley was hiding. He was most probably within the castle as it was heavily guarded, but it also made it harder to enter it.

He wanted to take one of their weapons and use it against them, but getting one without being noticed was difficult and even then ... he didn't know how to use one. Even if he somehow got one and learned to use it, he couldn't survive against the several dozen soldiers patrolling the city. And that was only the first shift. After about four hours they changed and another few dozen soldiers started patrolling the city, the others retreating to the castle ...

What if he waited for the right moment, maybe he could then ... It was a risky plan, very risky. But maybe he would get closer to Lia then. Even if not, then he would take some pursuers of her tail and Phobos would be indebted to him.

He got up from the roof, crawling to the edge and looking down on the streets. Another patrol was march-

ing along the street. He steeled his resolve. Everything had to work smoothly. He took another deep breath and jumped down in front of the three soldiers.

Before they could do something with their weapons he ran back towards the house, vanishing behind it, kept running through the narrow passages between the houses and climbed up the next rough stone wall, waiting there.

It took only a few moments until one soldier arrived beneath him. He had hoped that they would split up and they did. Perfect.

Jan jumped down from the wall, just behind the soldier. One blow to his head and he sank to the ground. He took the weapon from the soldier, looking at his clothes. It took him a few precious minutes to understand how to take his clothes off.

He hadn't had much time to get into the role of that soldier. Hearing steps behind him, he climbed back up on the roof, lying down there, holding his breath again.

A few moments later he heard the voice of the other soldiers. "He has been knocked out cold. The weapon is missing."

"Shit."

Jan heard some rustling, then steps, as if someone was dragging something. A bit later he looked on his booty. There were two levers on the weapon, one could easily be pulled by his finger, but the second one?

He couldn't test it there and then, the noise it made was much too loud. Things needed to calm down before he could do something again and until then he had to lay low.



Yukiko was back to gnawing her thumb. Felix's Plan had a good chance of working, somehow she still had a bad feeling about all of this.

Surprising Bradley in the dark, taking the dragon heart from him, reassembling the astral diamond and being free once again sounded easy enough. She hoped that it would work. Maybe she could even take revenge.

Laying there before her, sleeping, it would be so very easy, even for her ...

"We have arrived", Felix's stopped her train of thought. Before them lay a small village, if you wanted to go that far with a few dozen houses. All around these houses were fields, worked by men. Felix waved friendly to them, few waved back, but none paid them much attention.

The sun was low on the horizon, coloring it a deep red, as they continued their way to the middle of the village. They got down from the horses and Yukiko got several feet between herself and them. She didn't trust those animals. They probably just waited for her to be careless and then they would trample her down.

Felix knocked on the door of a smaller building and soon after a monk opened the door. "Aerith's blessing be with you. What brings you to my humble chapel?" He seemed to be very friendly.

"The path of the Dragon. The holy city has problems and we have come to pray for it." Felix smiled himself and bowed slightly.

"Come in then." The monk opened the door fully and let all of them inside. Yukiko somehow got in even before Felix, hiding on the other side. A wall of stone was a good barrier to shield her from the horses' malice.

The inside of the chapel was one large room, several chairs stood there in several circles, which were arranged

around the statue of a kneeling woman. A small dragon of stone wound itself around her, wings spread, maw open. It looked as if the dragon wanted to protect her. The statue was the only thing that seemed a bit valuable, the rest was extremely plain.

The monk closed the door behind them. "I haven't seen you in a long time, Felix", the monk said as he worked a heavy wooden bar before the door. "You need to go to the castle?"

"Yes, we do, old friend. The city has been conquered and Phobos return will take a few more days. We are pressed for time."

"I never thought that the secret passage would ever be used again", he sighed and went towards the statue. "I wish you luck." He used one of the dragons fangs to sting himself in one finger, then he put said finger deep into the dragons maw.

After a moment the statue of the woman began to fade, vanishing completely and opening the path to an old sturdy ladder leading deep down into the earth.

Felix nodded towards the monk, climbed of the tail of the dragon and onto the ladder, going down into the darkness. Yukiko gulped once. There was no way back anymore. Tentatively she followed Lia down the ladder into the deep darkness below. Nina was the last one to climb down.

As soon as they arrived in the passage the statue above them reappeared, sealing the passage and plunging them into a deep darkness. Felix lit up a torch on the wall by snipping his fingers, took it out from its place on the wall and followed the passageway. "We will take about four hours to reach the castle."



Jan jumped down from the wall, hitting the soldier below him with the grip of the unfamiliar weapon. His target blacked out. He pulled the clothes from him as fast as he could, trading it for his own robe.

Precious minutes went lost while he figured out how to wear that clothing properly.

Suddenly he heard steps. His comrades came back faster than he thought and he hasn't had the chance to pull the robe over him. Biting his lower lip he turned, holding the weapon like they did. He pulled the lever with his index finger, a loud bang and the uninvited guest fell to the ground. The third one appeared only a moment later. He gritted his teeth, pulling once again. The second bang ended the soldier's life.

Janus had to be fast in order to complete his plan. He put his weapon into the hands of the knocked-out soldier, pulled his robe to the body of him.

"What happened here, Ensign?" Just as he was aiming his new weapon on the last witness, he heard a voice behind him.

He gulped. He had practiced this sentence in his mind over and over again, but his heart was still pounding. This was serious. He turned, lifting his right hand towards his head. "We were ambushed. I could subdue him after he killed my comrades."

"Is that so?" The other soldier looked at him suspiciously. "Your name?"

"Ensign Johnson." It had been a good idea to stalk his target a while, before hitting it.

"Good, then end this farce", the soldier ordered.

Janus replied with the same gesture once again, targeted the head of the knocked-out man on the ground, switching the small lever on the ground and shot. The following bang removed the last witness from the equa-

tion. He still admired that these weapons were easy to handle, and his targets had taught him well while stalking them.

“Good.” He waved to his comrades. They swarmed into the passage and collected the other three weapons. “We will return to the castle. At least we got the missing weapon back.”

Janus nodded once and helped the others bringing the dead soldiers back to the castle. They left the fake dragon guardian back where he was.

Jan had speculated that with this army size not all soldiers knew each other. He had won that bet, for now. He went into the lair of the wild one, alone, hoping that he didn't underestimate his enemy.



They finally arrived at their destination. Lia hoped that the spiral staircase was an indicator for that and not just a junction in the path. She was nervous. They just had to finish Bradley off and find Jan afterwards. Felix had already promised that he would find a way to transfer the sealed dragon towards Jan.

Somehow it was strange that he knew some sort of spell that could help them do that, while no one of the dragon priests seemed to know it. It would have been good to transfer the dragon to a younger host after some time, keeping the elder ones around to teach. She had to ask him about this in more detail after they finished this thing with Bradley.

They went up, step after step after step after step. Somewhere her legs began to burn, Felix breathed heavily and Nina seemed to be exhausted as well. Only Yukiko seemed to take this as just another small exercise.

After a long time they arrived at a small platform. The Statue of a woman was standing on the top of the pillar the stairs had wound around until then. More steps lead further up next to her.

“This passage is from a period before the half dragons started to rule.” Felix lit up another torch and looked around. “We need to go further up to get to the royal bedchambers.”

“How do you know all that?” Yukiko asked, gnawing her thumb once again. She seemed very nervous and uneasy.

“My family had always been friends with the rulers of this land. The knowledge of this passage was handed down through the generations. I learned it from my father.”

Felix started climbing the next set of stairs, leaving no time for further questions. He seemed pretty sturdy as well. They passed another platform like the first one and arrived on the third, taking the torch there out of its mount and setting the burning one into it.

“We are there”, he whispered. “As soon as I open the door, we need to be fast.”

Lia nodded, the others doing the same. Felix nodded once as well, stepping towards the statue. He put his hands around the head of the stone maiden, letting his thumbs rest on her eyes. He pressed them, something clacked and a stone wall opened, sliding over the ground.

Yukiko was the first through the narrow passage, Lia following a moment later. As she arrived within the bed chamber, Yukiko was already at the bed, searching the man lying there. Lia joined her, holding him down, in case he woke up.

“This ... this isn't Bradley.” Yukikos voice sounded weak. The man didn't move at all he looked pale. “It's a trap.”

Just in that moment the main door to the room opened. Several men ran into the room, surrounding them. "I have waited a long time for you", Bradley stood there and stepped slowly into the room. "And this time you can do nothing."

"So you have it", Yukiko grumbled, "the dragon heart."

"Indeed. And if I am informed correctly, the other four stones are all here as well, correct?" His gaze wandered over them, looking upon the girls and stopping at Lia. "You seem to be quite special. I am thrilled to test you all out."

Lia felt a shiver down her spine. "H... how did you know?"

"Oh, that was nothing really. You see, our little thief here has learned to shield her magic from us, but she never realized that she shielded more than just her magic. We just had to cover larger areas and check them for missing magic and as a small patch came closer and closer to the castle, the rest wasn't hard to predict." He raised a hand. "Take their tears."

"Nobody moves." That voice was familiar. "Or your Al will die." One soldier was standing behind Bradley, threatening him with a weapon.

"Jan!" Lia's heart was pounding. Why was he here? Here in all places?

"Toss the dragon heart to the old man and no fast movements!"

The soldiers around them hesitated.

"You will regret that!" Bradley took the gem slowly from his throat, holding it in front of him, dangling from his outstretched arm.

"I said toss it towards the old man." Jans voice sounded like a growling dragon. Lia felt a nice warm shower running over her back. Part of her would have liked to kiss him there and then.

“Tossing is a fast movement”, Bradley answered coldly, “and I want to keep my life!”

Yukiko ran forwards, grabbing the gem out of Bradley's hand and running away from him once again. She proceeded to hide behind Lia, murmuring a “Fuuin.”

“Order your men to put down their weapons and leave the room.” Felix made a few steps towards Bradley, his voice, his posture telling him that he didn't take ‘no’ for an answer. Lia vowed to not ever make him angry at her.

“Do what he says”, Bradley said, nodding once. The soldiers laid down their weapons and left the room one by one.

“Phobos will judge you as soon as he returns.” Felix turned.

“Let me judge over him”, Yukiko exclaimed, going a few steps closer to Bradley, a dagger formed of ice in her hand.

Lia grabbed her shoulders, stopping her. “Don't do this. He isn't worth smudging your hands with blood.”

She looked around to Lia. “But ... but ...”

Lia shook her head once again. “I know what he did to you ... and doing what you want to do won't do that justice. Let Phobos decide.”

Yukiko let the dagger fall to the ground where it burst into several small pieces, tears running down her cheeks. Lia embraced her with a hug while looking to Bradley. He seemed unfazed.

“We should reassemble the astral diamond now.” Felix pulled his tear out of his robe. “After that we will think about the remaining problems.” The mage looked to Lia for a moment, then he looked to Bradley. He grunted, but didn't say a word.

Yukiko and Lia got their tears. Nina was skeptical but ... she got her tear out as well.

“So ... how do we do this?” Yukikos voice waivered.

“It’s easy. We should just hold our tears close together”, he kneeled, holding his onyx eye out to the others. Lia followed with her ruby tear, Yukiko with her flame sapphire and the dragon heart. Nina was the last to put her emerald breath to the others.

For a few seconds nothing happened ... then the tears seemed to turn liquid, single drops breaking from the larger gems to unite into one big drop in the middle of them all.

Within moments the five small tears had disappeared to form a large droplet, floating a few feet above the ground. Slowly it formed into a beautiful jewel, as clear as the sky.

Yukiko breathed a loud sigh, as if she had thought that things could go wrong in the last moment.

“Now to you”, Felix got up and turned to Bradley. “We shall lock you in the Dungeon until ...” The old man stopped.

Lia looked to Bradley, he was grinning broadly. Yukiko was shivering. She looked back to the astral diamond. Deep within it black clouds began to form, filling the gem, making it dull and changing it to a deep black gemstone.

“What?” Felix looked back at the diamond and then to Bradley.

Lia followed his gaze, seeing him change into the form of a young woman. “I ... I’m sorry”, she stuttered.

Suddenly there was a waft of air behind her. Black mist appeared from the diamond, changing the floor into a wafting see of darkness.

“Out of here!” Felix warning was too late. A soft blow pushed her away from the diamond, making her hit the stone wall of the room.

She tried to get up, but her whole body hurt and the dark mist seemed to conquer her mind. She only felt the shivering body of Yukiko within her arms before she lost her consciousness once again.

Bradley's Rule



Jan's head was hurting badly. The Shockwave had hit him full on and sent him to the land of darkness. As he slowly awoke he realized that he had been thrown into the dungeon.

He wasn't badly hurt; somehow the body of Bradley had taken most of the blunt. But why had he awakened before him? And who had been the woman that had appeared in between?

What had happened? Was it an elaborate trap from Bradley? But how could he predict that he would be attacked from behind, when even Lia had been surprised to see him?

Jan bit his lower lip. It was hard to think clearly and instead of finding answers he only found more and more questions. Why was he alone in the dungeon? Were Lia and the others fine? Were they alive?

He got up, making his head pound even more.

"So you didn't swear fealty to our new ruler, too?" The man in the opposite cell spat into a corner.

"Something like that." Jan looked around. Only his cell and the other one were occupied. "Were you imprisoned because of that?"

"Hah!" The man started laughing. Judging from his beard he hadn't had an opportunity to shave in days. "No, I've been imprisoned by Phobos for killing someone. This is my just punishment." He spat once again. "But our new ruler let everyone go, that swore fealty to him. But I still have my pride!"

Jan frowned. He was a murderer, but on the other hand ... he would do the same, if he saw Bradley again. Killing him and then sitting proud in prison. "I tried to

overthrow Bradley”, Jan answered, leaning back against the wall.

“If you want to try again, just give me a word. I’ll help you, it will be fast and clean.” He smiled. “You don’t have something to eat, have you?”

Jan shook his head.

“Shit, I’m starving. That bastard isn’t tending to his prisoners at all.”

Jan had the bad feeling that Bradley would make an exception in his case, an exception that didn’t involve making him comfortable.



A deep pain in her breast woke Lia. She looked into Bradleys smiling face, Yukiko, Felix and Nina behind him. What had happened?

She looked down over her body. On a short string hung the dragon tear, but something about it was strange, was it? It seemed dark red and had a silver insignia inside. Everything was as she remembered.

“Good morning, general Dias”, she was greeted by Bradley.

“What happened? Yesterday night something bad ...”

“We had an intruder trying to kill me”, Bradley answered, his smile vanishing. “You all have saved me.” He turned from her, his arms behind his back. “I will have him executed shortly. You will have the honor of ending his life.”

Lia got up, doubt within her heart. Something was ... “Thank you, my imperator.” She bowed slightly.

“Follow me. You will need clothing that suits your new ranks.” Bradley left the room, Felix and Nina following instantly. Only Yukiko waited for her.

“Please, don’t leave me”, she whispered, pulling herself close to Lia. Together, hands joined, they followed their ruler. Everything was fine. She hadn’t any reason to doubt anything, she didn’t need to worry.

They passed the throneroom on the way and arrived at ground level. They passed some more soldiers, a few of them greeted them and they arrived in a small room full of clothing: Uniforms worn by all of Bradley’s soldiers.

“Suit my four new generals up”, Bradley ordered and waved them closer. Lia noticed the man behind the small counter only after entering the room. He gulped audibly seeing Yukiko.

“We have still Miss Artais uniform”, he replied. “I have to see, if we have something for the others as well.”

“What are you waiting for? Get. To. It.” The man flinched, took up a measurement tape and began to take Felix’s measurements, as well as Ninas and Lias after that. A moment later he vanished between the rows of clothing, coming back with three sets that he gave to each of them.

“You can change in the room opposite of this”, he said, taking his place behind the counter again, being extremely nervous.

Yukiko pulled Lia with her into the other room, helping her change. Contrary to her robe the new set of clothes seemed to be closer to her body, making her look more female. She smiled looking into the mirror.

Nina changed after them, then Felix and all the while Bradley stood there waiting, smiling to himself. “Now we will show our subjects, who their new leaders are.” Bradley went on first, leading them down to the courtyard, out of the gate and onto the marketplace of the city. The citizen had been gathered and were being kept in check by soldiers with firearms.

“Many of you don’t like me taking over the rule”, Bradley addressed them. “Many of you believe that your previous ruler will overthrow and stop me.” He made a few steps looking onto the people standing there. “But that won’t ever happen, because of the power I wield.” Some murmurs could be heard at that. “There is nothing to be afraid of. I have pledged myself to unite this land and bring peace to all of you.” He made a few steps back, waiting. As nothing happened, Lia stepped forward. Somehow she knew what she had to do now. She stepped into the middle of the plaza.

“As you still seem to be skeptical, let me demonstrate!” Bradley’s voice thundered over the place.

Lia recognized the sign, opening her seal. There was something in her head that told her she forgot something, but as she changed into a dragon, ripping her new clothing apart, she dismissed the thought. She roared loudly, making the people below her shriek. Now none of them would even think of defying her imperator.

But why ... why did she feel like something was wrong? Her eyes looked over the horizon. No, there was nothing. It was much closer than that. Behind her.

She turned her head. Bradley held his arms into the air, taking loudly to his subjects. She grolled once again, her instinct telling her that something was wrong, but her mind couldn’t detect any danger. She just had to be careful.

“I can’t make a peaceful and united world a reality, if you struggle against me! That is why any of you, who wants to overthrow me, will share the fate of this young man!” Bradley’s voice stopped her searching for danger. She turned her head slightly further. One of her eyes could see behind her, see two soldiers bringing down a young man. A man she knew. A dragon guardian. Jan!

Her heart began to beat faster, her eye following each of his steps, her head turning further so her gaze could follow him more easily.

“This Dragon will now pass judgement on him!” Bradley stepped towards Jan, grinning broadly, whispering to him: “I told you, you would regret crossing me.” The he turned towards her and spoke two fatal words: “Kill him!”

A part of her wanted to follow Bradley order immediately. She opened her maw ... but she was held back by another part. She knew that she would do everything for her imperator, everything but one. She wouldn't kill Jan. She growled once again.

“What are you doing? Obey!” Bradley hissed towards her. Lia didn't follow the order, reactivating the seal. The more she changed back into her human form, the stronger got the need to follow the order. But her feelings remained strong, fighting the urge.

“Obey!” Her body began to tingle and she felt a stinging, burning sensation on her breast.

“Lia, you have to resist!” Jans voice was weak, muffled. Why was it that she heard Bradley so loud and clear?

She had to do something. This urge to kill Jan got stronger and stronger, the source of it being Bradley. Her mind told her to obey her imperator, but her feelings ... her feelings wanted her to kill Bradley, in order to save her love.

“General Artai!” Bradley spoke to Yukiko. He wanted to make her do it.

Her gaze was fixated on Bradley, her anger rose. She had to put him down, as fast as possible. All she needed was just a small little sphere that drilled a hole in his heart.

As soon as that thought had run its course, a small gleaming white sphere appeared before her. It was the

size of a pea, nothing more. Bradley managed to jump to the side, the magical bullet hitting one of the citizens. The man screamed and dissolved into nothingness. The people screamed, panic hitting them.

Bradley started to run away. "Subdue her!"

A thorn of ice wounded her right arm. She could see some sort of mist falling down from Yukiko, her arms wrapped in ice. Tears were streaming down her face, but she continued to attack Lia. She pulled back, being held down by Nina from behind.

Her eyes searched for Bradley. Another gleaming white sphere formed before her eyes, black Lightning running over its surface, it was the size of a cherry.

Somehow Bradley evaded it once again, the sphere hitting a row of houses, expanding into a big black sphere that swallowed the whole house. Air was pulled to the sphere as well as stones and pieces from the neighboring houses. The sphere collapsed a moment later, vanishing, leaving a gaping hole behind. There wasn't even debris.

Bradley looked to the crater, his mouth gaping, then he started running again.

The stones below Lias feet began to move, melting into one another, growing into a wall, locking her up. Nina released her, leaving her alone in the stone prison.

She felt something burning and stinging from where her dragon tear was. She pulled the gem from her throat, the pain now coming from her hand, but it seemed to be far away.

Suddenly she realized everything. That wasn't her tear. This was something else. She threw it to the ground, her memories returning.

Bradley had done something to the astral diamond, he had taken her freedom, had controlled her thoughts. She looked up. If only she was able to fly ...

Why shouldn't she be able to fly? She had a dragon within her. She only needed his wings! She concentrated. Never before had a dragon priest summoned only part of the dragon within them, but why shouldn't it be possible?

"General Dias!" Bradley's voice reached muffled through the stone prison. "I understand now. You want to save the life of this young man, don't you?"

She didn't answer, searching for a possibility. There was something, deep within. A warm, gleaming white light. She reached for it.

"Follow my orders and I will keep him alive!"

She felt a shiver down her spine as large leathery white wings grew from her skin.

"Give up! You don't want to cause a catastrophe!" Was there fear within Bradley's voice? Yes, he had all reason to fear her. She had to free not only Jan, but all others from his clutches as well!

Lia jumped upwards, her hands changing into claws. She dug them deep into the stone, climbing up the wall. She spread her wings on the top. Bradley wasn't hard to find, he had hidden behind Jan.

"Lia!" Finally she could hear his voice clearly. "Don't listen to him! You can't become his ..."

"Be quiet!" Bradley held a pistol to his head. "Follow my orders, General Dias, or this boy will die!"

This time she would hit him, she knew it. Within her right palm formed a gleaming white sphere, the size of an apple. Shadows hushed below its surface, black Lightning running over it and then ... the sphere flow of towards Bradley, following a slight arc. This nightmare would end now!

Nina appeared next to Bradley, pulled him aside and they both vanished as fast as she had appeared. Lia

didn't react fast enough. She couldn't steer the sphere anymore, making it hit the ground several dozen feet away from Jan.

She expanded immediately, got bigger than the house before, swallowing the marketplace, all the people there, as well as Jan.

For a moment her heart stopped. The vacuum lasted only a short moment before the sphere collapsed once again. She didn't see the following explosion coming. The shockwave hit her head on, hurling her far from the city.

She didn't even feel the heat. The wounds and pain all over her body were small compared to the sharp pain she felt inside her heart as soon as she realized what she had done.

She had killed Jan.

“Who ... what is that?” The source of that voice came closer. Some stranger came towards her. She couldn’t run, drained of her strength. “It seems to be ...” It was the voice of a woman and then there was someone else. Lia tried to get up. It took all her strength to stem her upper body upwards using her arms. She could see her hands blurry, they looked like the claws of a white dragon. She closed her eyes and looked again, her vision sharpening. She was wrong.

“Be a dear and get a blanket”, the woman called sternly. “Now!” She could hear some more steps going away again. She looked up and could see someone running away as well as an older woman standing next to her.

“Where ...?” She felt a shiver down her spine, something twisted painfully, draining her strength once gain.

The woman came closer, helping her up once again. “Your Highness”, her voice but a mere whisper.

“Highness?” Her throat felt rough and dry. Why did the woman call her highness? “Where am I?”

“Close to Greifjard. You landed in one of our fields.”

“I ...” Lia held her head. Why was she in that much pain? “How have I gotten here?” Why couldn’t she remember anything?

“I don’t know, your highness.”

“Why do you call me highness?” She looked into the face of the woman. She seemed old but also calm and friendly, making her feel all fuzzy inside.

“Are you not part of the royal family?”

“I don’t know ...”

“You are a white half dragon; you have to be a Luxana.”

“I ... I am ...” There was something, some sort of memory. Her name. “Lia ... Lia Luxana ...” But there was something else, something missing, was it?

“See?” The woman smiled friendly. “You should come to us and rest a few days. After that we will bring you to Novis.”

“I ...” Lia looked behind her. A deep several feet long furrow was behind her, and she was at one end of it. Somehow she knew, that at the end of that furrow, far, far away, something terrible had happened, making a cold shiver run down her spine.

“What can I do for you, your highness?”

Lia shook her head. “Nothing. It’s nothing.” She mustn’t burden that friendly old lady with her fears and feelings.

“Toss the blanket here and turn around!” The stern voice of the woman had surfaced once again, only to turn soft once more a moment later. “Here, your highness.” She put the blanket over her shoulders. The blanket was soft and warm, making her realize the cold she was objected to on the field. She didn’t wear any other clothing than said blanket now. What had happened? Her head started to hurt whenever she tried to remember.

As they got up and left the furrow she saw the man standing a bit away, his back turned towards them.

“Come”, the woman lead over the field. Lia tightened the blanket around her body. “My name is Emma Sheyan and that is my husband, Karl Sheyan.”

“Thank you”, Lia answered, stumbling more than walking.

“But of course, my dear. Where would we get if we wouldn’t help people in need, or half dragons for that matter, right, Karl?”

“What? Oh ... sure, sure.” The man pulled his gaze from Lia.

“Don’t even go there with your thoughts, old man. You are my husband and she is a Luxana!”

He gulped. “Why do you ...”

“We are married for a long time now. I know how you think!”

“I’ll go home first and prepare our guest room”, he bowed slightly before running off.

Lia had to smile. He was old but still very fit for his age ... Why was she thinking like that? Did she know more people that were his age? She shook her head slightly. Try as she might, she just couldn’t remember. Maybe she would remember, after arriving at her home ...



Three days had passed since Lia had been found by the Sheyans on their field. She still didn’t know what had happened, but her body had recovered.

The signs that showed that she was half dragon got stronger day by day. Her right eye had changed color from a dark brown to a bright yellow-golden hue. Her other eye remained red. Her red hair was slowly turning white.

During all that time Emma told her she would find answers to her questions as soon as she arrived home. She could only hope that the older woman was right. Especially since she wasn’t sure that she was a Luxana at all. On the way to the next city she constantly wondered what would happen, if she wasn’t part of the royal family. Wondered where her home would be then and how she could recover her lost memories.

“Don’t worry”, Emma put an arm around her shoulders squeezing her slightly. “Everything will be fine. I am sure you will be with your parents shortly.”

As the city came into view, Lia started to feel a nervous tingling where her stomach would be. Greifjard was a pretty large city, even surrounded by city walls, which meant that there would be guards that were somehow connected to the royal family. She could find and explain her situation to them.

Coming close to the gate their cart slowed down, halting next to one of the guards. The man came to her, smiling friendly. He lifted his spear slightly in greeting. “Hello Karl, Emma. Is harvest season starting soon?”

“We are a bit earlier than usual, this time around.” Emma leaned back slightly, allowing the soldier to catch a glimpse of Lia.

“Who is that with you?”

“She landed about three days ago in one of our fields.”

“L... landed?” The soldier stared at her.

“She’s a bloody half dragon”, Karl helped him, “a white one!”

“A white half dragon?” The Soldier stumbled backwards, almost choking on his own tongue. Then he went all stiff, putting his heels together. “W.. welcome to Greifjard, your majesty.”

Lia blinked. Was that behavior normal? What was expected of her?

“She lost her memory”, Emma supplied quieter. “You need to help her get back to Novis.”

The Soldier relaxed slightly. “She lost her ...”

“Are ya that slow t’day lad? Ya’re repeatin’ everythin’ we say.”

Lia just nodded. “I don’t know how I got there nor who my family is.”

“Maybe it’s got ta do with those strange lights ta the north”, Karl took the horses reigns into one hand, gesturing wildly. “That furrow pointed in ta tha’ direction.”

“To the north?” The soldier looked puzzled. “Novis is to the south from here.” He put the spear down on the ground, rubbing over the stubbles on his face. “I guess the Captain has to decide on what to do.” He nodded and held his hand out to her. “Come with me, please.”

Lia felt insecure and looked towards Emma. After she nodded friendly, telling her that it’s okay, she got off the cart.

“If you want to know his decision, come back when you are done with what your business”, the soldier said to the elder couple.

“We will”, Emma smiled and waved, as they continued their way into the city.

Lia waved as well before following the guard through the gate. A short way behind the gate they entered a building and after stepping through a few more doors the guard stepped towards a desk.

“Captain?”

The man behind the desk looked up, his body out of shape. It was evident that he had devoted more time to eating than to training. “What’s the problem? And why in Aerith’s name have you left your post?”

The guard didn’t answer but stepped aside, allowing the man behind the desk a good view on Lia.

“Who is that?” The man got even grumpier.

“Lia Luxana.”

Silence ensued as the captain’s mouth opened and closed a few times, just staring at her. His eyes looked over her for several times, blinking. Finally, at lot more friendly, he got up and addressed her. “Who are your parents, child?”

“I don’t know.” She felt as if she was being judged, as if his eyes would peel of her clothing at any moment.

“Well, I see you are half dragon, but you are also more than that”, the Captain explained. “I have seen a few dragon priests in my time, but you are the first female one. How did you manage to become one?”

The title seemed familiar, but as she tried to remember, pain started to spike within her head.

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head.

“Apparently she has lost her memory”, the guard supplemented for her. “What should we do with her? She might be a danger.”

“We will bring her to Novis”, the Captain answered calmly. “Even if she might be a danger or just considered dangerous by the dragon priests ...” He stopped midsentence as if remembering that she was there with them in the room.

“Why should I be dangerous?” She approached the captain slowly.

“Because ... you might not know how to control the dragon sealed within you.”

“There is a dragon ...?” Her head started to pound again.

“She is a unique case and, what is important for us, she is half dragon. This means that, even if she is not related to the royal family, she is still to be considered a princess, until our king judges her.”

“Judges me?” Lia looked up again, an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

“If you are not part of the royal family, then our king will look you over. If he likes what he sees he will make you part of the royal family. If not though ...” He started to grin, leaving the rest of the sentence unspoken.

“I... I think I don’t want to go to Novis after all.” Lia made a step back.

“Suit yourself”, the captain replied, “but you will be reported to Novis either way.” He came a few steps closer to her. “This means that our king will search you and I can promise you that he will find you. He will follow you to the end of the world and maybe even declare war on other countries.”

“But ... why?” She almost couldn’t believe what he said.

The captain raised his hand, ticking the points off of his fingers. “First of all, you are half dragon and either an ally to him or a liability. Second of all either your father or your mother is a white dragon, which makes you a rarity among the rare. Thirdly you are a woman.” He cleared his throat. “That makes you a wanted target by all the other ruling half dragons.”

“What?”

The captain looked to the guard that was blinking himself now. “Go back to your bloody post.” He nodded and ran off, leaving her alone with the captain.

“It seems you have forgotten more than you should. I’ll gladly remind you. Do you remember Aerith at least?”

She almost wanted to shake her head, but she had heard the name before. And suddenly a memory crawled out of her pain-riddled brain. “The holy protector of the dragon priests.”

“Indeed, it seems you have not forgotten all your training. Now, Aerith was the one ...”

“... that gave the first dragon priests the power to seal dragons that were rampaging against humans, those that are now called wild ones”, she finished his sentence.

“She was the one that restored peace between the dragon clans and the humans.”

“And that related to me how?”

The captain sighed. "You are like Aerith, a girl set into this world by a white dragon. Some will see you automatically as Aerith reborn. That means that you could go out, easily rally an army behind you and overthrow one or even all ruling half dragons. That is why they will do one of two things: Make them theirs ... or kill you."

"I don't want to rule. I want to live in peace."

"Maybe, maybe not. You are a risk if kept unchecked." He came even closer, so she almost could feel his breath. "You know, going to Novis would work in your favor, while fleeing and resisting from the get go would do the opposite."

Black Dragons



Bradley stood within the large crater that was once the proud city of Magneis. A few chunks of the city wall were still standing, but that was all. Every weapon he had paled in regard to that girls destructive potential.

He had thought that Yukikos power had been the pinnacle of warfare, and then he had seen the potentials of the others ... but that ... one had to fear that she was able to destroy the planet. He shuddered again. Rubenheim had saved his life by explaining what each of the tears could do and how he could use them after they were fused. He didn't know where he got all that knowledge from, but at the moment he didn't care.

He just wondered how that girl had been able to free herself from his control. But Rubenheim was nowhere to be found. He could have been destroyed with the city, but he was almost sure that he hadn't been in there as everything happened. This meant that the only man, who would have been able to answer his questions, had vanished. What should he do now? Bradley was cursing under his breath. He had been careless. He had come to depend on that despicable man.

He needed to know that the others, especially Yukiko, would stay within his control. Another one of them turning suddenly, ignoring his orders and attacking him would ruin everything.

For now he could only hope that Rubenheim claim of this plan being failsafe was at least in part right. At least until he found that mad scientist or someone else that could explain to him what went wrong.

A sudden shadow interrupted his thoughts. Bradley looked into the sky, only to see dozens of back creatures

arriving all around him. He had seen one of those creatures before but only about half their size. Most of them landed on the fields and the chunks of stone still standing, one landed directly in front of him.

Bradley touched the black diamond hidden underneath his clothing, calling for his four remaining generals, hoping that they won't go berserk on him. It took them only a second to appear.

The dragon lowered his head towards Bradley, looking at him with orange-red eyes. The eye blinked once, just before the dragon began to transform into something very human, complete with a leathery coat.

The human hadn't had any hair on him and still orange-red eyes but other than that he could have passed as a normal human any time.

"Are you responsible for this?" The dragon came a few steps closer to Bradley.

"What if?" Bradley had to grin.

The dragon looked once more on Bradley, staring at him. "No, you are not." He didn't answer Bradley's question but turned and went away, ignoring him completely. No. This time he was prepared to fight these despicable creatures. They wouldn't dare to ignore him again. He pulled energy out of the black diamond, lifting his right hand. A small explosion in front of the dragon cut through the earth, stopping him.

"You dare to ...?" The dragon turned slowly. "You challenge me? Do you really think you can defeat me?" He breathed in air, fighting to keep calm. "You are not a dragon. Not even half. You. Are nothing!"

Bradley didn't need to be careful, he didn't want to be. Using the powers of the black diamond directly should allow him to win. And even if he should be

pressed down, he could easily flee. He couldn't lose anything here. He could only win.

"Give up!" The dragon turned once again, most of his emotions in check once again.

Bradley stopped him with another explosion. "I am serious." His face was hard, telling the dragon that he was indeed challenging him.

"The challenge has been accepted!" A woman stepped inbetween both, her red eyes and bald head telling him that she was a dragon as well. Not that there was any other human then him and his generals around. Her curves weren't even half bad.

"Yamira! You can't seriously consider this! This is preposterous!" The male dragon shouted almost hysterically.

"You know the rules: The strongest one is the ruler of our clan and everyone is entitled to challenge him at any time, in order to take over!" She smiled.

"That's valid only for dragons! For members of the clan!"

"Are you afraid to lose?"

"As you wish! I shall fulfill this human's death wish!"

Bradley had to smile. This got better every second. That female was playing into his hands. He might even get a small army of dragons. With his generals and all of them he could stand a chance against that girl!

"The rules are simple: Either kill your enemy or make him surrender", Yamira explained. "Help from outside or taking prisoners is not allowed." She looked to Bradley and his generals, then towards all the other dragons.

Bradley thought an order to Yukiko and the others. They retreated obediently.

The woman waited a bit longer, observing both sides, then she retreated herself, stepping backwards and shouting a single word: "Begin!"

His enemy changed into the form of a dragon once again. Bradley surrounded himself with a magic armor. He knew of the dragons flaming breath already, he could also imagine that they were incredibly powerful. These despicable creatures could even fly. But apart from that they were living beings and living beings had always two weak spots: Heart and Brain. Granted, his were heavily armored, but then again, he had very powerful magic.

The dragon attacked with his maw, his teeth digging into his magic armor, never reaching him. Bradley reacted, shoving a spear of ice upwards, just slightly angled, to where he thought the dragons brain had to be.

The creature roared, retreating. He had missed slightly. He used more of the icy powers, freezing his enemy to the ground. He ran forwards, arriving below the dragon's body within a few blinks of an eye. His heart had to be somewhere there. Gesturing broadly he commanded a spear of ice that shot up against the dragon's body. It couldn't penetrate his scales. He didn't give up that easily. He changed the spear into the form of a drill, heating the stones until they glowed.

The improvised weapon started spinning wildly, drilling through the creatures scales. The dragon roared again, flailing his tail, beating his wings. He couldn't escape the ice, he couldn't touch Bradley below him, he roared louder, feeling the pain.

Bradley just realized that he had full control over the girls powers even though she wasn't in his control anymore. He felt invincible at the moment the drill penetrated the scales, hitting the sensitive flesh below, searing and severing it. Suddenly the dragon's roar died. Bradley jumped aside, blinked out of existence and reappeared back where he started. He had won!

Everything around him was silent as the creature collapsed onto the ground. Then Yamira approached him. A few feet away from him she kneeled and bowed slightly.

“We would like to know the name of our new chief.”

Bradley allowed himself to smile. “Edward L. Bradley!”

The carriage stopped in the courtyard of the castle. The impressive structure lay within the capital city of Novis. White walls stretched towards the sky only to be overshadowed by even higher towers.

“We have arrived”, the city guard left the carriage, offering his hand. Lia took it and exited, while her gaze was fixed on the seamless walls. “Please follow me.” He was waiting for her. He seemed out of place in his dark grey armor made of steel.

She followed him, ascending the few stairs up and through a big door. The walls were so seamless and highly polished that she could almost see her own image in them.

It felt like they had traveled half a mile until she found herself in a larger room, the statue of a praying woman surrounded by a dragon, was placed in the middle, facing her. “That’s Aerith”, whispered the guard next to her.

“You may leave now”, she heard another voice. Lia turned towards its source, observing another man entering the room. He had white hair and golden eyes. He was probably half dragon. Was he the King? How should she behave now? Kiss his hand? She would never do that.

“As you wish”, the guard answered and left, making a few steps backwards, then turned and left. She found herself alone with the strange man.

“Is that my new mother?” A girl appeared behind him, clutching to and hiding beneath him. Lia could only see her head.

“We shall know shortly, Riko”, the half dragon put a hand on the girls head, patting it slightly. He approached

her with a few more steps. "At least she isn't showing any fear or lying about her obedience towards me. She also has not made a move to attack." He started to smile. "I like that at least."

"Are you the king?"

"I am Ray Luxana, King of Naverin, Son of Aeris, the highest and mightiest of the white dragons." He stopped, opening his arms like a priest telling them of Aerith's heroic actions ... he seemed very full of himself. At least she had remembered something else. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lia. Lia Luxana ..." She still couldn't remember if there was a third part to her name.

"I didn't know that there are other families that share my name." He looked at her quizzically.

"Why do you have two differently colored eyes?" The girl suddenly stood before her, looking up to her out of her large golden eyes. Even her hair was white.

"She is a dragon priest", Ray explained. "She carries another dragon within herself."

Rikos eyes seemed to grow larger still.

"I want to know how you got that mark." Ray came a bit closer, his stern gaze fixed on her. "The dragon priests don't let girls join their ranks, even if they had known you were half dragon, they wouldn't have sealed one within you."

"I don't know", Lia shook her head. "I lost my memory."

Ray stared at her as if judging the truth of her words.

"Can you show me your dragon form?" Riko pulled at Lias clothing.

Lia squatted, getting to eyelevel with the girl, putting a hand on her head. "I don't know how", she told her, stroking gently over her head. "That's why I can't show you."

“The other dragon?”

Lia shook her head again.

“But it is sooo easy! Let me show you!” Riko closed her eyes and turned into a dragon. The little dragon was just as large as Lia was high, so she could see into her eyes while standing.

“Some need time to find their dragon form”, Ray explained, “just give her a bit more time.”

The little dragon frowned. “Okay”, she heard the girl's voice in her head.

“Well my daughter seems to like you”, Ray smiled, “so I am willing to let you join the family.”

“I need to know what you mean by having me join your family. Is it just a royal decree?”

“You’ll be my new mother”, the dragon rubbed her head against Lia's.

“I will make you my wife.”

Lia felt something tingle down her spine. She opened and closed her mouth, her instinct told her to run. “I ...”

“Please? Pretty please?” Riko looked at her with overly large dragon eyes, making another shiver run down her spine. If she would do it for her ...

Lia shook her head. “So, if I decline you will kill me?”

“Why do you ...”

“Sir!” A guard ran towards the room, his armor clanging loudly with every step. “Sir!” He stopped in front of Ray. “A black dragon just landed in the courtyard. It wants to see you immediately!”

“We will talk more about this later”, Ray said, leaving the room, passing Lia. “Riko, please stay with our guest. This won’t take long.”

“I shall protect my new mother”, she growled.

Lia sighed. “I hadn’t even had a chance to decline”, she murmured to herself.



Phobos gave an audience to the black dragon as replacement for Dikon. The once strong and proud ruler had become silent and lethargic after his daughter had left. He was in no shape to rule. Because of that Phobos return trip to Gajoan and Magneis had been delayed, but he knew that Serin would have everything under control until he returned.

“I am Yamira”, the female dragon explained, her head held high, as she approached him in human form. “I bring you a message from our new chief and the ruler over Gajoan: Edward L. Bradley.”

Phobos breathing stopped for a moment. Since when were dragons interfering with humans, conquering lands ... his land! But there was something else about this that was strange. That name didn't fit a dragon. Then he remembered that bastard that tried to attack him before.

Yamira produced a small piece of paper from her cloak, opened it and began to read: “Bradley would like to have your immediate capitulation and that you give him full authority to rule your country in your stead.” She squinted slightly, looked a bit closer on the paper. “Should you decline, Bradley won't ask nicely again and there might be casualties as he searches for other ways to get what is rightfully his.”

Phobos snorted. Rightfully his. “He threatens war.” He clenched his teeth trying not to attack the messenger right there. Bradley had taken over his land and was now threatening him with war. He had to stay calm. How did he get the dragons to side with him? He didn't stand a chance against him only a few days earlier.

Sending a black dragon as messenger and being called chief of their clan was just a demonstration of power,

taunting them with the knowledge that they wouldn't stand a chance if the whole clan attacked. Not even Dikon would have been powerful enough to defeat the whole clan, especially now that he had lost his sword.

"I await your positive answer in about an hour." Yamira returned the paper to her coat.

Phobos nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, there is one more thing." Yamira started searching her cloak for something. "Edward is promising those", she found another paper, "that help him find a certain Lia Luxana Dias, to keep their position as a governor under his rule." She showed him a drawn picture of her. "Dead or alive."

Phobos noticed how all his muscles started to cramp up. "Why is he searching for Lia?" Phobos growled and came very close to the envoy.

"I don't know", she shrugged with her soldiers. "But if you are hiding her, then you should hand her over. Otherwise his wrath will be terrible and that is nothing anyone of us wants, right?" She crumpled the picture and hid it in her cloak as well. Then she turned, searched for a place within the shadows and leaned against the castle walls. "I will wait exactly one hour. Shouldn't I hear from you until then, I will assume that you have declined his proposal."

Phobos bit on his tongue to keep his wrath in check. He turned and went back into the castle. After a long walk into the inner reaches he hit the wall and shouted out his wrath.

He desperately needed to know what had happened in Magneis. He also needed to neutralize Bradley, to get past the black dragons and end his life. He should have done it before. Now ... he had to get through to Dikon and ally himself with his former enemy.



“... and then I showed them my teeth. My dragon teeth!” Riko grinned. “Those boys never bothered me again after that.”

Lia smiled awkwardly. She had never heard of a dragon speaking as much as the one next to her. And she was still in her dragon form.

“Since then I can transform whenever I want. Flying is great. But it is also exhausting. Have you ever flown?”

“I don’t know”, she answered, still unable to recall most of her memories.

“It’s very easy, you just flap your wings and read the flow of the air. But dad doesn’t want me to get far from the castle.”

“And for good reason.” Ray had entered the room once again. “Riko, I would like to be alone with Lia for a while, can you play alone for a bit?”

“But ...”

“It is important, young lady.”

The small dragon frowned, going a few steps on all fours than changing back into the form of a small girl. Riko left the room going slowly, very slowly.

Ray closed his eyes for a moment, holding one hand above the other, creating a small transparent sphere between them, that started to grow, enclosing both of them. She vanished as fast as it had appeared. “It will be better if she doesn’t hear this.”

“Why? What happened?”

“The black dragon clan just declared war on us.”

Lia gulped. “The whole clan?” Should the whole clan attack a country ... then that country had already lost before the war had even begun. There weren’t even enough dragon priests to deal with such a threat. Wild dragons

were one thing, a whole clan going rogue another ... The humans didn't stand a chance and the few half dragons ... She shivered as her brain made some more connections. "But why?"

"Because they proposed me an Ultimatum, one that I can't accept at all." He started to pace up and down in front of her. "Why should I give my country, my rule to this Bradley, who or whatever he is?" He squinted his eyes and looked to her. "And why should I give you to them, Lia Luxana Dias?"

Another cold shower ran over her back, as she recognized the name as a part of her lost memories. "I don't know what they want from me. I don't understand!" The name wasn't the key to her full memories.

"I don't understand either, but I think that you should be able to tell me. There might be reasons why you either don't want to tell me or you have really lost your memory."

"I lost my memory!" She shouted at him, tears in her eyes.

"It is not important. I won't give you to them. Riko likes you and that is enough for me." He sighed. "But I fear I have to request help from the others."

"The others?"

"Dikon and Richard, maybe they even know what has happened to Phobos."

Phobos. Another name that made her head hurt. "Are those half dragon as well?"

Ray nodded. "The rulers of the other countries. If we stand together, we might have a chance. Maybe we could even enlist the dragon priests." A sad smile could be seen on his lips. "Our chances to win against the whole clan of black dragons is very slim even then."

"W... what about the white dragons?"

“I would like to ask my father, but he has disappeared for more than sixteen years. He seems to avoid humans suddenly.” Ray frowned. “And he is the only one that can make the clan of white dragons help us. They won’t do anything otherwise.”

He turned and left the room, his shoulders slumped, his head hanging low. Lia went after him, unable to get rid of this bad feeling in her stomach.



Bradely clenched his teeth while pacing in his tent. All of them had declined his offer to end this peacefully and not even one had bothered to say anything to his messengers.

Did they have some secret weapon? Hoped for help from outside?

“My lord?” Yamira entered the tent and bowed slightly. “Aeris has followed your call.”

Bradley had to smile. This dragon lady had been a perfect counselor so far. It had been her idea to send a message to the head of the white dragons, so he could pull them to his side as well. He didn’t want one of his enemies to do that, after all. “I am coming”, he said, leaving the tent with his head held high.

An unfamiliar man stood about two dozen feet away from him, on the place they had left open for dragons to come in and leave from. He was probably Aeris. He went to him slowly, setting one foot in front of another, radiating an aura of invincibility and greatness.

“So you are the one that is nowadays the chief of the blacks?” Aeris face was unreadable. He had short, white hair, even eyebrows, golden eyes and a mostly angular face. He had a short beard, as if he hadn’t shaved for

three days. Somehow it made him seem as if he didn't respect Bradley at all.

"Yes. I have sent you a message to propose an alliance between us."

"No thank you", Aeris turned.

"Then I shall challenge you!"

Aeris turned back. "You want to invoke the right of the mighty?" Bradley felt Aeris eyes judging him. "Well, if you would defeat me here, it won't mean that the white dragons shall follow you. It might turn to the opposite: They start to chase you, maybe even ally themselves with my son."

"But ..." Yamiras voice sounded desperate.

"I am not bound by the rules my brother had once set for you. Especially not since he kept his rule by being more wise than any of those who had challenged him." Aeris turned back into a dragon. He was even larger than any of Bradleys black colored allies.

Bradley hesitated. It was not that he doubted that he would win. It was more that he didn't want to risk losing the white dragons as well. Even if Aeris had lied there and then, he hadn't had a white dragon as witness. He might even turn some of the black dragons against him, if he attacked Aeris now.

"I shall hold council with my children", he heard the voice of the white dragon within his head. Aeris jumped into the air, flapped his wings and was almost out of sight in a matter of minutes. This plan had backfired on him.

Bradley turned to Yamira: "Who are 'his children'?"

"All white dragons as well as possible all half dragons that are his descendants.

Bradley frowned. Holding that large a council was a ridiculous sentiment. But still, it raised the possibility

that he had to fight against an alliance of white dragons and other countries. He had to make an example of one of the countries. Now. Immediately.

“Who is our strongest enemy?”

“I think ... Eien to the north”, Yamira answered a bit hesitantly. “Letoa is riddled with problems, their original ruler is in no state to rule and his replacement ... well, his orders are oftentimes ignored. Naverin is also quite strong, but Ray Luxana keeps most attackers in check just by stating that he is Aeris’ son.”

Bradley clenched his teeth again. It was tempting to attack Naverin to teach Aeris a lesson, but it would also set a clear signal, declaring war on them. Ray wasn’t even half dumb by stating that. Attacking the north, however, would tell the others that he could defeat a stronger foe within a short period of time. That should sent a signal in his favor.

“Tell the others that we shall purge Eien from the face of the earth!”

Dragon Brothers



Lia had followed Ray into a small, plain room. The only thing that was not a single mesh of grey was the black sphere held on top of a grey pillar in the middle of the room.

Ray went to the sphere, putting his hand on the smooth surface and suddenly the whole room changed as the sphere began to glow in a faint golden light. The plain walls were replaced by golden ornaments and red tapestries. An ornate golden chair had appeared and with it a slightly fat man with black hair. His red eyes looked around, soon locking onto Lia.

“I see you still like these exorbitant decorations, Richard.” Ray pulled the man’s attention to himself.

“And you are still the overly plain one. But I have waited for you”, the other one growled. “I am still waiting for Dikon to show up.” Then he turned his head to Lia again. “Who is she?”

“An ally”, Ray answered stepping between her and Richard, thus hiding her from him. She felt a bit of relief, as she found his gaze upon her uncomfortable.

“So, a half dragon that is also a dragon priest. And if that wasn’t enough, she is female as well. At least I now have seen everything.” Richard growled and leaned to the other side of his chair. “Even if she helps us, we don’t stand a chance against the dragon clan, as long as Dikon doesn’t show up.” He stood up and started pacing the room. “I wouldn’t be surprised, if he had killed the dragon, before it had delivered its message.”

“So you are considering to give up, if we don’t hear from Dikon?”

“It could be the wiser decision for Eien. I don’t participate in wars that I cannot win.” He stepped forwards

some more until he could see past Ray. “What is your opinion on this, girl?”

“I ...” Lia cleared her throat, searching for an answer that was as neutral as possible. “I can’t judge if that Bradley would care better for your subjects than you do.”

“A very diplomatic answer.” Richard turned towards Ray again. “I didn’t answer my messenger out of the same concern.” He started pacing slowly in front of Ray again. “He defeated Phobos somehow in a single day and pulled the clan of black dragons over on his side. We don’t know how he did that, we don’t know anything about that individual.”

“I have to put one thing right here”, another voice said, a voice that somehow seemed familiar towards Lia. “He never defeated me. He took over, while I was and still am in another country.”

“Phobos ... and Dikon. Now that is a surprise.” Richard looked at them while lifting an eyebrow.

A large man came towards Lia, grabbing her clothes. “Where is she? Where is Nina?” His anger flared for a moment then he let go of her as if realizing what he was doing. He scrambled backwards from her.

“Lia is with you?” Phobos came closer to her. “Can you tell me what happened in Magneis?” He came as close as the other one – Dikon before.

“I don’t know.” Uncomfortable she made a few steps back.

Ray caught her before she stumbled into him. “She lost her memory.”

Phonos sighed and looked to Ray. “I know that her father should be able to lift her blockade on these memories. Do you know where Aeris is at the moment?”

“What has my ...” Lia almost felt his gaze on her back. “You don’t want to say ...”

“So that old white geezer of a dragon got another half dragon? And then a daughter?” Richard seemed to be choking on his breath.

“Why do you know, who her ...”

“That’s unimportant right now. Important is where he is?”

“I don’t know, he hasn’t been here in a long time ...” Ray admitted uncomfortably. “Not in sixteen years.”

Phobos didn’t say a word, while staring at Ray. The moment of silence stretched uncomfortably long. Then he looked towards Lia. “I am sorry. I just had hope that you could give us some very much needed information.”

“So, other than that, what’s the plan now?” Richard began pacing once again.

“I thought of activating the dragon priests.” Ray held Lia still by her shoulders. “The dragons have declared war on humans and it is their duty to protect them.”

“Her! She can defeat all of them!” Dikon pointed towards Lia from a distance away, his finger shaking slightly.

“Me?” She suddenly felt a lump in her throat

“Why her?” Ray let go of her shoulders and went around her. “She is half dragon and dragon priest. Does that give her special powers of some sort?”

“Well, she managed to break Dikons sword”, Phobos answered. The others went silent. “You could call it a special power, but it seemed a bit out of control. And as you can see, it left Dikon in fear of her.”

“Why were those two fighting?” Richard stepped closer, looking at her as if she was a curious animal.

“Well, there were certain artifacts ...” Phobos stopped, he went to Lia, ripped her upper body clothing apart. Lia screamed at the top of her lungs, hitting him squarely in the face before protecting herself with her hands. “It’s not there”, Phobos kept staring at her, his face going pale.

“What is not there? What are you doing?” Ray put himself between her and Phobos.

“The dragons tear, the dragons tear is gone!”

“Artifact? The dragons tear?” Richards’s voice had gotten a stern undertone.

“If Bradley got that dragons tear ...” Phobos stumbled backwards next to Dikon, whose face had gotten paler still. “B... but why does he want us to hand Lia over then?”

“I don’t know ... maybe she needs to hear the words herself?”

“We can’t let him have her.”

“What is this dragons tear?” Ray shouted next to her, making her ears ring and her head hurt. Or did her head hurt because of those dragon tears? Wait, was there more than one?

“One of five incredibly powerful artifacts. They might even be more powerful than the dragons.” Dikon fell to the ground. “Even if Bradley has only four of them ... then we have no hope left.”

“And it would explain how he got to be chief of the black dragon clan.” Phobos sighed.

“That is all I needed to know”, Richard said, going back to his chair. “That concludes this meeting for me. In light of what I have learned now, I shall do what is best for my people.” He put his hand on the big black sphere, that was on his armrest, making the decorations and the chair vanish, leaving only Phobos, Dikon, Ray and herself in Rays grey room.

Ray clenched his teeth. “That ... chicken ...” Returned towards the other two rulers. “Phobos, Dikon, I fear we are on our own.”

“Come towards Letoa then. I am sure that Richard will tell Bradley, that Lia is with you. He will attack there next. Coming here should buy us at least a bit of time.”

“Right. We’ll be coming.” Ray touched his black sphere, making those two vanish. “But before that you will need new clothing.” He started to leave the room. “And we need to find Riko. I won’t leave her here all alone.”

Lia nodded, feeling a bit like a tool for some higher powers, although she was supposed to have some sort of higher power herself. If only she knew how to transform into a dragon, if only she had her memories back ...



Lia followed Ray through some more lengthy corridors of his castle. He finally stopped in front of a very plain looking door, starting to search his clothing until he produced a small iron key and opened the door.

“The clothes in here belonged to Ana, Rikos Mother. I am sure that you will find at least a dress or two that should fit you.” He turned without opening the room or looking into it. “I will look for Riko in the meantime.”

“But!” Lias protests were ignored. She felt nervous as she opened the door and went inside the room. There was a big picture over a much too large bed, showing Ray next to a young woman with white long hair, and golden eyes. She looked lovingly on a small white-haired baby in her arms.

What had happened to her? Was it really all right to take some of Anas clothing? But Lia couldn’t travel with ripped clothing either. She looked to the picture of the woman, hoping that she would give her an answer, allowing her to take some of her clothing. Lia had to admit that she was a beautiful young woman, making her jealous of her. She was smiling, probably towards the child in her arms, but Lia saw it as permission to take one dress as well.

She went over to the dresser on the other side of the room, searching for one of the more plain dresses and proceeded to change into them in front of Riko's mother. She put her old clothing over one arm, bowed towards the picture in thanks and left the room, closing the door silently behind her.

Ray was nowhere to be seen. Was she supposed to wait here? She grew more and more uneasy the longer she waited. After a while she couldn't wait any longer and started to search for Ray and Riko.

Unable to differentiate between the corridors of the castle she soon was lost. After stepping around some more she heard dampened voices. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but she was sure that one of them was Ray. Was the other one of the guards? Lia tried to make out from where these voices originated, following the corridor to the next crossing.

"Where is Lia?" She heard the other voice ask. Who was that stranger and why was he searching for her? She couldn't understand Ray's answer, his voice a bit too low. "I'll find her." The stranger's voice was loud enough for her to understand him, trailing a low echo behind.

Lia felt as everything in her cramped up. What was going on here? Was that Bradley? Had he found her and Ray wanted to protect her? She couldn't stay here, she had to hide somewhere! She ran to the next best door and, opened it and vanished into the room. Still partly in control of her wits, she remembered to close the door as silently as possible.

She had arrived in some sort of Library. Surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of books in several dozen shelves, she felt a twinge of nostalgia. She went through the endless rows, finding a small corner with comfy chairs and a fireplace, giving her a feeling of being safe.

A part of her would have just grabbed a book, settled into the corner and started reading, but she couldn't find peace and quiet right then.

She kept going along the rows of shelf to find a place where she could hide, until she could escape with Ray and Riko.

"Pssst." Lia turned, only to see Riko jumping on her, grabbing her and pulling her onto the ground. "You found me!" The girl started to laugh.

"Pssst", Lia put her index finger to her mouth.

"Do you play hide and seek, too?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me, I'll show you my hiding place." Riko got up and climbed atop the bookshelf next to them. Right in the ceiling above them was an opening. She could see daylight falling into the room through there. The girl jumped up from the shelf, getting ahold of the edge and pulled herself up. After sitting down she smiled towards Lia. "Dad never finds me here."

Lia looked towards the door then back to the bookshelf. She couldn't climb up there like Riko did, her weight would probably make the shelf topple and fall over. So she went to one of the edges, climbing up there, finding the place where Riko was shortly after. She had found a small ledge before the windows up there.

Lia joined her on the narrow space, just barely being able to sit there. Out of sight and in a good hiding place helped her to relax somewhat.

"You are very similar to mama", Riko whispered after a few moments of silence. "She wore a dress like that most of the time as well. She loved books very much, you know?" The girl smiled a sad smile. Lia had hoped to take something that was not noticed and not frequently worn by Riko's mother. "She also was the one that showed me

this hiding place, I got it from her.” The girl scooted a bit closer, her eyes full of tears. “Please, promise me not to vanish someday like she did!”

Lia hadn’t had any words for Riko. She was sorry for her loss, but at the same time unable to promise not to leave her. She didn’t know what the future held.

The door was opened suddenly. “Lia?” It was the voice of the stranger. “You don’t need to hide from me!”

She pressed her index finger once again to her lips, wanting Riko to stay silent. The girl nodded.

“Why are you hiding from your father?”

Her father? Was that truly her father? This ... Aeris? She didn’t feel anything, her blocked memories not reacting at all. Was he really that dragon, the one that could help her regain her memories? Somehow she started to doubt that she wanted them back, they always hurt so much. What if there was a good reason for her forgetting all that? What if this all was only a trick from Bradley?

Riko pulled at her dress. “Is that really your father?” Although she had whispered the question, it sounded really loud to her ears.

“There you are!” The stranger’s face appeared next to them.

Lia cried out of fear, tried to increase the space between him and her.

“What has you so spooked?”

“Are you really her father?” Riko looked at the old man with white hair curiously.

“I don’t know you!” Lia tried to open one of the windows.

“I am not sure, little one. My daughter wouldn’t behave like that. Oh and your father is looking for you, young lady.”

“I’ll be with him shortly.” Riko hung down from the ledge with her hands, letting herself fall down on the shelf, jumping onto the floor from there, leaving her alone with the strange man.

“Now, Lia. I don’t know what has happened to you, and I am sorry for not having visited you in all these years. But we do not have time for these games. If you come not down to me, I will get up to you.”

Lia stopped. She just couldn’t open the window. She was trapped. “A... are you really my father?” She looked into his eyes.

“Yes, I am and I shall protect you from now on.” He came a bit closer, put his hands gently around her sides and lifted her down from the ledge. After jumping down from the shelf he put her back on the floor. Lia pondered running away there and then, but she stayed. “Ray told me that you have lost your memory. I can help you to regain them.”

“I don’t know if I want them anymore.”

“I understand and I won’t force you to take them back. It is a decision you have to make for yourself.” He still pulled her into his arms, pressing her gently to his chest.

Lia started to shiver. The more she thought about it the more she didn’t want to have them. Her intuition screamed at her not to take them. But ... “They could be important. Help me to get them back, please”, she said as fast as possible before she could change her mind.

“Close your eyes”, he said to her, his voice soft and warm. She followed his order and then felt his lips on her forehead. He held her head in a warm embrace. Her head started to hurt as if it would burst at any moment, burning brightly and then ... all those memories and pictures came back to her all that she had hidden deep within her mind.



Yukiko was flying on another dragon right behind Bradley. He and this Yamira seemed to be glued together somehow, the dragon staying as close to him as possible. He even went so far as making the dragons his primary tool to overtake Eien. Was it that he didn't trust her anymore?

She didn't even understand why she had resisted him that much before. So she couldn't even be surprised in his lack of trust. If only Lia was next to her ... Why had she gone rogue? Why had she betrayed Bradley? Yukiko couldn't wrap her head around that.

Of course she had suggested that she wanted to speak with Lia, to convince her to come back into Bradley's service, but he had refused to let her search for her best friend. He wanted her to stay close, probably to witness him and Yamira being together as punishment.

The girl sighed as their target came into view. The castle seemed a bit larger than the one from Phobos, mostly colored in grey. A single man stood on one of the towers, waiting for the fall of the castle, the end of the nation.

After having declined Bradley's generous offer, Richard should be waiting with an army, he should attack. Instead he sent a single man.

"I want to speak with your leader", the man called. "Eien lays down its weapons. We surrender!"

Yukiko frowned. She couldn't even direct her anger at him. She just seemed unlucky these last few days.

"I also offer information on the one you are searching for: Lia Lixana Dias!"

Bradley raised a hand, telling all dragons to stop.

Yukiko's heart skipped a beat, only to beat faster just a moment later. That was a good sign!

“We land”, Bradley ordered. “I want to know what he has to say.”

The dragons started to land, a few within the castle, almost everyone else outside, as dragons.

The man jumped from the tower towards Bradley, turning into a dragon. A trap? Yukiko created a wall of ice between her emperor and the attacker. She gathered energy to counterattack.

Bradley stopped her with a simple “no” inside her head, just before the perceived attacker turned back into a human, landing in front of Bradley, only to fall to his knees and looking down. He just had used the dragon wings to soften his fall, she realized. With his weight ... no wonder.

“I am Richard, the current ruler of Eien. I am giving the rule over these lands to you.”

Bradley nodded, acknowledging his words. “You know where Lia Luxana Dias is?”

“Yes, my lord. She is with Ray Luxana, the ruler over Naverin in the south.”

Yukiko's heart beat even faster. There was the trail she had been looking for. Maybe she could persuade Bradley to search for her and bring her back, now that they had this knowledge?

“That’s all, you can leave now.”

Richard hesitated and looked up to Bradley. “Sir? What about your promise that I may keep ruling this land in your stead?”

Yukiko felt the air around her growing colder. “You can count yourself lucky, if I let you live.” Bradley's voice was almost a whisper. “You declined my first offer and now that I am at your castle, your loyalty changes like a flag in the wind.” He stepped a bit closer to him, squatting down before him. “You know, I cannot trust you, Richard.”

“But ...”

“Yukiko? Would you be so kind to remove this trash from my eyes?”

She had to smile. This day was getting better and better by the minute. She closed in on Richard, who looked at her and Bradley, seemingly confused.

Yukiko was within her element. The tear gave her incredible power. She could even see how the temperature around her dropped, ice crystals appearing on the ground.

Richard got up and jumped backwards. The fat man turned into a dragon, tried to push her back with his fiery breath. All he accomplished was to envelop her in a black cloud. She fathomed herself mask and goggles, pushing on. It still took her several long moments until she could see something again. The half dragon was high in the sky, fleeing from her. She put her hand forwards, trying to slow down the dragon by rapidly dropping the temperature around him. It missed. He had managed to escape from her reach.

“Oh, you will let him escape?” Bradley laughed.

“No!” She turned to the dragon that had brought her here. With a few jumps she was on his back again. “Follow him!” The black dragon growled but followed her order nonetheless. He jumped into the air, flapping his wings, closing in on Richard, fast.

She tried to reach him again, her right hand outstretched she targeted the smaller dragon with her palm ...

Suddenly the mark on the back of her hand sparked, the intricate lines glowing in a low purple. Her hand, her breast and her head started to hurt. She cried out as the pain hit her hard.

“Is something wrong?” She heard the dragon ask.

Yukiko clenched her teeth. "Yes." Her curse was still active. "Keep following him! I will get him." Squinting she looked forwards again, trying to ignore her pain. It wouldn't take long. Only a few more moments and he was in reach once again.

Finally she put all her rage and pain into her attack, the sudden drop in temperature turned the half dragon into a lump of ice immediately. Without beating his wings further he couldn't stay airborne. In a wide arc he crashed into the ground, shattering into several smaller and bigger parts, ending his existence. She had carried out Bradley's mission.

Now she could do other things. "To the south", she ordered her dragon.

"Shouldn't we return ...?"

"No!" Yukiko smiled as her headache started to fade. The distance between her and Bradley was great enough. She could use this time to find her friend and persuade her to come back. Or to end this problem once and for all.



Lia finally stopped hitting her father. It didn't do anything anymore. She had her memories back and wanted to forget them right away. Tears were running down her cheek, while she kept sobbing. Aeris pressed her gently to his chest. He hadn't said one word while she kept hitting him.

"Why?" She had asked him that question over and over again. Why hadn't he helped her? Why hadn't he been there for her? Why was he interfering with her life now?

"Your uncle and I ... we had a major argument after your mother died." He stroke soothingly over her head.

“I couldn’t stay with you as I had lost all my trust in humanity.”

Lia pulled herself closer to Aeris. Even if he hadn’t been there for her before, she needed his warmth and embrace right now.

“I am sorry, my child”, he ended his embrace and took a step back. “I should have stayed with you. How could this incompetent fool let it happen that you were mis-used as a dragon prison?”

“That ... was an accident”, Lia whispered to the side. “Besides”, she looked at him, her anger flaring up once again. “You don’t have any right to call my fa... my uncle incompetent. He was there for me all these years!”

“An accident? How could this have been an accident?” Aeris stroked the stubbles of a beard on his chin.

“The dragons! You attacked us! One of you killed the designated guardian during the ritual!”

“Calm down, young lady.” Aeris raised his hands. “We have done nothing. The white dragons keep to themselves, even if they accept me mostly as their chieftain.” He sighed and let his arms fall down again. “So the black dragons attacked you?” He suddenly looked up and came closer again, his arms on her shoulders. “The dragon imprisoned within you ... is that possibly ... my brother?”

“W... who?” Lia couldn’t follow her father’s thoughts at all.

“My brother! Yargyuu! The true chieftain of the black dragons!”

“I ... I don’t know ...”

“How many dragons were sealed back then?” Aeris shook her by her shoulders.

“One ... I think.”

“In...” Aeris let go of her, shaking his head. “You truly are my daughter.” He looked back at her, grinning from

ear to ear, though there was some sadness in his eyes. "Now I know how this Bradley-guy could have taken control over my brothers clan."

"Y... your brother is a black dragon? The black and white dragons are related to each other?" That was incredible news. No book of the dragon priests had that bit of knowledge in it.

"Yes", Aeris nodded, "Yargyuu and I shared one egg."

"What about all those other dragons? Who were your mother and father?"

"The other dragons are our children. They do carry a part of humanity in them, but it got rather small over the time. But we do not know who our parents are, we were alone ever since birth."

"But ... but ... that means ..."

"Yes", Aeris nodded once again, a serious look in his eyes. "But there are more important things than my past or my family's origin." He went next to her and started leading her to the door. "We need a plan on how to deal with Bradley."

Bradley ... he had cost her her love. Now she could understand Yukiko's past behavior fully. Still he somehow managed to be one step ahead of all of them.

They followed the corridors of the castle, her father leading her along. They found Ray quickly again, Riko stood next to him, while he kneeled before her.

"... and that's why I want you to stay close to me after we leave the castle." He had raised the index finger of one hand. The girl before him just smiled, nodding her head all out. As they came close she turned and ran towards Lia, hugging her.

"I am allowed to leave the castle, Mama!"

Lia stroked Rikos hair and kneeled down to her. "That's wonderful, dear."

“She has her memories back”, Aeris explained and kneeled next to them. “I need to tell you another secret, Riko. I am your grandfather.”

Riko stared at him, breathing a lot of air at once, so it could be heard. She hugged Lia even tighter, exclaiming: “I have suddenly a real large family!”

“Can I get a hug, too?” Aeris pointed with a finger to himself.

“No!” Riko shook her head violently.

Aeris stood up and sighed. “They always like the females more than me”, he murmured. “Well, we should talk about further plans on the way.”

Ray nodded in agreement.

“Can you fly yourself?” Aeris looked to Lia.

“No”, she shook her head, recalling that Felix had warned her to turn into a dragon.

“You should at least be able to use my brother’s form ...”

“It’s ... complicated. Trust me, it is better if I fly with one of you.”

“Will you fly with me?” Riko looked up, hope in her big round eyes.

“You are too young to take someone on your back”, Ray answered in Lias stead.

“Then ... I will get on the same dragon as mama!”

Ray opened his mouth only to close it a moment later. He was speechless. No one raised an objection, so Lia had to put up with her self-proclaimed daughter. Somehow it reminded her of the days she had spent with Yukiko.

There had to be a way to help her friend and to remove this Problem called Bradley from this world!

Gathering



Phobos had started pacing in front of Dikon. His thoughts were still running faster than his legs. Richard had betrayed them already, he was sure of that. He could only hope that Ray was on his way. But what should they do as soon as they arrived? Where should they flee to? They couldn't stay at the castle, that much was certain.

They also had to find Aeris somehow. But how do you find a white dragon that wanted to stay by himself? What should he do, if not even the son of the white dragon knew his whereabouts? Could they find another dragon? Could that one do the same things that Aeris could, or hat it to be him? Maybe if they could persuade the other one to help them find Aeris ...

Then again, they first had to find one and it seemed like they were running out of time. Maybe Ray could somehow help Lia to get her memories back. It would at least help in some regards. But he just didn't know the rules on how this all worked. His mother once said that some things would make sense as soon as he had children of his own.

All that thinking did nothing! He needed a plan. At least something that he could do that would help them later on! If they just could deal with the dragons somehow ...

He turned to Dikon: "Where have you put your sword? Can it be repaired? Can a new one be forged?"

The other one shook his head. "The sword was inherited through generations in our family. The blacksmith back then claimed that he had cooled the blade using the blood of a golden dragon."

“There are no golden dragons!”

Dikon shrugged with his shoulders. “At least not any more. But using the blood from other dragons doesn’t do the trick, our family has tried.”

Phobos sighed. He couldn’t count on Dikon at all. Loosing that sword had changed him. That and his sorrow for his daughter. Though the latter should make him eager to help. But instead he just sat in the corner with his shoulders slumped.

The door to the throne room was opened and someone entered with a brisk pace. “Phobos!”

“Barnett Dias, what a pleasant surprise”, Phobos smiled and looked at Serin that was close behind him, once again nervous.

“I ... I am sorry, but ... after you left the city ... it was taken. I fl...”

“What did you do to my daughter?” Barnett stopped Serin’s words, jumping on Phobos. “Where is she?”

“She is on her way here right now.” Phobos looked into Barnett’s eyes. There it was once again, that passionate fire he showed back as he left him with the small half dragon child. He had said something about being perverse after Phobos had told him that he planned to marry Lia.

“What do you mean, she is on her way?” Barnett shouted. “You disappeared with her, knowing that I disapproved of it! Even Felix disapproved! She is much too young for you!”

Phobos growled. “This is a decision that should be left to her and myself. I don’t let anyone tell me, who I can marry and whom not!”

“But not my ...”

“That is unimportant right now!” Phobos raised his voice, his authority stopping Barnett. “We have a larger Problem than that.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Barnett squinted his eyes.

“Someone has conquered my city, wants us to capitulate and Lia.” The last word made Barnett listen closely. “That one names himself Bradley.”

“Brad ... ley?” The fire in Barnetts eyes died, replaced by fear. “How did he ...? Why are you ...?” His voice showed signs of panic.

“You know Bradley?” Phobos squinted his eyes. His old friend seemed to have some more secrets. Maybe he could shed some light on this whole story. Maybe he knew some of Bradleys weak points. Still, his reaction was unsettling.

“Its ... a longer story.” Barnett sighed. “Why does he want Lia? Is it because of those ... ?”

“I am not sure. We surmise that he is searching her because of that dragon tear.”

“The dragon ...” Barnett looked to Phobos, not saying anything for a few long moment. “You know of that gem?” He sounded angry. Surprised. Questioning. “What do you know?”

“Tell me what you know about Bradley and I will share my knowledge of the dragon tears with you.”

Barnett turned. “I will wait until Lia is here.” Without saying a word he went over to a wall and leaned against it, staring at the ground.

Phobos shook his head, he hated to wait.

Serin stepped forward again, sweat on his forehead. “Sir? About the city ...”



Yukiko landed directly in the castle's courtyard, making the dragon wait there. He had crushed a few buildings and walls, but she didn't care about that at all. She

had to find Lia as fast as possible. Bradley had noticed her absence by now, calling through the tear towards her. She ignored his call as good as she was able to. She had decided to do this and she was determined to follow through.

She started searching the castle as fast as she could, breaking down locked doors, running into all rooms she could find. Nobody. There weren't even servants in the castle. The home of the regent was empty. She was already too late.

Bradley had gotten angry, she could feel it. He would search for her. Here. She had to do something. If only she could find Lia. Or defeat a half dragon. She had to do something extraordinary to get back on Bradley's good side.

She ran back towards the dragon as fast as she could. "We will fly to Letoa", she called while climbing on his back.

"What? Immediately?" The dragon growled.

"If you don't want to be grilled from me now or Bradley a bit later, then you should fly off immediately!"

The dragon growled again, but followed her order.

Yukikos heart was pounding. A part of her regretted her decision, but another part, a smaller one, liked her rebellious behavior.



Lia thought she knew already everything there was to know about Rikos life. But somehow the girl found more and more stories to tell. She couldn't remember everything that was thrown on her head.

It was a relief seeing their target in the distance, but it still took long enough for Riko to tell four more stories,

before they descended into the Courtyard of Dikons castle. Aeris started to transform back while they were landing, the courtyard was too small for a full grown dragon. Finally they were back on the earth and Riko was looking around, her eyes wide and her mouth shut for once.

“Welcome to Letoa.” Phobos entered the courtyard with Dikon in tow. Behind both of them was ... her father or more foster father. Lia left Rikos side and ran to Barnett, hugging him tight.

“You are alive”, she sobbed loudly, while he embraced her as well.

“So that little worm has crawled out of its hole.” Aeris grunted.

“Father!” Lia shouted at the dragon.

“You are right. I’ll wait”, he answered frowning.

“Have you got your memories back already? Where is my daughter? What happened in Magneis?” Dikon stepped quickly in front of Phobos, but still preferred some sort of distance between him and her.

“I guess Aeris is informed and you got your memories back?” Phobos sounded hopeful. “I need to know what Bradley did.”

Lia pulled herself closer to Barnett. “Bradley ... well, we thought we had won, we reassembled the astral diamond ... but then everything went ... bad. The diamond turned black, pushed us away from it. As we came back to, we were under Bradley’s control.”

“Impossible.” Aeris shouted. “There is no way the astral diamond turned black.”

“It was black. Is black! I am sure of it! I saw it!” Lia felt tears rising in her eyes.

“What happened next, how did you escape?” Bradley stroke gently over her back, his voice soothing.

“Bradley ... he wanted me to kill ... Jan”, she answered, tears now streaming over her face. “That’s when I started to resist him, when I realized that I had a fake tear around my neck and ripped it off ... and then I started to chase him, using ... strange magic.” She started to shiver, reliving the moments, where any rational thought had escaped her. “He escaped.”

“What happened to Jan?” Barnett’s voice was almost a gentle whisper.

Lia felt her heart cramp up again as she saw once again her magic sucking everything in ... She shook her head, hoped that was answer enough.

“I see”, Barnett kept her in a warm embrace.

“So that is why the city is no more.” Phobos sighed.

“Bradley”, Barnett said again, parts of his body shivering. “It is not the first time I heard that name, not the first time I met him. I had hoped to never see or hear of him again.” He pressed Lia close to his body. “I will now tell you what I know about him, what happened about twenty years ago.”

Meeting of Worlds



“... and you are really sure that this is safe?” Barnett watched the shimmering surface that had formed within the strange gate with mixed feelings. A part of him wondered which stone circle the strange gate was stolen from, but he kept silent rather than asking these scientists an offending question. Instead his gaze was wandering around, following the many cables, which were hooked up to irons wedged into the stone, to some great machines. A deep humming was in the air and Barnett could almost feel the energy that was pumped into that gate right now. Something like that couldn’t be safe.

“We are very sure”, answered the white coat, adjusting his glasses. “We went through the gate ourselves once and everything is fine with us.”

Barnett wondered if “fine” was the correct attribute for these scientists, as one had to be slightly mad to be in this profession. And who was “we”? He was only talking to a single person and he couldn’t picture him ever leaving the safety of his laboratory. The most irritating thought was, that he and his men were now his new lab rats.

“Where does it lead?” Barnett touched the shimmering surface. The tips of his fingers began to tingle as they made contact to the water-like energy.

“We don’t know”, admitted the man. “It can be anything. Another Planet, another Dimension, maybe even the inner earth”, he shrugged. “The only thing we did was finding this portal and open it. In fact, depending on the amount of energy we put into the portal, we can choose an exit.” He pointed towards an enormous knob. Barnett didn’t want to know, how much energy would be running

through that, when turning it to maximum. “We sought out an exit with a special environment. We hope for many new findings when exploring that.”

Barnett nodded. “That all sounds well and fascinating, but why are we here?” He pointed with a thumb over his shoulder to his men, standing behind him. They were fully equipped, carrying light weapons, heavy guns, camouflage-suits, radios and a few things more.

“I can answer that question.” A corridor formed behind him, a larger man with short black hair stepping through them. He had a grin on his face and felt clearly superior. It was the one person, that Barnett didn’t like at all. Sadly Bradley was his superior, so he had to stand to attention, waiting for his explanation.

“We have good reason to think that the other side of this portal holds some new Materials for developing exceptional weapons.”

Barnett would have rolled his eyes on that. He knew that they needed new weapons desperately, but how did they got the Idea, that they would find suitable materials on the other side of that gate?

“The area on the other side seems to be of volcanic origin”, supplied the scientist as if answering his unspoken question.

“It will be your task to scout the area, find possible mining grounds and secure them. A few scientists will accompany you.” Bradley looked towards the gate, his gaze almost asking, why they were still standing there.

“Understood.” Barnett didn’t like that task at all, it could be highly dangerous. But he hadn’t had any grounds of refusing it either, so he had to do it or be court-martialed. He was payed to do the job, and most court-martials ended in a guilty verdict and shooting the defendant. Barnett somehow clung to life.

“There is another thing”, the scientist supplied. “We can’t keep the gate open for a prolonged period of time. An hour at most. Because of that we will close the gate behind you and reopen it in about six hours, contacting you per radio.”

Barnett nodded. That explained why the job was so extraordinarily paid as well – and he had an upcoming vacation right after the job.

“Let’s go!” Barnett raised his voice, speaking full of authority, and went through the gate first. Two dozen men followed him into the unknown.



Barnett stood shortly after a short, but cold, massage of his whole body in the brightest Sunshine. The Temperature was significantly higher than in the cellar he had been in before, but it wasn’t uncomfortably hot. Barnett looked at this job in a positive light: Out of the cellar and as far as possible from Bradley. Two days. Everything it took was a job for two days to go without any problems. That shouldn’t be too hard.

While taking the first steps he surmised his surroundings. They were in a canyon, yellow and brown rocks were all around them, reaching high into the sky. A hint of sulfur was in the air. One or two brown plants had dug their way through the stones.

His men were seuring the perimeter professionally, hiding close to the rocks and keeping a look out front, back and up. Barnett looked back to the gate. The last of his men got through the shimmering surface, then the four scientists they had to protect. After that the shimmer started to flicker and the whole watery surface vanished. The gate itself stood within a stone circle – why

did he have to be right about these things? Behind the stone circle was another tall wall. A dead end. Great. At least they couldn't lose their way.

The scientists did the same, looked to the plants, taking a few steps towards them and shook their heads soon enough. There was nothing here.

Barnett motioned his group to press on, following through the canyon. They kept their firearms ready, in order to respond quickly to any threat that may arise.

Soon the lighter Stones were replaced by much darker, almost black ones. The temperature raised with their discovery. "Volcanic origin" had not been a lie. Barnett could easily imagine the black stains to be volcanic ash. He could only hope that the volcano wouldn't wake right now, greeting them with a shower of hot molten stones. A cold shiver ran over his back despite the heat.

He looked again to the scientists, hoping to see a sign of them being interested into something, but there was none.

He continues his way for another quarter of a mile and stopped. The heat was almost unbearable. He suspected the stones around him of starting to glow orange-red and melt any moment now. This was another dead end for them. He didn't see the need to befriend magma.

"Sir?" One of his man pointed upwards with his rifle. Barnett looked up and thought for a moment that he had seen a shadow in front of the sun. A moment later he was sure, as the shadow grew into a large black Creature that landed right in front of him within the canyon.

The creature was more than a dozen feet taller than he and his men, large claws dug into the ground that splintered slightly. A large head lowered itself down to them, black scales covered almost every spot on the

creatures body. As it breathed the air around them it felt like a small gust of wind passed through them. Its teeth were as large as their weapons and glittered in the sun. Hot breath greeted them as the creature opened and closed its maw. An eye as large as Barnetts head looked at them.

No one was brave enough to even move. Immobilized by fear they looked at the creature they only had known from stories and fairy tales. Suddenly he heard a voice inside his head.

What do you humans seek here?" The breath of the dragon felt like hot wind. How could something that large even exist? "You came through the gate. You have something foreign about you."

Barnett gulped. What should he answer to that? Should he even answer? "We are here on a peaceful mission" he tried with a loud voice. It was less stable than he had liked it to.

The dragon looked at him for long silent moments, then more and more of his teeth got visible and ... did the creature just smile? "On behalf of my fellow dragonkin, I welcome you."

Barnett felt a cold shower run over his back. Dragonkin? There were more of these creatures? What were they planning? Did he invite them in as some kind of meal? Should he back out?

Suddenly black mist started to surround the dragons features: His teeth, eyes, wings, the tail and his pranks. The mist shrunk in size, changing form into that of a smaller creature, probably bipedal in nature. A human stepped out of the black mist, which dissipated only a moment later. At least he looked mostly human: His skin seemed to be pale grey instead of pink, his head was bald and there was not a single strand of hair, not even where

his eyebrows were supposed to be. A long black leather coat hid most of his skin. His eyes were glowing in an unearthly light.

“Follow me. Our chief would like to speak to you.” He turned and continued his way deeper into the hot hell before them, not even breaking a sweat.

Barnett hesitated to follow him. The wiser action would be to turn around and leave these dragons be, instead of following them into some kind of trap. On the other hand they had to wait five hours until the gate reopened and were trapped with these creatures nonetheless. And Bradley would be furious with them, if they returned empty-handed.

He decided to follow the dragon, in hope that their chief really would only like to speak with them. He motioned his soldiers to go on, but he didn't had to remind them of being more alert and careful now.

The way through hell felt like an eternity, but then the temperature started to drop to more comfortable levels. He and his men sighed as they felt cold wind on their skin.

It still took them at least an hour and a half until their way ended in front of a few caves. The grey man took position in front of one entrance and nodded towards it. “Go on in, he is waiting for you.” After that he just stared forwards as if he had turned to stone – which seemed very likely with his grey skin.

If they entered the lions ... no dragons den, their chances to escape were almost zero. But the dragons could have feasted on them already, if they wanted. He followed his instinct, straightened his posture and entered the shadow of the cave.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the darkness within. First he saw a scheme enter his vision,

soon after that he could make out the silhouette of a human. It was an older man, wearing short black hair and a long black leather coat. The only things that distinguished him from any other human he knew were his eyes. They were as red as the ones of the dragon they met before.

“That’s close enough”, bellowed the stranger. His strong deep voice and the self-confidence he radiated made him a perfect leader.

Barnett signaled his men to stop as well. The stranger hadn’t made any move to attack them and he didn’t want to give him any reason to do so.

“Good”, the man looked over them all, his eyes soon fixating on Barnett. “I want to know why you are here.” He made a step towards them. “You told my son that you were on a peaceful mission, yet you carry strange weapons.”

“These weapons are for our defense. We didn’t know what to expect.” Barnett’s mouth felt dry.

“You didn’t know what to ...” The man made another step closer to Barnett. He looked him over, judging his every move. “So it was fate that brought our worlds back together?” He turned, making some steps away once again. “I doubt that it was fate or a random occurrence, but I shall allow you to stay, provided you respect our laws.

Barnett felt like they should leave as soon as possible. But they needed to stay for a while, especially since those four scientists had become very curious about the cave they were in. Perhaps they could trade some things before they returned home. “Should we put out weapons down?”

“You don’t need to put your toys down, if you feel more secure wearing them. You can’t hurt us anyways.”

The dragon turned towards him again. “The rule for you staying is that none of you enters a cave without any of my sons going with them. And don’t touch any of our treasures.” There was a growling sound in his voice that made Barnett flinch.

He looked around. The cave seemed empty. What treasures did he mean? And which one of the dragons were his sons? ‘Or were all his sons because he was the chieftain? “We accept”, he answered and tried to smile. It was common courtesy to follow the house rules of the place you visited. Given that the owner could easily kill them this was only more true.

The dragon reached out with his hand. Barnett did the same, hesitating slightly, but as they shook hands the dragon before him smiled. “I am Yargyuu, the oldest and strongest of the black dragons and therefore their chieftain.”

“Lieutenant Barnett Dias.” He felt insignificant with that short a title, but he didn’t dare to add some invented titles.

“I am pleased to meet a leader such as you.” Yargyuu smiled, making some steps towards him once again. “I will hold you responsible for the actions of your people”, he added with a threatening undertone.

Barnett nodded and smiled. He was used to being responsible, but he knew also that he could trust his men. The only ones he couldn’t trust were those four scientists. They hadn’t had a military background and could step out of line. He didn’t mistrust them as much as he mistrusted Bradley, but it was close.

“Can some of my men gather some rock-samples?” Barnett found it prudent to ask first.

“I don’t know what you want to do with those rocks, but if you like, you can take as many as you want.”

“Thank you”, Barnett nodded, relaying the orders to his men with a few meaningful gestures and military signs. Four soldiers flanked those white coats as they started going about their business.

“I see you mistrust your own men as well.” Barnett wasn’t sure if Yargyuu asked or simply stated that.

“As well?”

Yargyuu frowned. “I am the chief of the clan not only because I am the oldest and wisest, but moreso because I am the strongest. I had to establish that rule a while ago. Still there are many young ones that come to challenge me, wanting to lead our clan instead.”

Barnett nodded, understanding fully. “So you can’t relax, because they might attack you at any time. What if an outsider would challenge and win against you ... would the clan follow him then?”

“Do you challenge me, human?” Yargyuu growled in a tone that wasn’t possible for a human. “You can’t beat me, especially not in a one-on-one fight!”

Barnett raised his hands defensively. “I was just curious”, he added. This would be one of Bradley’s strange ideas to get new weapons.

Yargyuu looked into his eyes, staring. “Maybe you should go back where you came from, or curiosity might kill one or more of you.” The dragon turned, ending their talk there and then.

Barnett got the message. They weren’t welcome here any longer. He shouldn’t have asked that. After taking a deep breath he went back to his men. One of the scientists was still examining a rock, two others had given up already, sitting on the ground, their shoulders hanging down in defeat. None of them wanted to be out there with those dragons around. The fourth scientist was braver than them. Barnett turned to one of the soldiers.

“As soon as white coat four returns, we’ll go back.” The man nodded, saluted and informed the others. The outlook to leave this place soon allowed his men to relax slightly. Barnett looked on his watch. They had been out here for about three and a half hours. If they hurried, they would make it back in time until the gate reopened.



Scientist number four returned after a bit more than ten minutes.

“Have you found something?” Barnett looked at him.

“Only more stones, nothing of value”, one soldier answered. The scientist nodded, and looked back over his shoulder. He seemed slightly nervous. Maybe he wasn’t as brave as Barnett had thought.

“We’ll return to base.” Barnett bellowed the command with a loud and steady voice. His men didn’t hesitate in the slightest, getting back in formation within record time.

A few dragons followed them with their gazes, her black heads held high, but none made a move to follow them. His men kept looking around despite that and Barnett did the same until they had left the dragons dwelling far behind.

They kept a harsh pace to make it back to the gate. The scientists could keep up with them, earning his respect. They arrived at the gate with fifteen minutes to spare.

Barnett took a deep breath. That hadn’t been too bad. With the right wording he can put off this realm as a threat that shouldn’t be visited again – no weapons to be found. Then maybe one other mission like this and ...

A loud roar ended his thoughts. The stones around him shook, some fell from the cliffs. This couldn’t be

good. They hadn't done anything wrong, had they? But why had he that bad feeling that the dragons would attack any time now? If they did, they had almost no chance to survive. Those creatures were large and heavily armored, they probably had not many weapons that could penetrate their scales – and even if they did, the amount of damage would be minimal.

Another roar joined the first, then one more, a cacophony of roars raised from possibly every dragon in range. He could only hope that they opened the door on time, maybe even a bit earlier.

Was there a weak point to these creatures? “if they attack us, try to concentrate your fire on one spot, like their breast or head. If we have to use grenades, don't bring the walls down on us”, he instructed his soldiers with a loud voice. “Take cover! We don't know if those dragons breathe fire!” He hope that would only be a figment of imagination, part of the story to make them more dangerous.

His men scattered, finding cover behind rocks and some of the monoliths of the stone circle. The dragons appeared only a moment later above them. Shadows appeared one by one, growling in number and size every second as more and more of them arrived. That Clan was almost an army of dragons alone.

Barnett rolled to the side, barely escaping a wave of fire. The heat still burned on his skin although he hadn't touched any of the flames. Damn! The fire breathing had to be true, too!

“The gate is open”, someone shouted.

“Retreat!” Barnett shouted, pulling out a flash bang. He hoped that the creatures eyes were as vulnerable to it as any other he knew. The safety-pin fell to the ground, the noise it made drowned by roars and gunfire. He let

go of the handle, waited about one and a half second and tossed it high into the air.

He scrambled to his feet and started running. His men were still firing at the dragons, covering their eyes just in time before the grenade exploded in a flash of light. The dragons roared slightly different than before. It had worked. He hoped.

It should buy them a few more crucial moments to escape. The scientists were through the gate already and most of his men. Only the most loyal stayed behind, covering him.

“Go, go! Before they regain their senses!”

His men stopped and ran the last meters to the gate. Just as he arrived at the gate and touched its surface he felt a wave of heat ... which was replaced by the coolness of the basement only a moment later. He stumbled, fell, rolled and turned.

A burning person stumbled through the gate after them. The last man to make it through ran around crying. “Get a blanket! Close the gate!”

They struggled a bit to get the running man to stop and douse him. One of the scientists went to help him, sending for cooling agents and bandages. It was a try in vain to save his life. Second and third degree burns covered his whole body. He couldn't recover from that.

“Have you found something?” Bradley sat in a corner of the room, leaning forwards in his chair.

Barnett wanted to shake his head, but one of the scientists stepped forward. “Indeed, we did.”

He couldn't believe his ears. The scientist produced something in a white piece of cloth, just the size of a fist. He uncovered it, making a clear white crystal appear.

“That's why”, murmured Barnett. “The dragons told us not to touch any of their treasure”, he whispered. “You

broke their rules ...” His gaze wandered to the soldiers that had accompanied him. “Why?” They didn’t move at all.

Barnett jumped up and made the white coat go down with a bloody nose. The crystal fell to the ground, giving of a clear noise. Two rifles stopped him from mutilating that man.

“Lieutenant!” Bradley went next to him. “My men seem to have carried out the mission. Why are you attacking them?”

Barnett took a deep breath. “He brought us all into danger by stealing that! He almost had all of us killed! Because of your greed!”

“That is no simple gemstone”, the scientist answered, getting back to his feet and using his coat to wipe the blood from his nose. “That stone seems like a diamond in structure, but it is much more than that. I felt it as soon as I touched it!”

“How about you pick it up”, Bradley said, smiling.

Barnett growled under his breath. They couldn’t even see what they did wrong. He reached out for the crystal and picked it up, his fingertips tingling. It was as if he had a soft velvety cloth in hands and not the unyielding surface of a gem like this. Had he picked it up with the cloth? No, there was no cloth between his fingers and the stone.

“Now give it to me!”

Barnett gritted his teeth and hold the diamond out to Bradley. The other one reached out for it, took it in his own fingers ... and suddenly there was lots of lightning, a shockwave threw everyone in the room onto the ground.

Lightning was jumping uncontrollably through the room, reactivating engines, the gate flickering, becoming active again. The crystal split into five parts that flew out of side like bullets being fired from a gun.

Two of them drilled their way through the ceiling, the other three disappeared through the gate. The surface started to flicker and disappeared a moment later, the room went silent and dark, the only light visible were the red emergency lights that came on a few minutes later.

Then he felt Bradley's hands around his collar, lifting him from the ground. "You! This is your fault! What have you done?" His face was contorted by rage. "You will regret this! You are relieved from duty immediately." Bradley let go of him and stormed out of the room, even before Barnett had had a chance to answer.

He was sure that his superior had gone too far. He had put up with him for far too long. He would file a complaint with high command immediately! He had enough time to do so now, thanks to him.

He looked once again to the soldiers that had betrayed his orders, remembering their names and faces, before leaving the basement as well.



As he brought her the message, the woman started to shed tears, but managed to stare at him with hatred in her eyes. It was as if she made him the one responsible for the death of her husband. He had to admit, that part of his death was his fault. He shouldn't have trusted his men to the extent he did.

He continued on, giving her the belongings of her husband, telling her that he was sorry and gave her the medal as well. They had honored him after his death, raising him a rank as well.

His wife tore the envelope from his hands and threw the door shut. A moment later he heard her crying through the wooden door. There was nothing more he

could do here, so he turned and left the house behind, going back into his car. He breathed in, fighting down the cold showers over his back and the bad feeling he had, ever since Bradley left. He turned the key and drove along the way, all the time thinking what he would put into that complaint about his superior.

As fields and trees went past him, his thoughts started to wander, the complaint soon left behind. He started to wonder if he could have protected that soldier. Maybe if he had paid more attention to the soldiers that were tasked to accompany him.

In the end it all boiled down to Bradley's schemes. It wasn't the first time he had toyed with him. The worst thing was that he hadn't had many things he could file a complaint about. His chances of getting rid of Bradley were slim.

Maybe he should ask to be reassigned to another division. He had to move somewhere else then, but it was better than staying under Bradley.

The sun was on its way to vanish behind the horizon, as he entered the way to his home. The sky had taken on the color of a beautiful orange-red. It was his sister's favorite color. It wasn't a surprise to find her on the veranda, looking towards the horizon.

She turned to him as his car came close. He parked it next to the house and was greeted by her as soon as he got out of the car. He returned the hug as well, smiling once again for the first time in weeks.

"Welcome back." Her voice had a beautiful melodic tone.

He looked at her as she managed to stop clinging to him. She had blossomed into a beautiful woman and was getting to old to welcome him like that. She was able to find and marry a husband now.

“I really missed you!” She smiled to him. “I just recently found something and I wanted to show it to you since I found it.” She pulled a small orange-red gem from under her clothing. “This was in our garden this morning. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Barnett looked at it, smiling as well, just before a memory and a realization hit him. That gem had been one of the parts of that crystal. A small part of him hoped that all of this was just a coincidence, but such jewelry wasn’t to be found in one’s garden by chance.

He put his hands around hers, making her take the gem into her own hands. “Please. You can’t show this gem to anyone”, he told her. It would probably be better to throw it away somewhere, but a part of him realized that he couldn’t make her do that.

“But why?” She looked at him, studying his features, as if it would tell her the answers. While he was still thinking of a reason he could give her, she answered to his plea. “If you insist, I shall keep it hidden.” He didn’t know what she had seen. Maybe it was his pain over what he had lost? Maybe it was his stern gaze? He was just thankful and nodded once.

“Let’s go inside, it’s getting cold.” The stone reappearing here was a bad omen, something supernatural haunting him. He would have liked if Luxana would have thrown it away or buried it somewhere, but he knew that she wouldn’t do that.

His sister shrugged with her shoulders. “I still think it’s warm”, she said but turned to go inside. “I’ll make us something to eat.”

Barnett undid the tie from his suit and opened the first two buttons, before following her inside.

“You got post, by the way”, Luxana called from the kitchen, “it’s lying on the living room table.”

Barnett put his jacket on a hanger and put it away. He took the envelope from the table. No return address. He opened it, took out the contents and read the mail, wondering about the second envelope inside that was addressed to his sister. He had a bad feeling as he started reading.

It took him only a few moments to read it all. "Forget the meal", he told his sister, "pack your most important things, we'll be out of town." He hit the door frame with his fist.

"Why?" Luxana looked into the room, a big head of lettuce in her hands.

"I'll explain on the way", he grumbled, taking the second letter. He broke the seal and read it as well.

"Did something happen?" She put the lettuce on the table and tried looking over his shoulder. He let her read it as well.

"Conscription call", the letter said. "Dear Miss Dias, the ongoing difficult military situation forces us to call in not only able bodied men, but women as well. Please report to the Grenhil Barracks on the morrow auf August the fourth to begin your military service. With best regards Major E. Bradley." Attached to the letter were some more documents and forms, proving the validity of it.

Bradley only had a few hours to arrange this unless it had been his plan from the get go. He was too powerful in the military already, a simple complaint won't work.

"W... what does that mean? I don't want to go to the military", Luxana whispered with a quavering voice.

He looked at her. If they stayed she hadn't had much of a choice. If she didn't comply, she would be caught by military police and killed. They couldn't flee into another country as well, as they were at war with both countries

that were next to Bucar. There had to be another way. He clenched his teeth.

“I won’t let that happen, I won’t let them take you!” His voice was firm. There was one possibility. It was the only one he had open and it was very, very dangerous. He just had to make sure that they didn’t arrive in the dragon’s realm. There had to be other places, where they could survive and maybe live in peace.

“What is your plan?”

“Just take your most important things”, he told her once again. She didn’t move, looking up to him, wanting to know more. “We will leave the country, this night.”

She stared at him for a moment, then turned and ran up the stairs. Barnett followed her, went into his own room and started packing things. A few cloths, some rations and a few minutes later his suit case landed in the cars back.

He changed out of his uniform, determined not to put it back on, ever. He was relieved from duty, but he knew some men as well and had some favors open. He needed to have them returned now, in order to flee and break down any bridges behind him.

Luxana came down fifteen minutes later, a small suitcase in her hand. She followed them to the car, put her case into the trunk as well and got on the front passenger’s seat.

The journey would take them straight to the barracks and area 23 right behind it. Luxana didn’t ask why. He knew that she trusted him. His sister seemed uneasy despite of that, maybe a part of her feared that he would give her to them.

They didn’t say a word while they traveled and it was deep within the night as they stood before the gates of the Barracks. A guard looked into the car, puzzled. “You are relieved from duty, Lieutenant Dias.”

“My sister has been called into active duty and asked me to show her around, before she starts service”, he replied and gave the letter to the guard. He took the paper and read it in the cars lights. Luxana looked at him questioningly, but stayed quiet.

The guard returned to him. “They want our women, too now?” He sighed and gave the letter back to him. “She is supposed to be here on August the fourth. You know the rules, she can’t go in prior to that.”

“Only three days prior”, Bradley frowned. “She got the letter today. This visit is to calm her, as I can’t be with her when she has to start her service. Please, do me the favor?”

The guard looked at him and sighed. “I suppose you have your reasons and since it is the middle of the night ... three hours.”

Barnett nodded thankfully, “just before the next shift, got that.”

The guard nodded again. “We are even now”, he said and waved them through.

Barnett never intended to stay that long, but he also didn’t intent to leave through that gate. He didn’t like do this to that soldier, but the safety of his sister was more important to him.

He drove to one of the further most buildings and stopped. “Wait here”, he told her and went inside. He sneaked through the barely lit corridors to the armory, kicking the door. The old wood gave in quickly, the door opened inwards and smashed into the shelf. Barnett switched the lights on, took two pistols and several ammunition. Then he found some grenades. He took of his jacket and packed some of those up in it.

He was gone within the minute. If they were lucky, it would still take some time until the soldiers would react

to the alarm. Hopefully it was enough time for them to flee.

He threw the jacket on the back seat, and drove off, tires screeching. It took about another minute until the alarms of the whole barracks were howling. They shouldn't count on him going even deeper into the barracks now. Some of the soldiers would await him at the gates, a few would search for him, but not where he was going. They stopped in front of a seemingly small and unimportant building.

"Come with me", he told her, got the jacket with the grenades and his suit case. She took hers and followed him into the building and down into the basement. He stopped on the second flight to load his weapon and release the safety on it. The Alarm wasn't as loud in the basement, but there might be guards posted nonetheless.

On one of the flights he told her sister to wait once again and took a deep breath to calm his heart. Then he ran around the corner. The soldiers there were too slow to react. He shot and the first one clutched his breast. He turned around, looking into the barrel of a rifle. The soldier recognized him and hesitated, one moment too long. The bullet hit him in the head and he sank to the ground, lifeless. "I am sorry", he whispered and closed the soldier's eyes. "Luxana!" He called his sister as he got back, picking up the jacket with the grenades once more. They ran the last few meters to the laboratory.

He could see Luxana go past the guards carefully, her hand to her mouth, tears in her eyes. Bradley would never get that pure soul!

No one was in the laboratory. The only sound was the faint humming of some machines still turned on, the sound of the alarm stayed outside of the heavy metal doors, as well as the sound of any approaching soldiers.

He probably had only one chance to find a suitable target. He turned towards the switches and controls, turning the machines on that supplied the gate with power.

Lightning surged the air started to flimmer and then the faint surface of the gate appeared. He looked onto the man instruments. It seems that it was at half the maximum power. He hadn't got any idea how he could change the amount of energy that was fed to the gate, but he hoped that the scientists had changed it after the last time.

He went through it and stood deep within snow. This wasn't the realm of the dragons, it seemed to be te opposite. He went back and looked to the frightened Luxana. "Come. We will be safe on the other side."

She looked back to the door, hesitating a moment, then she nodded and followed him through the gate into the waiting cold beyond. She knew as well as he, that this was their only option. He lead her far from the gate, unpacked the grenades and dug a hole next to one of the big monolithic stones. He threw the grenades in there after pulling the pin. He jumped aside and after a moment they exploded, taking the stones foundation away. The stone began to wobble, lightling stroke from the gate to the ground, the faint surface between them flickered and tore with a loud screech. The gateway was closed even before the stones hit the ground.

Luxana's Child



They had been travelling for hours already. The knee-deep white snow made their journey exhausting despite going down. The weather was seemingly against them, the ice-cold wind whipped in their faces, snow melted on their already wet clothing, draining even more heat from them. Barnetts shirt was wet, as well as most of Luxanas clothing. She was breathing heavy, her face red from exhaustion, but she kept going nonetheless. She knew as well as he did that, should they stop only for a moment, the cold would finally claim its tribute. He should have tried changing the target at least once, especially before detonating the gate. Now everything was too late. Had he made the right decision? Could he really protect his sister like that? What should he do now, if the cold would claim her life? Were her chances to survive really higher compared to being bossed around by Bradley? He felt doubt gnawing away at his conscious.

Luxana grabbed his side, dragging herself further along, but leaned heavily on him. She had grown weak, too weak to keep up with his pace. What was he thinking?

He stopped and put a hand on her cheek. Although it was a deep red it felt cold. Her gazes was empty and she didn't really notice his hand. "Are we there yet?" Her voice was so quiet that he almost didn't hear it. She fell into his arms, breathing heavily, her eyes closed.

"You can't sleep now, do you understand?" He shook her lightly, hit her cheek. She didn't open her eyes, her breathing was shallow. "Hang on, please, hang on!" He let go of his case and the weapons, leaving only the pistol at his leg. He pulled her onto his back. She wasn't even much heavier than the bag he had carried before; she

was much too light for her size. Her head leaned on his neck, so he could still hear her breathing over the unyielding wind.

Barnett kept going. There had to be somewhere, where they could stop and warm up.

Step by step he felt his sister getting weaker. There was even a moment where her breathing stopped, but then she started coughing and continued breathing, a strange warmth spreading over his back.

They had to leave this cold, find some place where they could rest. Suddenly he could see a small cabin on the side, light flickering within, promising warmth and comfort. He felt relief as he started going towards the cabin, speeding his steps up.

He hesitated a moment in front of the door, fearing that it could disappear, then he knocked and went inside, not waiting for an answer.

A man turned to him, his eyes shimmering golden, his hair white. He seemed surprised to see them and closed the door to the small oven that kept the cabin warm. "You have to be insane to wander these mountains in this snow storm." He stared at them, judging them. "Who are you?"

Luxanas coughing spared him from answering. Barnett didn't even notice how the stranger had stepped next to him as he touched the forehead of the girl on his back.

"I want answers to my questions later", he grumbled. "But before then we have to tend to your girlfriend."

Barnett didn't correct him. Maybe it was for the best that he thought her his girlfriend. Maybe it would keep him from getting dumb ideas.

He helped him carry the pale form of his sister to a bed.

“Get her clothes off. As wet as they are, they are going to steal the warmth she desperately needs.” The man turned and went back to the oven, working with a pot.

Barnett looked to him a moment later, making sure that he didn't look, and started to remove Luxanas clothing one by one until she lay half naked before him. He only let her keep the small red gem around her neck. It was pulsating a faint but soothing red light, as if it was warming her. After pulling the blanket over her, he turned to the stranger again.

“You should change out of your clothing as well”, the stranger advised as he turned towards him, a small wooden bowl in his hand, it contained a steaming aromatic liquid.

Barnett nodded thankfully while taking the bowl, put it down on the small table and removed his own clothes. Exhausted he sank down against the wall. He should be next to Luxanas side, give her something to eat and drink. He took one sip of the soup, it went soothingly down his throat. In a moment he would replace him at her side, he just had to relax for a moment ... the warmth of the soup was good for his exhausted body. He drank the rest of the elixir and closed his eyes. He only needed to rest for a minute ...



Barnett woke hours later. The snowstorm had passed and he felt refreshed. What had happened just before ...

Luxana! As fast as he could, he scrambled to his feet and ran towards the bed. She lay there peacefully, breathing slow, her head a deeper shade of red and she had a wet cloth on her forehead.

“She has high fever.” The stranger’s voice startled him. “You should rest for a while longer as well. There is nothing we can do right now.”

Barnett turned towards the white-haired man. He wasn’t sure if he should thank him. He felt powerless and was angry at himself.

“Sit down”, the stranger said, pointing towards the table. “Tell me why you wanted to cross the mountains during a snow storm.”

“We ...” Barnett hesitated, before sitting down slowly on the table. What should he tell him? The truth? He didn’t know anything about this world and a plausible lie was the last thing he could think of. “We needed to flee”, he admitted. It was the truth, without telling too much.

The man stared at him, his face unreadable. After a few terrible long seconds of silence he nodded. “I see.” He gave Barnett his hand and he took it. “I am called Aeris.”

“Barnett”, then he nodded towards his Sister,”and she is Luxana.”

Aeris seemed to stiffen up slightly for a second, but he started to smile a moment later. “Welcome to my humble abode.” He leaned back once again and looked at the girl. “You should take good care of her. She has accepted a heavy burden.”

“Why is that?” Barnett gulped a bad feeling down.

“That small red gemstone, the dragons tear has bound itself to her”, Aeris sighed. “You don’t know what that means?”

Barnett shook his head. Why should he? But why did he know about these stones? Did he accidentally return to the realm of the dragons? If so, it was only a matter of time until his life was over. Maybe they would spare his sister. But he had also heard of dragons wanting virgins ...

“Not many know about the dragon tears”, Aeris’ voice pulled Barnett out of his thoughts. “But there is something you ... no she need to know. She mustn’t show the tear to anyone. The consequences could be devastating if it falls into the hands of those knowing its secret.”

“Why?” Barnett’s eyes widened, as he felt fear spread within him, but Aeris never answered his question. “What devastating consequences?” He raised his voice, wanting an answer. He felt rage as his feelings of helplessness and powerlessness increased.

“She would become a tool, a weapon”, Aeris answered with a sigh, “a prisoner in her body, while being controlled by someone else.”

Barnett gulped once again. They had to get rid of that stone as soon as possible.

“Even if you try to hide it somewhere or bury it, it will find its way back to her or to someone that will use it. The binding is permanent, until she dies.” Aeris got up, looked one last time to Luxana and went out the door. A few lonely snowflakes fell from the grey but calm sky.

Barnett looked down on his hands. Was everything that he did wrong? He felt extremely helpless, his rage increasing more and more; rage that was directed at one man only: Bradley! Everything was his fault! There wouldn’t have been this mission without him. Luxana wouldn’t have been called to service without him. They wouldn’t have had to flee without him! He imagined himself choking his superior, pressing his hands down on his throat ... I didn’t help at all. His rage only got stronger, as his imagination still managed to taunt him. He hit the table with his fist, hard. The pain managed to soothe his rage and after a few more hits, he had himself back under control, the pain had won. Still, he knew that his rage would come back once he saw Bradley again.

Minutes went by in silence until he went to the bed and sat down next to his sister. He stroked lovingly over her face. Aeris was right, she had a high fever. He took the wet cloth from her head, cooled it in fresh water and wrung most of the water from it, before replacing it on her head once again. Wasn't there a doctor in this world?

As the pain receded he felt desperation rising within him once again, tears running down his cheeks as he sobbed softly next to the one person that was most important to him.



Her health didn't change much over the next few days. He mostly stayed at her side or talked to Aeris – when he was in and not somewhere outside in the snow. He had told him that he lived up here alone most of the time, because he didn't want to have much to do with people, so he was avoiding them.

Besides some very few sentences they didn't speak much, none of them wanting to tell more than necessary of their secrets. At least he suspected that Aeris had a few secrets of his own.

Somewhen on the fourth day, Luxana opened her eyes and smiled up to Barnett. "I'm back", she whispered with a weak voice.

Barnett took one of her hands into his and smiled, tears in his eyes. He felt as if some sort of weight had been lifted from him. He lifted his sister and pressed her towards him.

"I was afraid to lose you, so very afraid", he whispered into her ear.

"Don't worry about me, dear brother", her voice was soft and caring albeit its weakness. "I won't leave you,

yet”, she whispered and patted his back with one hand. After a long moment, she pushed him gently from her, looking towards Aeris. “Would you mind introducing our host to me?”

Barnett nodded and let go of her, reluctantly. A part of him was still afraid to lose her.

“This is Aeris”, he said, trying as hard as possible to sound friendly, hiding his anxiety, as there was more than one way to lose a loved one.

The white-haired man nodded towards her. “You have returned to us”, he said friendly.

“Of course, I can’t leave my brother alone.” She winked towards him and made him smile. It was as if those two had some sort of unspoken secret between them.

“I can imagine.” He made a few steps towards her, giving her a bowl of soup. She took it smiling and began to eat it. Aeris stood at her bed and watched her every move.

He knew now that they were siblings. He wouldn’t ...

Barnett shoved his jealousy aside. He was seeing ghosts. Aeris hadn’t shown much interest in her until now, why should that change suddenly? A part of him wanted him to get Luxana as far away from Aeris as possible.

“You should rest some more”, Aeris voice was incredibly soft all of a sudden, making Barnett shiver. “We should go and visit Akaria as soon as possible. You are in need of a healer.”

“Akaria?” Barnett looked up to Aeris.

“It is a city at the base of the mountain. A few days there and she will get healthy once more.”

“Thank you, Aeris”, Luxana smiled.

“Lay back down”, Barnett took the empty bowl from her. Her head was still red.

His sister nodded and sank back on the bed. She closed her eyes and was asleep once more within a few moments.

“How far is it to Akaria?”

“About a day’s march.” Aeris sighed, his face unreadable and devoid of any emotions once again. “We should be able to leave here in a few days’ time.” He turned and left the siblings alone once more.

Barnett pondered to search for their cases. The weapons and shirts were probably unusable by now: Encased in ice and buried under a deep layer of snow. He needed to trust his own strength and the pistol still strapped to his leg, should any problems arise. He had a bad feeling within his gut.

“What should I do?” He asked his peaceful sleeping sister, but Luxana didn’t answer.



They stayed another three days in the cabin, with Aeris now being more inside and next to Luxana than before, especially when Barnett was asleep.

Barnett thought something was strange as he awoke to both their laughter on the third day. Luxana wouldn’t ... No. She was a girl that could get anybody to laugh, as if it was her special talent. Why was he always getting jealous of Aeris? Luxana was his sister! He once again shoved those thoughts aside before getting up and joining them at the bed.

Luxana looked a lot better than before.

“Good morning, dear Brother.” She smiled. “Aeris says that my fever has gone down.”

“She should be strong enough for the way down, especially if we take turns carrying her. We should make

use of the moment, as the sun is shining and will be, for a long time.”

Aeris seemed somber next to Barnett. He just couldn't imagine him laughing. “Good”, he said nodding, omitting that he would like to carry her alone. It was a foolish idea born from his jealousy. He would collapse before they reached the base of the mountain.

“Then we should go now”, Aeris stood up and threw Luxanas clothing to Barnett, leaving them alone a moment later.

“Why are you always this ... stern?” Luxana frowned while she changed into her clothes. “You can really stop any fun, just by being there.”

“I'm sorry”, Barnett answered, smiling sadly at her accusations. “I'm just worrying. Very much.”

“Don't.” Her voice came from under the sweater as if she was reprimanding him. “Whatever you are worrying about, you can't change it at the moment. Put it aside!”

“Yes, your majesty!” His answer made Luxana laugh once again.

A moment later she stood before him, fully dressed, although her legs were shaking. He supported her on the way outside, where Aeris was waiting for quite some time already. Barnett took Luxanas weight for the first part of the journey.

His sister didn't mind changing the one she mostly spoke with every other hour. Somehow she had enough things to share with both Aeris and Barnett and it finally came to pass that he could see the other one smiling. He shook his head, noticing that he didn't participate in their talk anymore, but observed them closely, like a predator, waiting for the right moment to attack his prey. Aeris never made any suspicious movement.

As they arrived in Akaria, Barnett had to admit to himself that he was overreacting. It was just Luxanas nature to make everyone smile. Literally everyone, which was one of the things he loved about her.

It was late already, so they found an Inn, rented a room and found the healer on the next day. He gave her a few herbs and something to drink, but otherwise confirmed that she would be fine in no time.

Just as they left healers house, Aeris turned to leave. "You will be fine now and I need to get back to my place."

Barnett took a deep breath and smiled. He still thought that he might steal her from him.

"Please stay a few days longer", Luxana suddenly hung at Aeris' arm, looking up to him with large puppy dog eyes. Barnett always got weak when she did that. How had she been able to perfect that gaze so much?

"O... okay ... I'll stay a while longer." Even Aeris melted to the power of that gaze.

With Luxana using that gaze, those days turned into a month. Aeris caved in and the month turned into a year.

Barnett joined the city guards. He had expertise as a soldier and could continue guarding his sister and the townspeople like that. But as he returned one day, he felt like he had failed at his job. Aeris had asked her to marry him and she ... had agreed; without asking him.

He finally had to admit that his small sister had become a woman, a woman capable of making her own decisions.

Barnett needed time to accept that and after another three years, he started searching for a wife. Luxana had been happy with Aeris, very happy. Barnett soon found a young woman, that seemed to like him and he liked her as well. Reija was a beautiful young girl, the daughter of the baker and she was also interested in more.

Then, on the day, where he finally gathered enough courage to speak to her, it was Luxana that changed his plans once again. With a bright smile on his lips she told him that she was pregnant.

All the worries that he had managed to bury over the past three years, surfaced once again and he started to avoid Reija for the next few months. Needless to say that she started to dislike him soon after, and then came the day where his dream of having a happy, healthy family, was smashed into pieces.



He ran down the street as fast as he could. Aeris was already waiting in front of the door.

“The women threw me out”, was his greeting, his face as emotionless as ever, when talking to Barnett.

“How is she?” Barnett gasped for air, wanting his pulse to calm down.

“It’s bad. The fever has caught up with her.” The white-haired man sighed. Sadness was shimmering through his mask of indifference.

“Is a healer with her?” Barnett looked around, full of worry.

“No.”

“Then we need to ...”

“It’s of no use”, Aeris interrupted him. “She won’t survive the night.” He turned away from him.

“What do you mean? Where are you going?” Finally that man showed his true colors. “You can’t just leave now! She is your wife! What will happen to her child?”

Aeris stopped, looking back over his shoulder. “My wife is dying and I can’t do anything for her. I can’t take care of the child and it wouldn’t be safe with me.” He shrugged.

“You bastard”, Barnett shouted, full of rage. “I always knew ...”

Suddenly Aeris stood in front of him once again, his hand around Barnett's neck, choking all other words. “What is it? What did you always know, you petty thief?” His fingers dug into Barnett's throat painfully. “You know, I have spoken to my brother Yargyuu. You are responsible for her fate, in every way imaginable.”

Barnett had trouble breathing. Yargyuu? Wasn't that the name of the dragons chief?

“I should have killed you already! But my love to my wife has stopped me to do so.” He lifted Barnett with his hand, growling deeply. “Now I am unable to kill you because of that child! Don't ever come before me again, when it is older!”

Aeris tossed Barnett aside, against the next stone wall. He got dizzy as the air was pressed out of his body. He fell to the ground. As he recovered enough to get up again, Aeris had already vanished, the growl of a dragon resounding through the mountains, causing him to shiver.

Luxana had the child of a dragon within her. She was dying because of that. That Bastard had just used her and now he wanted to use him to take care of his brat.

Despite his pains, he dragged himself to the door of the house, hearing the cries of his sister only too clearly through it.

He just ignored any traditional laws and went in. The cries of his sister had stopped, the ones of a small baby were resounding instead.

“It's a girl”, he heard a woman say. Was that Reija? He saw the woman give the child to her mother.

“Close the door”, ordered another woman. Barnett took a deep breath and closed the door, before he

straightened himself and went over to the group of women. "From outside!" He ignored the shout of outrage.

"Let him be", his sister said with a weak voice. "Do you want to hold your little niece?" Luxana smiled innocent.

Barnett got closer and fell to his knees next to the bed. His sister seemed weak, her cheeks red and droplets of sweat on her forehead. But still she seemed the happiest girl alive at that moment.

"Please look after my little Lia", she showed him the small baby with its few red hairs. "You are the only one she'll have, when I am gone."

"What are you talking about? You'll get healthy again."

"No", she shook her head weakly. "I have been living on borrowed time. I have already died five years ago. But ... I have to thank you for the time here, for letting me meet Aeris. Promise me to look after Lia. And don't hate Aeris."

She looked at him with a face he couldn't say no to. He finally nodded and took the child in his arms.

"This is now hers", Luxana gave the small red gemstone to Barnett. "Give it to her, when she is old enough."

Barnett nodded once again, enclosing the gem within his hand.

"I wish I could see you grow up", Luxana whispered, her voice growing weaker with every word. "Good bye, my child. Good bye, dear brother."

She closed her eyes smiling and just stopped breathing. He felt hot tears running down his cheeks; his sobbing was drowned by the crying child in his arms. He pressed it gently towards him and noticed that he couldn't hate it, even if he wanted to.

After long moments of silence, the women took the child from him and wrapped it with a diaper.

They left him alone, let him deal with his loss himself
... even Reija.

Yukiko's Attack



“A dragon being your father was soon no secret in Akaria, so it wasn’t a coincidence that Phobos arrived in town one day and wanted to speak with me. He helped me, gave me valuable tips and even a better paid job within his castle. Everything was fine until I got to know that he wanted to take you as his wife. That’s when I went in hiding with you.” Barnett ended his story and waited for Lia to react.

“Why have you never told me about mother?” Lia felt tears rising into her eyes.

Barnett looked from her to Aeris. “Because then I would have needed to tell you about him as well. And I couldn’t ... didn’t want to see him ever again.” He gnarled his last words.

“Don’t make me responsible for everything your sister had to endure”, the dragon growled back. “I couldn’t save her from death as much as you were just a puppet in your betrayal!”

Both man stared at each other as silence fell.

“Everything that happened was just Bradley then”, observed Lia, clenching her hands into fists, ignoring the tears in her eyes. “Jans death, Mothers death, Yukikos pains ... all of them Bradley.” She felt the magic within her responding to her rage, her right arm tingling and shooting lightning down into the ground, causing a chunk of it to just disappear. Lia fell a few inches deeper, toppling over backwards, her rage dissipated by the suddenness of it all.

“Be careful, my child”, Aeris touched her shoulders, helping her back onto her legs. “You need to control your emotions, your rage.”

Lia looked back to him. "Is... that normal? Is it because I'm half dragon?" As Aeris didn't answer, she looked to her halfbrother. Riko hid behind him, keeping her distance from Lia all of a sudden.

"No, none of us have that problem", he answered after a moment. "I guess it is because you are half dragon and dragon priest at the same time."

Lia looked at her hands. Felix. Felix wanted to help her. Was he still able to do that? Jan wasn't alive anymore.

She felt tears rising into her eyes again. What should she do? If only Felix was with them. Or Yukiko at least.

"Lia!" As if in answer she could hear the voice of the girl. She turned just in time to see the dragon coming straight at her out of the sky. The girl standing on his back, ice present all around her.

Aeris pulled her to the side, just before a spear of ice hit the ground now next to her. She could feel the cold all around her. That wasn't the girl she knew. That was something else.

"You have a choice", shouted the girl as everything got even colder around her. "Come with me back to Bradley", Aeris pulled her aside once again, before a spear of ice hit her, "or die!"

The girl jumped down from the back of the dragon, using some contraption of ice to land gently on the earth. The black dragon flew over them and disappeared.

"Yukiko! Come to your senses!" Lia wrestled herself out of her father's arms. "You are not that!"

"Why have you betrayed us? Why have you betrayed me?" A gust of ice-cold air hit Lia face-on.

"I haven't betrayed you!" Lia tried to defend herself. How should she resist the powers of Yukiko if she wasn't allowed to use her own?

“I see”, Yukiko sighed, looking towards the ground, “you want to die.” As she looked back up, there was no rage, but only sadness, there were tears in her eyes. A thick layer of ice spread on the ground, with Yukiko at its center.

“It’s the tear! Bradley is using you through it!”

“I won’t give you my tear, no matter which lie you tell me!”

Aeris and Phobos ran past her, the dragon’s fire enveloping the girl, thawing the ice on the ground. It only took a moment and the ice solidified again, the flames were put out. Aeris and Phobos were pushed back from her, rolling over the ground. Aeris crashed into the castle walls, Phobos rolled a few meters further and stopped there. The strong gust of wind almost pushed Lia from her feet, but she managed to keep standing, only to glimpse Yukiko throwing something at her.

She raised her arms in defense, a blade of ice cutting into it. The pain from the cold burning her was worse than the wound itself, but a moment later she couldn’t feel it anymore.

Aeris jumped again towards Yukiko, another gust of wind, Lia toppled over backwards, fumbled blindly for something to stabilize herself and found something. Aeris flew past her, ramming into the castle wall again.

Lia looked towards Yukiko, seeing her hand clutching into the air, her fingers disappearing into small golden glowing holes. Her hand and her arm were black, golden glowing veins all over its surface. She couldn’t feel it.

The wind stopped as suddenly as it started. Lia stabilized herself quickly enough only to dodge another blade from Yukiko. The girl had a sword in her hands that was much too large for the little girl!

Her right arm reacted, catching the blade in the air. Lia hadn’t even realized what had happened, her gaze

fixated on Yukiko, noticing that she still had tears within her eyes. She had to do something, had to free her from that tear!

Her left hand grabbed forwards, tried to get the gem underneath Yukiko's clothing. The girl reacted faster, jumping backwards from her.

Phobos appeared behind Yukiko, tried to grab her. Yukiko jumped aside, becoming invisible. After another moment Lia could see her again, like a faint purple silhouette.

"Where is she?" Phobos looked around. Has he lost her?

Yukiko was behind him, a dagger of ice in her hand. Phobos tried to avoid it in the last moment, but it hit him on the side.

Lia ran forwards, Yukiko to the side, running towards Aeris, her father examining the surroundings carefully.

Yukiko had another dagger in her hand. Lia ran as fast as possible, but how could she catch up to the girl? "Dragon!" She hoped her father would ...

Aeris jumped into the air and transformed into a dragon, making the dagger miss.

The girl looked towards Lia, ran a few steps to the left and to the right, staying out of Lia's reach.

"Why do you have to make everything so complicated?" Yukiko sighed, tossing a gust of wind and several daggers of ice against her.

Lia's arm reacted on its own, tearing through the air. Just before her appeared a whole of absolute nothingness, of blackness, consuming wind and daggers alike.

"Bradley will be here soon. Please ...!" Yukiko ran towards her, one Dagger of ice in each hand.

Lia hadn't much time to react. Her left caught one of Yukiko's arms, the other one managed to hit Lia's shoulder.

Her right arm had a mind of its own, tore through Yukikos clothes and ripped the gem from her throat.

The girl hesitated. Lia forced herself to kneel, forced her right arm to pick up the traitorous gem.

“Give it back ...”

Lia crushed the fake tear in her hand, something crackled, sparks flew and a bolt of lightning traveled up her arm, hitting her in the shoulder. She felt pain and unclenched her hand, small parts of the gem falling to the ground.

Yukiko looked towards the black pieces, her eyes going wide ... and then she looked to Lia. “I ... I’m sorry!” She started to cry loudly.

Lia hesitated before wrapping her left arm around the little girl, willing her right to staystill.

“Bradley had you within his control”, she said, her voice colder than she wanted it to be. Her right arm was stil black and she had no feeling within it. But why? She had followed Felix’ instructions and hadn’t used her powers.

“We need to leave.” Phobos stepped towards them, slightly bent forwards. His upper body was bandaged and those bandages were already reddened by blood.

Lia looked around and noticed Ray staring at her. His robe was torn, his upper body seemed unusually pale within the sun. He hadn’t fought, had he?

“Ray bandaged me”, said Phobos.

Aeris landed next to them in the courtyard, tearing down the walls. “Get on”, he ordered, “we need to leave!”



Bradley paced impatiently through the room. Why has he waited so damn long to follow Yukiko? Eien was

already loyal to him. Felix was managing the land as he would do it. But he had only followed the thief after he was sure that all those details were as he wanted them to be. Now he paced through the empty hallways of Naverins castle, Yukiko was nowhere to be found and Lia wasn't either.

"We'll go to Letoa!" He stopped pacing and ran outside to the other dragons. Yamira was next to him and nodded in agreement, transforming as soon as they arrived in the courtyard. He hopped onto her back and they rose into the air.

He was sure, that he needed the dragons on his side, if he wanted to have a chance against Lia. He alone could make use of Ninas ability to teleport, but it also had its limits. She wasn't able to teleport his whole army to Letoa, but at least she could support them with tailwind.

Still, Bradley had the feeling that they were too slow. He felt a hit going through his whole body, heard something snap. He had a bad feeling as he looked down to the black diamond he carried within his armor on his breast. He could see cracks in the otherwise smooth surface.

He clenched his teeth, realizing that he already had lost Yukiko. His dream had already been within his grasp but now it was like sand trickling through his fingers.

Lia was too dangerous to keep around. He couldn't control her and she was a danger to him and his plans. He had to remove this danger. Lia had to die!

Yukiko was the only one that dared to come close to her, especially her right arm. Phobos and Ray kept their distance, while Riko seemed unsure as to what was happening. She looked between Ray and Lia and didn't dare to move more than a few feet. Aeris and Barnett stood a bit closer, but still kept their distance, as if fearing that what she had was contagious.

The hadn't moved much from the castle, they still could see its silhouette on the horizon. They were at the edge of a small forest, just far enough in to not be easily spotted by a dragon. They wanted to discuss their next move, but since Aeris had stated that he felt the coldness of Lias right arm through his scales, no one had said a word.

Although she was hugging Yukiko with both arms, she could only feel her warmth in her left. What was happening to her? Maybe it was contagious. But she felt as if she was losing control more and more. It had cost her a lot of concentration to make her right arm do what she wanted and not what it wanted.

Perhaps she should really go to the dragon priests, begging them to perform the final sealing, before she accidentally killed Yukiko or her father.

"What's happening with mama?" Riko broke the silence, looking towards her father for an answer. Worry was written all over her face and Lia even thought she could see fear within it.

"I don't know", Ray went closer to her and stroked gently over her head.

Lia thought she could hear Dikon shout: "She is a demon! Kill her!" But the half dragon stayed back in the

castle. "I'd like to face this tyrant rather than travelling with that demon!" Even though she had seen him like this before, the recent developments made her fear that he was right and she got the feeling that most of the others have started thinking like that as well.

Suddenly Yukiko got up and went to the others. "What is wrong with you? Lia isn't the demon here! The demon is Bradley!"

"We know that much already", Aeris sighed, "but something is happening to her that is unnatural. It's ..." He shook his head. Lia could see the fear within her father's eyes.

"Whatever we do, we shouldn't count on her powers, when fighting Bradley", Phobos stated. "She might accidentally kill both sides."

Lia looked down, tears welling up in her eyes. Those words felt as if someone had driven a dagger into her heart.

"But with all the dragons and three more dragon tears on his side, we won't stand a chance", Yukiko said. "We would need Felix, I am sure that he knows what to do."

"Even if Felix is able to help her", Felix kneeled before Yukiko, "I am sure that Bradley won't let any of them out of his eyes now. I don't think that we would stand a chance against him, Nina and Felix even without the dragons." He put his hand on Yukikos shoulder and smiled a sad smile.

"What should we do then? Just give up? Just let us be chased down by Bradley?" Yukiko clenched her fist and shoved Aeris hand aside. "I can't let him win!" Her voice started to quiver, "anyone but him." She took a deep breath, looking into Aeris' eyes. "I'll get Felix back, even if I have to go alone!"

"And how do you want to do that?"

“I’ll just steal his tear. I am a thief! One of the best!”

Aeris looked at her in silence.

“Thinking back”, Phobos now got closer to her as well, “how did you manage to turn invisible even for us? Every other spell doesn’t work on dragons or half dragons. You have failed so before.”

The girl began to smile slightly. “I have asked myself why you were able to see me. You and Dikon. So I guessed it was because both of you were half dragon. From that I concluded that it might be a natural ability of half dragons and dragons alike to see something that the human eye is blind for. I thought that you might be able to see my body’s warmth, so I experimented a bit with the dragon that flew me here, and after lowering my body temperature to a certain degree, he couldn’t see me anymore.”

“You can change your bodies temperature?” Phobos stared at her with unbelieving eyes.

“Well ... not any more”, Yukiko admitted, her smile dying.

“Then you can forget this plan as well”, Aeris said, standing up again. “You know that Bradley is the new chief of the black dragons? They can all see you! Some can even smell you!”

“Shall we just give up then?” Yukiko shouted so loud that Lia flinched. Maybe Bradley could have heard that. But ... she was right.

“No”, Aeris answered. “I fear we have to give him the war that he wanted.”

“What do you mean?” Phobos asked the question before Lia could voice it.

“I’ll call my children together. The white dragons shall join this war!”

They all looked at him speechless, as he left them to go deeper into the forest.

A war between dragons. Lia could see once again the sky over Andragat, the day as the dragons attacked and she was made a dragon priest accidentally. Lia felt as if the temperature around them dropped suddenly.

“Should we wait and do nothing, while he rallies the dragons?” Yukikos loud voice brought her back from her memories. She stood up and took a deep breath. “There is nothing much that we can do. We can’t go to Felix and free him at the moment. I can’t go to the dragon priests and ask them for help either.”

“I could go”, said Ray. “I know a few of them quite well.”

Lia nodded. “They could be convinced to help. But they shouldn’t try to seal any of the dragons, they just should try to hold them at bay, until Bradley is defeated.”

“Why?”

“Because those dragons have not lost their mind, they are not outcasts and they will protect each other.”

“I understand”, Ray nodded.

“Then go, we don’t have much time.”

The half dragon nodded again and went to Riko. “You will wait with the others, understood?”

The girl nodded and looked to Lia. “I’ll stay and protect mama.”

“Good girl. I’ll be back as soon as possible.” Ray embraced her in a right hug and went deeper into the forest as well.

“That leaves only us five”, Phobos commented. “We can’t do much at the moment, so we should try to come up with strategies.”

“Maybe Lia can learn to control her powers? She would be a valuable in battle”, Yukiko suggested. “I think she got better with control since the battle with Dikon.”

Lia shook her head. “It does respond to my emotions or the emotions of the dragon within me at first. I could

control them in our last battle, but it got more and more a mind of its own and I fear it is getting stronger.”

“In other words, you fear that, the next time you use your powers, it might take you over.”

Lia nodded. “Though I do not understand what happened in our battle. I didn’t even use magic and it turned black.”

“Maybe it is not your use of magic”, Yukiko suggested, “but something else.”

“But what could it be, then?”

“You said it responds to your emotions. Maybe it responds to your fear. And since you fear that you might be turning into something else, it reacts to that ...”

Lia nodded. Yukikos theory was sound, though she still had the feeling that something was off about it all.



The castle was empty as well. Bradley was too late, of course. There wasn’t a trace of the ruling half dragon, there was no trace of Lia and the trace of Yukiko ... there was too much to work with. The ice hadn’t even started to melt; the inner courtyard was unnaturally cold.

They did find the dragon that had brought Yukiko here and he had told him that they all had been here only an hour ago. All his foes had been here, even Aeris, which meant that the white dragons would probably take the side of his enemies.

He could see the large battle that was coming now. There was no way around it, if he wanted to keep control and he had to keep control or everything would end in chaos. Why wanted everyone to go their own way, to follow their own desires? That only ended in conflict, there would be no progress. The world needed someone strong

at its top, someone, who led the way. Why wouldn't they understand? Why did they fight him that much?

Bradley shook his head. These times would soon be over. There was only one human, one half dragon ... no, one being that was in his way. He just had to remove Lia and then he would find a way to get Yukiko back.

Should push come to shove, he would need to make another sacrifice to reach his goals. But then again, those few lives were insignificant compared to the golden age that was to start under his rule.

"We'll fall back to Eien", Bradley announced. The lost black dragon offered to tell them where they had gone, but Yukiko was too smart to stay in an easy to locate spot. "We will show the white dragons that they picked the wrong enemy!"

"Yes, sir!" Yamira nodded and transformed into a dragon, offering herself for a ride once again. Bradley made a mental note to be careful around her. She was to eager to please him. Carefully he climbed onto her back and led her carry him to the castle that was now the new center of his empire – until Magneis was rebuilt.



Yukiko had troubles sleeping. Three days had passed since Aeris had left, flying from somewhere deep within the forest, keeping out of sight of Bradleys army. Three days since she was apart from Bradley and his army and she knew that he was preparing for the big battle that was to come. He probably was already down rallying his troops and now he was just waiting for them, patiently.

He could wait patiently, if necessary, but he hated it. A part of her found solace in that. It was like torturing him from afar.

Yukiko looked around in the small room once again. They had found a place in an inn, outside of a small village. They all had taken one room. One room for five persons. Phobos was sure that Aeris would find them there, because he was connected to his daughter, Lia, who was sleeping with Riko in her arms in one of the two beds. Phobos sat on the other bed, staring at them, Barnett sat in one corner and stared out the window. Only Yukiko was pacing up and down the room impatiently.

“Do you think Dikon might have tried to join Bradley?” She stopped a moment and looked to Phobos.

“No”, he shook his head, “he isn’t as dumb as Richard and won’t think that Bradley would let him join. I think it more probable that he is trying to find a way to free his daughter ...”

“That is almost suicide”, Yukiko grumbled. Still, they wouldn’t have to count him as their enemy for now.

“Our Plan to attack Bradley is also almost suicide, especially since we do not know, if he had another ace up his sleeve”, commented Barnett.

“The more we wait, the higher the probability, that he will have another ace up his sleeve”, countered Yukiko. “Sooner or later we won’t have any other choice than to attack him.”

“Well, you are right at that ...” He looked down from the window and to Yukiko.

“With the white dragons joining us, we only need to focus on Bradley, Nina and Felix”, Phobos peeled his gaze from the sleeping girls and looked to Yukiko. “Things might even get easier, if the dragon priests join us. The weapons of his army cannot harm the dragons or us half dragons.”

“Are you forgetting that neither Barnett nor I are half dragon? We don’t even have a drop of dragon blood within us. Leaving that aside, we can’t even do anything

against the powers of the dragon tears.” Yukiko shook her head. “Especially this fifth tear will render me useless as well. Without magic I am just a scared little girl.” She bit on her lower lip.

“Bradley seems to have the better hand”, Barnett sighed and stared onto the ground.

Yukiko started gnawing on her thumb again. The situation seemed hopeless. She knew that she shouldn’t just give up hope, that there had to be something they could do, but she was close to losing it. There had to be a way to make this a fair battle. If only she could use some of her powers!

She stopped biting on her thumb and stared on the mark on the back of her right hand. It had hurt her many, many times before. Instead of hurting her, it should have helped her!

“There is something we could try”, Phobos whispered suddenly. “If that fifth tear is working in the same way as the walls of Magneis did, then there is way for you to use some of your magic.”

“What do you mean?”

“We need to make a dragon guard out of you. I know that this hasn’t been done for generations, but as long as there are no plans to seal a dragon within you, the process might help you to use magic.”

“What do you mean by dragon guard?” She felt a shiver running down her spine.

“That would involve ... a dragon ... and the only dragon ... do you think Aeris would consent to that plan?” Barnett looked up.

“Yes, I think so”, Phobos smiled. “The stronger the dragon ...”

“Would you stop making decisions over my head?” Yukiko raised her voice, making Lia mumble something

in her sleep. At least she didn't wake up. "I want explanations first", she resumed with a lower volume.

"You remember the city walls of Magneis, where you passed with a sleeping spell?"

"That was sleeping gas, a small souvenir of Bradley's."

"So ... that is some sort of magic without magic, right?"

Yukiko shrugged. She couldn't explain how those grenades with sleeping gas worked.

"Do you still have some?"

Yukiko thought back. She had stolen several grenades from Bradleys armory in one night, but those weren't many because of her limited space. "Maybe half a dozen."

"We should make use of those. I don't think that Bradley would think of us attacking him with his weapons."

Yukikos spark of hope suddenly grew into a small flame. Of course he wouldn't think of that. She nodded eagerly.

"Now, those city walls were built in a way, which allowed no one to use magic, except dragons, half dragons or dragon priests."

Yukiko nodded again. "Yes, you said so before."

"Which is because of the way magic works for most. Mages like you draw magic from their surroundings, while dragons have an inner source of magic. The wall is just cutting of the magic from the surroundings."

"So, with that inner source of magic I could make use of mine as well?" She felt another shiver going over her back. Those tidbits of information were wonderful. Bradley couldn't even know about that! They soon had two surprises for him!

"Dragon guards are baptized with the blood of a priest when entering the order", Barnett explained. "It strengthens their body and mind for their tasks ahead."

“The blood of a dragon priest is similar to that of a half dragon”, Phobos looked to Lia and Barnett, “though the first priest is said to have had blood from a real dragon. The effects are similar as well, but it doesn’t grant them an inner source like us or the first priest.”

“You know much about them”, Barnett commented.

“As do you, old friend”, Phobos answered.

“So, if Aeris would give me some of his blood ...?”

“Then, yes, you should acquire an inner source yourself. The only problem is that it can be hard to persuade a dragon to give you his blood.”

“Well, since he seems to care about Lia and her life is at stake, he might make an exception ... he even spared me”, Barnett said and smiled slightly.

Yukiko suddenly felt a large fire of hope and passion burn within her. She could easily imagine Bradleys puzzled face, when she started blasting him with fireballs from close range. “I’m in!”



Yukiko clung tight to Lia. She felt as if her whole body was burning although they were high up in the sky on Aeris’ back. They were on their way to Bradley, white dragons joining them left and right, heeding their leaders call. They were the only ones that would help them, the dragon priests had opted to stay neutral.

They had asked Aeris to make Yukiko into a dragon guardian as soon as he got back. The dragon had warned her that she needed several hours rest after that procedure, but she still went through with it in that same night, even before Lia woke up. It hadn’t been that grand of a ritual, just a little cut in both of their fingers, letting his mix with hers. Several minutes of silence had gone by

until she started to feel a strange tingling within her finger and that was all there was to the ceremony.

The next thing she did was distributing the few weapons she had to the dragons that had already followed Aeris. She shortly explained them how they were used and that was it. Everything was fine for the rest of the night, she only felt slightly tired as Lia awoke, but she credited that to being awake the whole night. Despite that she wanted them to leave right then and there.

Shortly after takeoff she got dizzy and she got the feeling that the mark on her hand had started to burn and it had gotten worse since then.

“Are you okay?” Lia somehow managed to feel Yukiko’s forehead, turning half around. “You got fever!”

“I’m fine”, Yukiko said although she felt as if everything spun around her. They couldn’t lose more time now. Lia wouldn’t stop Aeris now, because of that? Lia’s voice seemed to be far away, shouting something ... was it to her?

She had to stop her friend from doing something stupid. She willed her eyes open, only to see a bright light in front of her eyes.

“Finally you found someone”, she heard a voice she only knew too well. But that couldn’t be true? Some sort of mist formed into a shape in front of her eyes. It only took a few moments and then she saw ... herself? No, something was strange, different. The eyes of the other Yukiko had the color of an amethyst.

“Who are you? What do you mean ‘I finally found someone’?”

“Who am I?” The other one smiled and nodded towards Yukiko, to her hand. “I am you.” She closed her eyes and came a step closer. “I am also the eye.”

“The eye ... ?”

“I have waited so very long for you and now we are finally together once more.” She made another step closer and embraced her, giving her a feeling of security and warmth, whispering a single word: “Aruji.”

The eye of flows? The artefact she had touched although she wasn't allowed to get close to it?

“Yes, that one.”

“But ... but those pains ... The punishment ... the monk said ...”

“Shhhht, stay calm.” The other girl run her hand gently over Yukikos head. “Those monks never understood me nor my nature. That temple was mine ... ours. I have used it to wait for you and as I finally found you, I allowed time itself to catch up.”

“I ... I don't understand.” Why now? After all this time, all those years?

“I know that you have many, many questions. Let's just say that the dragon blood accelerated a process that would have taken years, still. What I want ... need you to do, is to trust me. If you do, I will be able to help you, when the time comes.” She released the tight hug, kissing Yukiko on her forehead. “Whatever happens, do not give up and help your friend. She will need your help soon.”

As Yukiko blinked once, the strange girl had disappeared. “What do you mean? Why will she need my help soon?”

No one answered. The bright light around her started to vanish instead, being replaced by darkness and the feeling of something hard below her. She could hear Lias voice from some distance, getting louder and closer fast.

“... you thinking?” She was shouting at someone. “A few novices were struck with fever for several days, and they only got blood from a dragon priest! Why haven't you told me anything? Why have you let her go through with this?”

Yukiko smiled and opened her eyes. She got up and turned around to see Lia shouting at Ray, Phobos and Aeris. Her father was still in the form of a dragon and still flinched after every sentence.

“It’s because I wanted them to. They saw as well as I that we do not have much time, if we want to keep our advantages.” Yukiko interrupted Lia’s speech and stood up. She wasn’t dizzy any more, though her fever had still to go down completely.

Lia turned and embraced Yukiko in a hug. “Why? Why are you so reckless, if Bradley is involved? I worried about you.”

“It is remarkable, that you got through it within a few hours. But Lia is right, you should rest a bit more.” Aeris stretched his neck and looked north. “We will attack Bradley early enough, and my children are still gathering.”

Yukiko nodded and returned Lia’s embrace. They were the ones that had a few aces up their sleeve. Bradley would fall, she could just feel it!

The Battle



Bradley was almost certain, that his enemies would attack any moment now. He just couldn't tell exactly when. It was one of these situations that weren't under his control. As he first got ahold of the black diamond, he could feel when Yukiko was coming close; even predict when she would come through the door. But that ability was lost now.

He was already waiting for several hours, and with each second he had more and more the feeling that he was losing control. He took out the fifth tear and stared at its smooth surface, its clear colorless form. This was his last ace, his last secret. He could take all their magic with it, even the magic of dragons, if he were to believe Rubenheim.

But then again, Rubenheim had been also a factor he couldn't really control and he had disappeared after Magneis' destruction.

"They're coming", someone shouted.

Bradley looked up. He could soon see some silhouettes on the horizon. His dragons reacted on their own, transforming and soaring up into the sky, the soldiers kept waiting within the castle. Felix and Nina stood next to him, instructed not to leave his side.

He started counting his enemies. Somehow he had expected the white dragons being at least as many as the black ones, but there were much less of them. He had the upper hand in numbers, but he still felt uneasy.

As soon as he spotted Lia, he had to kill her. She was a rogue factor to his plans. Then he had to capture Yukiko alive, as she was the key to eternal life. She was his property. She had to survive.

“Something is strange”, noticed Yamira and came a few steps closer to him. They were both standing on top of the castle, overseeing the battle. “Some of them don’t approach in dragon form.”

Perhaps they want to save their strength”, replied Bradley. He couldn’t grasp the woman’s motives and as such she was uncontrollable.

“Possibly”, Yamira shrugged.

“Binoculars!” The next best soldier saluted, came closer and gave Bradley the object he wanted. Then he stepped back.

Bradley looked through his binoculars at his attackers. Almost every dragon had someone on their back. And that one either looked like Yukiko or Lia. And they all were packed with rifles and grenades. What was this treachery? And where had she gotten ... But of course, the missing weapons from the armory. “Illusions and my weapons”, he growled. If they wanted to play hard from the beginning, he had to do the same. He gripped the fifth tear and whispered the words to release its power.



Yukiko felt something change around her. It was almost like a pull, trying to remove the magic not only from around, but also from within her. Bradley had started using his ace much earlier than expected.

She didn’t care on the other hoof. There were still enough illusions left to ...

On the dragon next to her, a human suddenly changed into a dragon, making both fall to the ground. Yukiko bit on her lower lip. She should have known that the dragon tears were stronger than a mere wall. Some

more dragons fell out of the sky, before the others noticed what was going on and separated in the air.

The only ones that still looked like Yukiko and Lia were Phobos, Ray, Barnett and Aeris. The four men were the first that had put the illusion spells on them – and the spell was still holding, as if Yukikos magic was impervious to the tear – it just couldn't keep full grown dragons disguised.

They had lost a big advantage and those dragons that had hit the ground, would be an easy target for the enemy dragons. But for now they would keep to the initial Plan: Lia would free Felix and flee with the mage in tow. As soon as they were somewhere safe, the rest would retreat as well. And as soon as Felix has fixed Lia, Yukiko would make Bradley regret ever crossing her ways.

Her dragon began to dive down, to accelerate, just as the black ones started to attack them. They managed to dodge the claws of one dragon, a breath of fire from the next. Yukiko flinched, she had felt the flames heat clearly. Her dragon broke his fast flight to dodge another attack. She could see Lia flying past her. Or was it Phobos? Or Barnett? Without the formation even Yukiko couldn't know who was who.



Bradley clenched his teeth. Using the dragons tear, he had been able to slow the advancing army down, albeit increasing the number of enemy dragons. But from all those Lia- and Yukiko-look-alikes, there was still three of each left.

How was that possible? Had Rubenheim lied to him, like before? No, no, there was something else at play. Several dragons had fallen, because the tear had ended their

transformation spell. Maybe this spell was from Aeris, and the chief dragon had enough reserves, to maintain the spell even while his magic was drained.

He had to stop Lia, no matter the cost. “Everyone one of them”, he targeted one of the Lias with his hand, a stone spike forming in front of his hand.

Felix did the same, targeting another Lia, while Nina targeted the third.

His arm was pushed back by the air pressure as the projectile started. A bolt of Lightning started next to him, hitting a black dragon, then a white one and ending finally within a large tree. The thunder was so loud that he almost couldn't hear anymore afterwards, the sudden light almost blinding him. He couldn't say if his nor Felix' projectile hit their mark. He made a note within his thoughts to never attack with lightning again!



As the lightning hit the tree, Lia needed a few moments to orient herself once again. The cries of pain she heard were dulled.

She searched for their source as fast as she could. Another Lia ... no Phobos she realized as the illusion spell failed, tried to pull a stone spike out of his shoulder. Then she felt a sharp pain on her cheek, feeling something warm and wet soon after. Her left hand felt for the sensation and as she looked onto her red gleaming fingers she realized that it was blood. Her blood.

“Lia!” She heard Yukikos dulled voice. “Flee! Bradley wants to kill you!”

Lia felt cold, as if her heart had stopped for a moment. She was scared. Scared to die. Although she sever-

al times had the thought of going to Cerinsagath and having them perform the final sealing.

She couldn't let that fear control her! She fixated her gaze on Bradley, saw him and everything as if it were moving much slower than normally, could see him targeting her. She duck down on the back of the dragon, dodging another projectile. "Bring me to Bradley", she told her dragon just loud enough so he could hear her. She would take fate into her own hands now. "I won't leave without Felix!"



Yukiko felt as if paralyzed. Bradley had changed his mind. Lia had become an uncontrollable danger for him. That was why he wanted to have her out of the picture.

At least the lightning hadn't hit anything; the energy had sought its own way. The projectile Felix had fired had only missed its target by mere inches. The only one they had hit was Phobos.

"Lia! Flee! Bradley wants to kill you!" She tried warning her friend.

Bradley targeted Lia once again, smiling. Maybe he had even decided that Yukiko herself was a danger to his plans and that he had to remove her?

Bradley's smile died. Yukiko saw back to Lia and noticed the dragon ... diving forwards?

Was she still trying to execute their Plan? Yukiko bit on her lower lip. She was right, they had to do, what they had come to do. "Go", she shouted to her dragon.

Yukiko pulled herself close to the dragon's body, as they nosedived forwards. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but necessary.

The flew past two dragons, narrowly escaping both their claws as they dove between them, only stopping to dodge another flame, then continuing on, turning sideways. Yukiko had trouble holding on to the dragon as he flew a reckless maneuver to escape a dragon that wanted to bite into his wings.

Why hadn't they approached the castle on foot, leaving the battle between the dragons, well, between the dragons.

Although her dragon was masterfully dodging attacks, she still feared that she could be hit at any time or fall from his back.

Just as they had managed to cross half the way to Bradley, her dragon stopped suddenly. Three black dragons were flying in front of them, cutting off their way. Yukiko risked a look to the side. Lia had the same problem. She looked back to Bradley, saw him climbing on the back of a dragon. Perhaps he wanted to attack Lia in the air. Yukiko needed to do something. She ended the illusion-spell, got one of the grenades hanging from her belt and threw it. Then she used her magic to make it split in front of her enemies, and made them split and split ...

"Close your eyes", she told her dragon just before the grenade exploded.



Bradley climbed on Yamiras back. The dragon lady had stayed still after her forced transformation back into a dragon. The stones were being crushed underneath her weight and started to crumble with every move she made. After taking off, a part of the wall would surely crumble.

He didn't care about the building and the few soldiers within. They were an acceptable casualty. He had to kill Lia or she would destroy the whole castle and all soldiers within.

There was movement within the corner of his eye. A few grenades flew towards a group of dragons, multiplying on the way. What kind of magic was that?

Behind those dragons flew a white one and on top of them was ... Yukiko.

The bright light of hundreds of grenades impaired his vision. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes. There was still one point left that impaired his vision, but he could see enough to get an overview over the battle once again.

There were only one Lia and one Yukiko now and both were close to him, very close, too close. He couldn't let Lia come close to him. He wouldn't be able to dodge one of her attacks from close range.

But ... could she even attack him from close range, without being hit herself? And why hasn't she attacked already? Was it just to make sure that she would hit? Maybe she only could use it once in a certain period of time? Or was there something else that stopped her from doing so?

He dismounted from Yamiras back and looked towards Felix and Nina. She hadn't pulled her punch, even knowing that she could have hit the mage and that girl. He needed more information, something that told him how to best behave in the coming situation. If her attack had any limitations, then there was a chance that he could let her come near, and kill her from close range and if not ... well she was too close already anyways.

"What is it?" He could hear Yamiras voice in his head.

"I changed my mind", he answered and left Yamira where she would, going back to Nina. "You know what?"

That game with more than one target can be played with two players.” He touched Nina's shoulder and they vanished only a moment later.



Yukikos flash of light had cleared her way towards Bradley and Felix. They easily dove beneath the dragons in their way, gaining speed once again, and flew towards the wall even before their pursuers could realize what had happened.

Bradley had climbed down from the dragons back and had gone to Nina, both disappearing. Was he fleeing, leaving Felix back alone? Then this was her chance. She had to get to him and free him now!

The mage raised his hands. Chunks of stone started to float around him; parts of the walls came loose, forming themselves into sharp projectiles.

Her dragon reacted just fast enough, dodging the projectile rain. It hit a dragon behind them. They just had to cross these last few meters to get to him.

From the corner of her eye she could see another grenade flying towards Felix. A stone projectile split it into two parts, making it explode into smoke, obstructing her view of Yukiko.

The dragon turned, bringing them behind the cloud of smoke and further away from Felix once again.

“Use the grenades, Lia!” She could hear Yukiko's voice. The little girl had given her two of them just before they set off. She took one. It should be another smoke grenade.

She pulled the pin. “Go!”

The dragon dove forwards through the smoke. Lia squinted her eyes and as soon as she could see again, targeted Felix roughly, throwing the grenade at him.

As soon as the grenade left her hand, the dragon nosedived once again, stone projectiles flying there way at tremendous speeds.

In that small moment of zero gravity, Lia tried to grab back onto the dragon. Her upper body was flung upwards, just before she could find a place to hold onto. She managed to keep on the back of the dragon by clenching her legs together.

They dove below the top of the wall, before the dragon started gliding. The smoke grenade exploded somewhere over them. Closer to the wall the dragon flapped his wings strongly to gain altitude once again.

Yukiko flew over them, jumping down on the wall.

“Faster!” Lia shouted to her dragon, her heart racing.



As soon as Yukiko felt ground beneath her feet, she pushed on forwards, taking only seconds to close the last few meters to be next to Felix.

The mage hadn't even had time to target her. She dove beneath his harms, climbed up his robe and easily found the necklace with the black gem. Another moment later and she had the gem within her hands, now the only thing she needed to ...

There was a loud bang. She felt a deep pain within her leg and lost her balance.

Her right arm clung to the gemstone.

“Let go of it!” It was Bradleys voice. He had come back. She turned and saw the rage in both of Bradleys faces. Both? “Once again I caught you red handed.” One of them had raised a pistol towards her. The other one looked arrogantly down on her.

Lia landed behind both Bradleys. The second one drew a weapon and turned. "Welcome back, General Dias."

Lia had a black scar within her face. Since when? Wasn't it long ago that she ... The second Bradley targeted her heart.

"Bradley! Don't!" The sound of the pistol firing turned her blood into ice. She let go of the gem, fell to the ground. She could see Lia's legs trembling as her clothes turned red. She fell to the knees and to the sides, reaching forwards with her good arm.

"I see that you have finally come to your senses, General Artai." The second Bradley smiled and lowered the weapon, turning towards Yukiko. "Now to you", the first one said. "Sadly I have no means of controlling you directly anymore."

"But that isn't necessary", the second one said.

"That small dragon army can't hurt me anyways." The sky turned black slowly, spewing lightning on the horizon. "You know that you are the only one I wanted alive."

Yukiko would have liked to just jump at one of them and choke him, but the burning pain in her leg stopped her from doing so. She looked down and past him towards Lia. Her blood had turned completely black.

A black bolt of lightning ran over her body, sizzling softly. What was happening to her?

Another bolt rushed over the body of her friend, the sizzling couldn't be heard through the thunder of the large lightning overhead.

"I'll just remove all the dragons in a glorious thunderstorm", Bradley smiled doubly.

Lia's blood formed into small droplets that defied gravity. "Her ... blood ..." Whispered Yukiko, realizing something.

The battle with Dikon. The battle with her. The wound from Felix. Everytime she was bleeding. Even in Magneis ... there had been blood on those white wings.

“What is with her blood?” One Bradley turned. He didn’t say a word as he looked upon the slowly growing black figure that was forming out of Lia’s blood. The form of it could only be one thing: A dragon.

